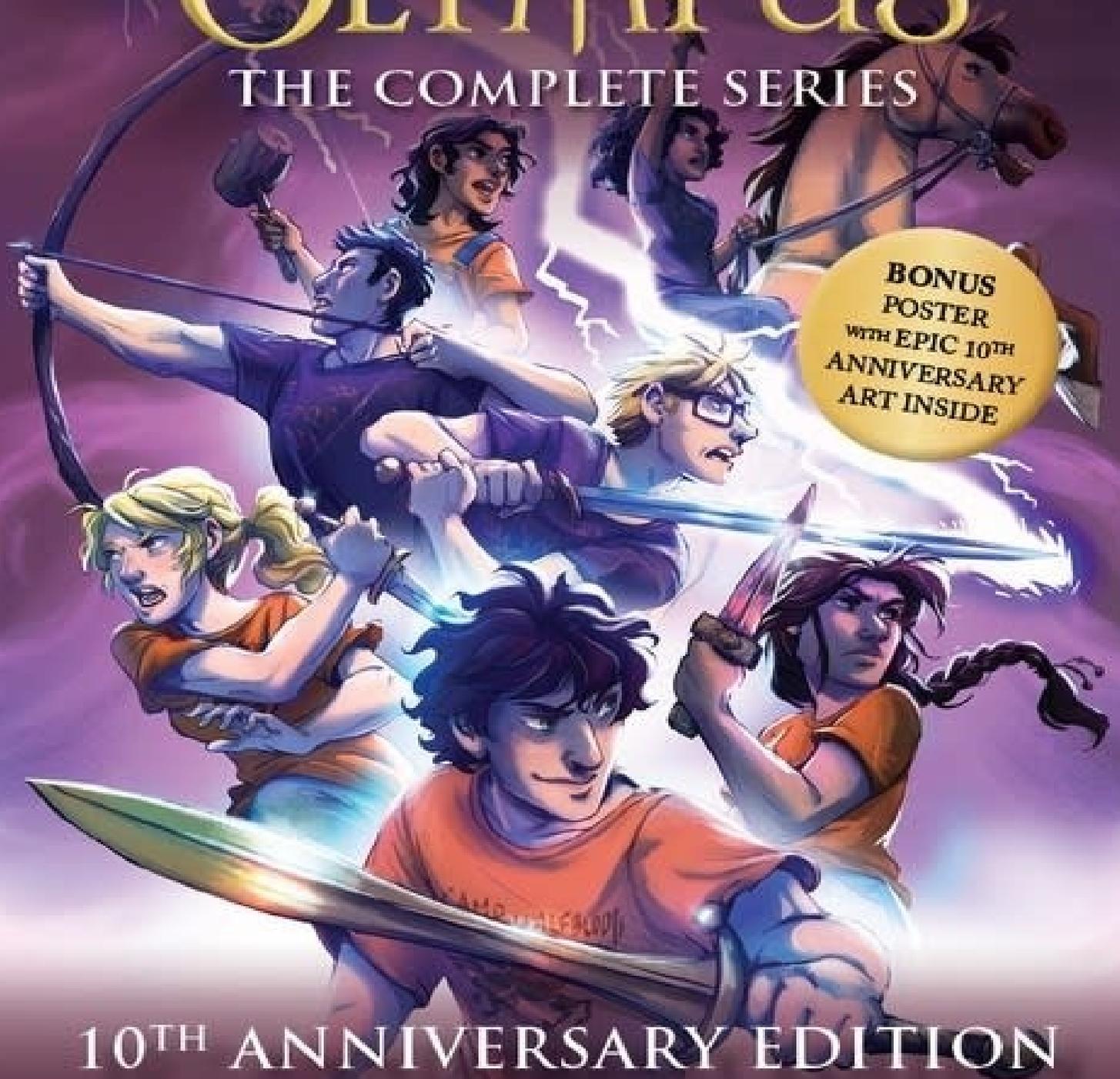


NEW YORK TIMES #1 BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

RICK RIORDAN

THE
HEROES OF
OLYMPUS

THE COMPLETE SERIES



**BONUS
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WITH EPIC 10TH
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ART INSIDE**

10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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OF OLYMPUS

THE LOST HERO



AUTHOR OF THE BEST-SELLING PERCY JACKSON SERIES

RICK RIORDAN

THE HEROES



OF OLYMPUS

THE LOST HERO

RICK RIORDAN

Disney • HYPERION BOOKS
NEW YORK

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First Edition
13 5 7 9 10 86 4 2
V567-9638-5-10213
Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data on file.
ISBN 978-1-4231-4540-0

Visit www.hyperionbooksforchildren.com

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For Haley and Patrick, always the first to hear stories Without them, Camp Half-Blood would not exist.

THE HEROES



OF OLYMPUS

THE LOST HERO

Happy reading on your Kindle!

Rick Riordan

RICK RIORDAN

Disney • HYPERION BOOKS
NEW YORK

Also by Rick Riordan

Percy Jackson and the Olympians, Book One:
The Lightning Thief

Percy Jackson and the Olympians, Book Two:
The Sea of Monsters

Percy Jackson and the Olympians, Book Three:
The Titan's Curse

Percy Jackson and the Olympians, Book Four:
The Battle of the Labyrinth

Percy Jackson and the Olympians, Book Five:
The Last Olympian

The Kane Chronicles, Book One:
The Red Pyramid

JASON

EVEN BEFORE HE GOT ELECTROCUTED, Jason was having a rotten day.

He woke in the backseat of a school bus, not sure where he was, holding hands with a girl he didn't know. That wasn't necessarily the rotten part. The girl was cute, but he couldn't figure out who she was or what he was doing there. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, trying to think.

A few dozen kids sprawled in the seats in front of him, listening to iPods, talking, or sleeping. They all looked around his age ... fifteen? Sixteen? Okay, that was scary. He didn't know his own age.

The bus rumbled along a bumpy road. Out the windows, desert rolled by under a bright blue sky. Jason was pretty sure he didn't live in the desert. He tried to think back ... the last thing he remembered ...

The girl squeezed his hand. "Jason, you okay?"

She wore faded jeans, hiking boots, and a fleece snowboarding jacket. Her chocolate brown hair was cut choppy and uneven, with thin strands braided down the sides. She wore no makeup like she was trying not to draw attention to herself, but it didn't work. She was seriously pretty. Her eyes seemed to change color like a kaleidoscope—brown, blue, and green.

Jason let go of her hand. "Um, I don't—"

In the front of the bus, a teacher shouted, "All right, cupcakes, listen up!"

The guy was obviously a coach. His baseball cap was pulled low over his hair, so you could just see his beady eyes. He had a wispy goatee and a sour face, like he'd eaten something moldy. His buff arms and chest pushed against a bright orange polo shirt. His nylon workout pants and Nikes were spotless white. A whistle hung from his neck, and a megaphone was clipped to his belt. He would've looked pretty scary if he hadn't been five feet zero. When he stood up in the aisle, one of the students called, "Stand up, Coach Hedge!"

"I heard that!" The coach scanned the bus for the offender. Then his eyes fixed on Jason, and his scowl deepened.

A jolt went down Jason's spine. He was sure the coach knew he didn't

belong there. He was going to call Jason out, demand to know what he was doing on the bus—and Jason wouldn't have a clue what to say.

But Coach Hedge looked away and cleared his throat. "We'll arrive in five minutes! Stay with your partner. Don't lose your worksheet. And if any of you precious little cupcakes causes any trouble on this trip, I will personally send you back to campus the hard way."

He picked up a baseball bat and made like he was hitting a homer.

Jason looked at the girl next to him. "Can he talk to us that way?"

She shrugged. "Always does. This is the Wilderness School. 'Where kids are the animals.'"

She said it like it was a joke they'd shared before.

"This is some kind of mistake," Jason said. "I'm not supposed to be here."

The boy in front of him turned and laughed. "Yeah, right, Jason. We've all been framed! I didn't run away six times. Piper didn't steal a BMW."

The girl blushed. "I didn't steal that car, Leo!"

"Oh, I forgot, Piper. What was your story? You 'talked' the dealer into lending it to you?" He raised his eyebrows at Jason like, *Can you believe her?*

Leo looked like a Latino Santa's elf, with curly black hair, pointy ears, a cheerful, babyish face, and a mischievous smile that told you right away this guy should not be trusted around matches or sharp objects. His long, nimble fingers wouldn't stop moving—drumming on the seat, sweeping his hair behind his ears, fiddling with the buttons of his army fatigue jacket. Either the kid was naturally hyper or he was hopped up on enough sugar and caffeine to give a heart attack to a water buffalo.

"Anyway," Leo said, "I hope you've got your worksheet, 'cause I used mine for spit wads days ago. Why are you looking at me like that? Somebody draw on my face again?"

"I don't know you," Jason said.

Leo gave him a crocodile grin. "Sure. I'm not your best friend. I'm his evil clone."

"Leo Valdez!" Coach Hedge yelled from the front. "Problem back there?"

Leo winked at Jason. "Watch this." He turned to the front. "Sorry, Coach! I was having trouble hearing you. Could you use your megaphone, please?"

Coach Hedge grunted like he was pleased to have an excuse. He unclipped the megaphone from his belt and continued giving directions, but his voice came out like Darth Vader's. The kids cracked up. The coach tried again, but this time the megaphone blared: "The cow says moo!"

The kids howled, and the coach slammed down the megaphone. "Valdez!"

Piper stifled a laugh. "My god, Leo. How did you do that?"

Leo slipped a tiny Phillips head screwdriver from his sleeve. "I'm a special boy."

"Guys, seriously," Jason pleaded. "What am I doing here? Where are we going?"

Piper knit her eyebrows. "Jason, are you joking?"

"No! I have no idea—"

"Aw, yeah, he's joking," Leo said. "He's trying to get me back for that shaving cream on the Jell-O thing, aren't you?"

Jason stared at him blankly.

"No, I think he's serious." Piper tried to take his hand again, but he pulled it away.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't—I can't—"

"That's it!" Coach Hedge yelled from the front. "The back row has just volunteered to clean up after lunch!"

The rest of the kids cheered.

"There's a shocker," Leo muttered.

But Piper kept her eyes on Jason, like she couldn't decide whether to be hurt or worried. "Did you hit your head or something? You really don't know who we are?"

Jason shrugged helplessly. "It's worse than that. I don't know who *I* am."

The bus dropped them in front of a big red stucco complex like a museum, just sitting in the middle of nowhere. Maybe that's what it was: the National Museum of Nowhere, Jason thought. A cold wind blew across the desert. Jason hadn't paid much attention to what he was wearing, but it wasn't nearly warm enough: jeans and sneakers, a purple T-shirt, and a thin black windbreaker.

"So, a crash course for the amnesiac," Leo said, in a helpful tone that made Jason think this was not going to be helpful. "We go to the 'Wilderness School'"—Leo made air quotes with his fingers. "Which means we're 'bad kids.' Your family, or the court, or whoever, decided you were too much trouble, so they shipped you off to this lovely prison—sorry, 'boarding school'—in Armpit, Nevada, where you learn valuable nature skills like running ten miles a day through the cacti and weaving daisies into hats! And for a special treat we go on 'educational' field trips with Coach Hedge, who keeps order with a baseball bat. Is it all coming back to you now?"

"No." Jason glanced apprehensively at the other kids: maybe twenty guys, half that many girls. None of them looked like hardened criminals, but he wondered what they'd all done to get sentenced to a school for delinquents, and he wondered why he belonged with them.

Leo rolled his eyes. “You’re really gonna play this out, huh? Okay, so the three of us started here together this semester. We’re totally tight. You do everything I say and give me your dessert and do my chores—”

“Leo!” Piper snapped.

“Fine. Ignore that last part. But we *are* friends. Well, Piper’s a little more than your friend, the last few weeks—”

“Leo, stop it!” Piper’s face turned red. Jason could feel his face burning too. He thought he’d remember if he’d been going out with a girl like Piper.

“He’s got amnesia or something,” Piper said. “We’ve got to tell somebody.”

Leo scoffed. “Who, Coach Hedge? He’d try to fix Jason by whacking him upside the head.”

The coach was at the front of the group, barking orders and blowing his whistle to keep the kids in line; but every so often he’d glance back at Jason and scowl.

“Leo, Jason needs help,” Piper insisted. “He’s got a concussion or—”

“Yo, Piper.” One of the other guys dropped back to join them as the group was heading into the museum. The new guy wedged himself between Jason and Piper and knocked Leo down. “Don’t talk to these bottom-feeders. You’re my partner, remember?”

The new guy had dark hair cut Superman style, a deep tan, and teeth so white they should’ve come with a warning label: do not stare directly at teeth. permanent blindness may occur. He wore a Dallas Cowboys jersey, Western jeans and boots, and he smiled like he was God’s gift to juvenile delinquent girls everywhere. Jason hated him instantly.

“Go away, Dylan,” Piper grumbled. “I didn’t ask to work with you.”

“Ah, that’s no way to be. This is your lucky day!” Dylan hooked his arm through hers and dragged her through the museum entrance. Piper shot one last look over her shoulder like, *911*.

Leo got up and brushed himself off. “I hate that guy.” He offered Jason his arm, like they should go skipping inside together. “I’m Dylan. I’m so cool, I want to date myself, but I can’t figure out how! You want to date me instead? You’re so lucky!”

“Leo,” Jason said, “you’re weird.”

“Yeah, you tell me that a lot.” Leo grinned. “But if you don’t remember me, that means I can reuse all my old jokes. Come on!”

Jason figured that if this was his best friend, his life must be pretty messed up; but he followed Leo into the museum.

They walked through the building, stopping here and there for Coach Hedge to lecture them with his megaphone, which alternately made him sound like a Sith Lord or blared out random comments like “The pig says oink.”

Leo kept pulling out nuts, bolts, and pipe cleaners from the pockets of his army jacket and putting them together, like he had to keep his hands busy at all times.

Jason was too distracted to pay much attention to the exhibits, but they were about the Grand Canyon and the Hualapai tribe, which owned the museum.

Some girls kept looking over at Piper and Dylan and snickering. Jason figured these girls were the popular clique. They wore matching jeans and pink tops and enough makeup for a Halloween party.

One of them said, “Hey, Piper, does your tribe run this place? Do you get in free if you do a rain dance?”

The other girls laughed. Even Piper’s so-called partner Dylan suppressed a smile. Piper’s snowboarding jacket sleeves hid her hands, but Jason got the feeling she was clenching her fists.

“My dad’s Cherokee,” she said. “Not Hualapai. ’Course, you’d need a few brain cells to know the difference, Isabel.”

Isabel widened her eyes in mock surprise, so that she looked like an owl with a makeup addiction. “Oh, sorry! Was your *mom* in this tribe? Oh, that’s right. You never knew your mom.”

Piper charged her, but before a fight could start, Coach Hedge barked, “Enough back there! Set a good example or I’ll break out my baseball bat!”

The group shuffled on to the next exhibit, but the girls kept calling out little comments to Piper.

“Good to be back on the rez?” one asked in a sweet voice.

“Dad’s probably too drunk to work,” another said with fake sympathy. “That’s why she turned klepto.”

Piper ignored them, but Jason was ready to punch them himself. He might not remember Piper, or even who he was, but he knew he hated mean kids.

Leo caught his arm. “Be cool. Piper doesn’t like us fighting her battles. Besides, if those girls found out the truth about her dad, they’d be all bowing down to her and screaming, ‘We’re not worthy!’”

“Why? What about her dad?”

Leo laughed in disbelief. “You’re not kidding? You really don’t remember that your girlfriend’s dad—”

“Look, I wish I did, but I don’t even remember *her*, much less her dad.”

Leo whistled. “Whatever. We *have* to talk when we get back to the dorm.”

They reached the far end of the exhibit hall, where some big glass doors led

out to a terrace.

“All right, cupcakes,” Coach Hedge announced. “You are about to see the Grand Canyon. Try not to break it. The skywalk can hold the weight of seventy jumbo jets, so you featherweights should be safe out there. If possible, try to avoid pushing each other over the edge, as that would cause me extra paperwork.”

The coach opened the doors, and they all stepped outside. The Grand Canyon spread before them, live and in person. Extending over the edge was a horseshoe-shaped walkway made of glass, so you could see right through it.

“Man,” Leo said. “That’s pretty wicked.”

Jason had to agree. Despite his amnesia and his feeling that he didn’t belong there, he couldn’t help being impressed.

The canyon was bigger and wider than you could appreciate from a picture. They were up so high that birds circled below their feet. Five hundred feet down, a river snaked along the canyon floor. Banks of storm clouds had moved overhead while they’d been inside, casting shadows like angry faces across the cliffs. As far as Jason could see in any direction, red and gray ravines cut through the desert like some crazy god had taken a knife to it.

Jason got a piercing pain behind his eyes. *Crazy gods* ... Where had he come up with that idea? He felt like he’d gotten close to something important—something he should know about. He also got the unmistakable feeling he was in danger.

“You all right?” Leo asked. “You’re not going to throw up over the side, are you? ’Cause I should’ve brought my camera.”

Jason grabbed the railing. He was shivering and sweaty, but it had nothing to do with heights. He blinked, and the pain behind his eyes subsided.

“I’m fine,” he managed. “Just a headache.”

Thunder rumbled overhead. A cold wind almost knocked him sideways.

“This can’t be safe.” Leo squinted at the clouds. “Storm’s right over us, but it’s clear all the way around. Weird, huh?”

Jason looked up and saw Leo was right. A dark circle of clouds had parked itself over the skywalk, but the rest of the sky in every direction was perfectly clear. Jason had a bad feeling about that.

“All right, cupcakes!” Coach Hedge yelled. He frowned at the storm like it bothered him too. “We may have to cut this short, so get to work! Remember, complete sentences!”

The storm rumbled, and Jason’s head began to hurt again. Not knowing why he did it, he reached into his jeans pocket and brought out a coin—a circle of gold the size of a half-dollar, but thicker and more uneven. Stamped on one

side was a picture of a battle-ax. On the other was some guy's face wreathed in laurels. The inscription said something like *ivlivs*.

"Dang, is that gold?" Leo asked. "You been holding out on me!"

Jason put the coin away, wondering how he'd come to have it, and why he had the feeling he was going to need it soon.

"It's nothing," he said. "Just a coin."

Leo shrugged. Maybe his mind had to keep moving as much as his hands. "Come on," he said. "Dare you to spit over the edge."

They didn't try very hard on the worksheet. For one thing, Jason was too distracted by the storm and his own mixed-up feelings. For another thing, he didn't have any idea how to "name three sedimentary strata you observe" or "describe two examples of erosion."

Leo was no help. He was too busy building a helicopter out of pipe cleaners.

"Check it out." He launched the copter. Jason figured it would plummet, but the pipe-cleaner blades actually spun. The little copter made it halfway across the canyon before it lost momentum and spiraled into the void.

"How'd you do that?" Jason asked.

Leo shrugged. "Would've been cooler if I had some rubber bands."

"Seriously," Jason said, "are we friends?"

"Last I checked."

"You sure? What was the first day we met? What did we talk about?"

"It was ..." Leo frowned. "I don't recall exactly. I'm ADHD, man. You can't expect me to remember details."

"But I don't remember you *at all*. I don't remember anyone here. What if ___"

"You're right and everyone else is wrong?" Leo asked. "You think you just appeared here this morning, and we've all got fake memories of you?"

A little voice in Jason's head said, *That's exactly what I think.*

But it sounded crazy. Everybody here took him for granted. Everyone acted like he was a normal part of the class—except for Coach Hedge.

"Take the worksheet." Jason handed Leo the paper. "I'll be right back."

Before Leo could protest, Jason headed across the skywalk.

Their school group had the place to themselves. Maybe it was too early in the day for tourists, or maybe the weird weather had scared them off. The Wilderness School kids had spread out in pairs across the skywalk. Most were joking around or talking. Some of the guys were dropping pennies over the side. About fifty feet away, Piper was trying to fill out her worksheet, but her stupid

partner Dylan was hitting on her, putting his hand on her shoulder and giving her that blinding white smile. She kept pushing him away, and when she saw Jason she gave him a look like, *Throttle this guy for me.*

Jason motioned for her to hang on. He walked up to Coach Hedge, who was leaning on his baseball bat, studying the storm clouds.

“Did you do this?” the coach asked him.

Jason took a step back. “Do what?” It sounded like the coach had just asked if he’d made the thunderstorm.

Coach Hedge glared at him, his beady little eyes glinting under the brim of his cap. “Don’t play games with me, kid. What are you doing here, and why are you messing up my job?”

“You mean...you *don’t* know me?” Jason said. “I’m not one of your students?”

Hedge snorted. “Never seen you before today.”

Jason was so relieved he almost wanted to cry. At least he wasn’t going insane. He *was* in the wrong place. “Look, sir, I don’t know how I got here. I just woke up on the school bus. All I know is I’m not supposed to be here.”

“Got that right.” Hedge’s gruff voice dropped to a murmur, like he was sharing a secret. “You got a powerful way with the Mist, kid, if you can make all these people think they know you; but you can’t fool me. I’ve been smelling monster for days now. I knew we had an infiltrator, but you don’t smell like a monster. You smell like a half-blood. So—who are you, and where’d you come from?”

Most of what the coach said didn’t make sense, but Jason decided to answer honestly. “I don’t know who I am. I don’t have any memories. You’ve got to help me.”

Coach Hedge studied his face like was trying to read Jason’s thoughts.

“Great,” Hedge muttered. “You’re being truthful.”

“Of course I am! And what was all that about monsters and half-bloods? Are those code words or something?”

Hedge narrowed his eyes. Part of Jason wondered if the guy was just nuts. But the other part knew better.

“Look, kid,” Hedge said, “I don’t know who you are. I just know *what* you are, and it means trouble. Now I got to protect three of you rather than two. Are you the special package? Is that it?”

“What are you talking about?”

Hedge looked at the storm. The clouds were getting thicker and darker, hovering right over the skywalk.

“This morning,” Hedge said, “I got a message from camp. They said an

extraction team is on the way. They're coming to pick up a special package, but they wouldn't give me details. I thought to myself, Fine. The two I'm watching are pretty powerful, older than most. I know they're being stalked. I can smell a monster in the group. I figure that's why the camp is suddenly frantic to pick them up. But then *you* pop up out of nowhere. So, are you the special package?"

The pain behind Jason's eyes got worse than ever. *Half-bloods. Camp. Monsters.* He still didn't know what Hedge was talking about, but the words gave him a massive brain freeze—like his mind was trying to access information that should've been there but wasn't.

He stumbled, and Coach Hedge caught him. For a short guy, the coach had hands like steel. "Whoa, there, cupcake. You say you got no memories, huh? Fine. I'll just have to watch you, too, until the team gets here. We'll let the director figure things out."

"What director?" Jason said. "What camp?"

"Just sit tight. Reinforcements should be here soon. Hopefully nothing happens before—"

Lightning crackled overhead. The wind picked up with a vengeance. Worksheets flew into the Grand Canyon, and the entire bridge shuddered. Kids screamed, stumbling and grabbing the rails.

"I had to say something," Hedge grumbled. He bellowed into his megaphone: "Everyone inside! The cow says moo! Off the skywalk!"

"I thought you said this thing was stable!" Jason shouted over the wind.

"Under normal circumstances," Hedge agreed, "which these aren't. Come on!"

JASON

THE STORM CHURNED INTO A MINIATURE HURRICANE. Funnel clouds snaked toward the skywalk like the tendrils of a monster jellyfish.

Kids screamed and ran for the building. The wind snatched away their notebooks, jackets, hats, and backpacks. Jason skidded across the slick floor.

Leo lost his balance and almost toppled over the railing, but Jason grabbed his jacket and pulled him back.

“Thanks, man!” Leo yelled.

“Go, go, go!” said Coach Hedge.

Piper and Dylan were holding the doors open, herding the other kids inside. Piper’s snowboarding jacket was flapping wildly, her dark hair all in her face. Jason thought she must’ve been freezing, but she looked calm and confident—telling the others it would be okay, encouraging them to keep moving.

Jason, Leo, and Coach Hedge ran toward them, but it was like running through quicksand. The wind seemed to fight them, pushing them back.

Dylan and Piper pushed one more kid inside, then lost their grip on the doors. They slammed shut, closing off the skywalk.

Piper tugged at the handles. Inside, the kids pounded on the glass, but the doors seemed to be stuck.

“Dylan, help!” Piper shouted.

Dylan just stood there with an idiotic grin, his Cowboys jersey rippling in the wind, like he was suddenly enjoying the storm.

“Sorry, Piper,” he said. “I’m done helping.”

He flicked his wrist, and Piper flew backward, slamming into the doors and sliding to the skywalk deck.

“Piper!” Jason tried to charge forward, but the wind was against him, and Coach Hedge pushed him back.

“Coach,” Jason said, “let me go!”

“Jason, Leo, stay behind me,” the coach ordered. “This is my fight. I

should've known that was our monster.”

“What?” Leo demanded. A rogue worksheet slapped him in the face, but he swatted it away. “What monster?”

The coach's cap blew off, and sticking up above his curly hair were two bumps—like the knots cartoon characters get when they're bonked on the head. Coach Hedge lifted his baseball bat—but it wasn't a regular bat anymore. Somehow it had changed into a crudely shaped tree-branch club, with twigs and leaves still attached.

Dylan gave him that psycho happy smile. “Oh, come on, *Coach*. Let the boy attack me! After all, you're getting too old for this. Isn't that why they *retired* you to this stupid school? I've been on your team the entire season, and you didn't even know. You're losing your nose, grandpa.”

The coach made an angry sound like an animal bleating. “That's it, cupcake. You're going down.”

“You think you can protect three half-bloods at once, old man?” Dylan laughed. “Good luck.”

Dylan pointed at Leo, and a funnel cloud materialized around him. Leo flew off the skywalk like he'd been tossed. Somehow he managed to twist in midair, and slammed sideways into the canyon wall. He skidded, clawing furiously for any handhold. Finally he grabbed a thin ledge about fifty feet below the skywalk and hung there by his fingertips.

“Help!” he yelled up at them. “Rope, please? Bungee cord? Something?”

Coach Hedge cursed and tossed Jason his club. “I don't know who you are, kid, but I hope you're good. Keep that *thing* busy”—he stabbed a thumb at Dylan—“while I get Leo.”

“Get him how?” Jason demanded. “You going to fly?”

“Not fly. Climb.” Hedge kicked off his shoes, and Jason almost had a coronary. The coach didn't have any feet. He had hooves—goat's hooves. Which meant those things on his head, Jason realized, weren't bumps. They were horns.

“You're a faun,” Jason said.

“*Satyr!*” Hedge snapped. “Fauns are Roman. But we'll talk about that later.”

Hedge leaped over the railing. He sailed toward the canyon wall and hit hooves first. He bounded down the cliff with impossible agility, finding footholds no bigger than postage stamps, dodging whirlwinds that tried to attack him as he picked his way toward Leo.

“Isn't that cute!” Dylan turned toward Jason. “Now it's your turn, boy.”

Jason threw the club. It seemed useless with the winds so strong, but the

club flew right at Dylan, even curving when he tried to dodge, and smacked him on the head so hard he fell to his knees.

Piper wasn't as dazed as she appeared. Her fingers closed around the club when it rolled next to her, but before she could use it, Dylan rose. Blood—*golden* blood—trickled from his forehead.

“Nice try, boy.” He glared at Jason. “But you’ll have to do better.”

The skywalk shuddered. Hairline fractures appeared in the glass. Inside the museum, kids stopped banging on the doors. They backed away, watching in terror.

Dylan’s body dissolved into smoke, as if his molecules were coming unglued. He had the same face, the same brilliant white smile, but his whole form was suddenly composed of swirling black vapor, his eyes like electrical sparks in a living storm cloud. He sprouted black smoky wings and rose above the skywalk. If angels could be evil, Jason decided, they would look exactly like this.

“You’re a *ventus*,” Jason said, though he had no idea how he knew that word. “A storm spirit.”

Dylan’s laugh sounded like a tornado tearing off a roof. “I’m glad I waited, demigod. Leo and Piper I’ve known about for weeks. Could’ve killed them at any time. But my mistress said a third was coming—someone special. She’ll reward me greatly for your death!”

Two more funnel clouds touched down on either side of Dylan and turned into *venti*—ghostly young men with smoky wings and eyes that flickered with lightning.

Piper stayed down, pretending to be dazed, her hand still gripping the club. Her face was pale, but she gave Jason a determined look, and he understood the message: *Keep their attention. I’ll brain them from behind.*

Cute, smart, *and* violent. Jason wished he remembered having her as a girlfriend.

He clenched his fists and got ready to charge, but he never got a chance.

Dylan raised his hand, arcs of electricity running between his fingers, and blasted Jason in the chest.

Bang! Jason found himself flat on his back. His mouth tasted like burning aluminum foil. He lifted his head and saw that his clothes were smoking. The lightning bolt had gone straight through his body and blasted off his left shoe. His toes were black with soot.

The storm spirits were laughing. The winds raged. Piper was screaming defiantly, but it all sounded tinny and far away.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jason saw Coach Hedge climbing the cliff with

Leo on his back. Piper was on her feet, desperately swinging the club to fend off the two extra storm spirits, but they were just toying with her. The club went right through their bodies like they weren't there. And Dylan, a dark and winged tornado with eyes, loomed over Jason.

"Stop," Jason croaked. He rose unsteadily to his feet, and he wasn't sure who was more surprised: him, or the storm spirits.

"How are you alive?" Dylan's form flickered. "That was enough lightning to kill twenty men!"

"My turn," Jason said.

He reached in his pocket and pulled out the gold coin. He let his instincts take over, flipping the coin in the air like he'd done it a thousand times. He caught it in his palm, and suddenly he was holding a sword—a wickedly sharp double-edged weapon. The ridged grip fit his fingers perfectly, and the whole thing was gold—hilt, handle, and blade.

Dylan snarled and backed up. He looked at his two comrades and yelled, "Well? Kill him!"

The other storm spirits didn't look happy with that order, but they flew at Jason, their fingers crackling with electricity.

Jason swung at the first spirit. His blade passed through it, and the creature's smoky form disintegrated. The second spirit let loose a bolt of lightning, but Jason's blade absorbed the charge. Jason stepped in—one quick thrust, and the second storm spirit dissolved into gold powder.

Dylan wailed in outrage. He looked down as if expecting his comrades to re-form, but their gold dust remains dispersed in the wind. "Impossible! Who *are* you, half-blood?"

Piper was so stunned she dropped her club. "Jason, how ... ?"

Then Coach Hedge leaped back onto the skywalk and dumped Leo like a sack of flour.

"Spirits, fear me!" Hedge bellowed, flexing his short arms. Then he looked around and realized there was only Dylan.

"Curse it, boy!" he snapped at Jason. "Didn't you leave some for me? I like a challenge!"

Leo got to his feet, breathing hard. He looked completely humiliated, his hands bleeding from clawing at the rocks. "Yo, Coach Supergoat, whatever you are—I just fell down the freaking Grand Canyon! Stop asking for challenges!"

Dylan hissed at them, but Jason could see fear in his eyes. "You have no idea how many enemies you've awakened, half-bloods. My mistress will destroy *all* demigods. This war you *cannot* win."

Above them, the storm exploded into a full-force gale. Cracks expanded in

the skywalk. Sheets of rain poured down, and Jason had to crouch to keep his balance.

A hole opened in the clouds—a swirling vortex of black and silver.

“The mistress calls me back!” Dylan shouted with glee. “And you, demigod, will come with me!”

He lunged at Jason, but Piper tackled the monster from behind. Even though he was made of smoke, Piper somehow managed to connect. Both of them went sprawling. Leo, Jason, and the coach surged forward to help, but the spirit screamed with rage. He let loose a torrent that knocked them all backward. Jason and Coach Hedge landed on their butts. Jason’s sword skidded across the glass. Leo hit the back of his head and curled on his side, dazed and groaning. Piper got the worst of it. She was thrown off Dylan’s back and hit the railing, tumbling over the side until she was hanging by one hand over the abyss.

Jason started toward her, but Dylan screamed, “I’ll settle for this one!”

He grabbed Leo’s arm and began to rise, towing a half-conscious Leo below him. The storm spun faster, pulling them upward like a vacuum cleaner.

“Help!” Piper yelled. “Somebody!”

Then she slipped, screaming as she fell.

“Jason, go!” Hedge yelled. “Save her!”

The coach launched himself at the spirit with some serious goat fu—lashing out with his hooves, knocking Leo free from the spirit’s grasp. Leo dropped safely to the floor, but Dylan grappled the coach’s arms instead. Hedge tried to head-butt him, then kicked him and called him a cupcake. They rose into the air, gaining speed.

Coach Hedge shouted down once more, “Save her! I got this!” Then the satyr and the storm spirit spiraled into the clouds and disappeared.

Save her? Jason thought. *She’s gone!*

But again his instincts won. He ran to the railing, thinking, *I’m a lunatic*, and jumped over the side.

Jason wasn’t scared of heights. He was scared of being smashed against the canyon floor five hundred feet below. He figured he hadn’t accomplished anything except for dying along with Piper, but he tucked in his arms and plummeted headfirst. The sides of the canyon raced past like a film on fast-forward. His face felt like it was peeling off.

In a heartbeat, he caught up with Piper, who was flailing wildly. He tackled her waist and closed his eyes, waiting for death. Piper screamed. The wind whistled in Jason’s ears. He wondered what dying would feel like. He was thinking, probably not so good. He wished somehow they could never hit

bottom.

Suddenly the wind died. Piper's scream turned into a strangled gasp. Jason thought they must be dead, but he hadn't felt any impact.

"J-J-Jason," Piper managed.

He opened his eyes. They weren't falling. They were floating in midair, a hundred feet above the river.

He hugged Piper tight, and she repositioned herself so she was hugging him too. They were nose to nose. Her heart beat so hard, Jason could feel it through her clothes.

Her breath smelled like cinnamon. She said, "How did you—"

"I didn't," he said. "I think I would know if I could fly..."

But then he thought: *I don't even know who I am.*

He imagined going up. Piper yelped as they shot a few feet higher. They weren't exactly floating, Jason decided. He could feel pressure under his feet like they were balancing at the top of a geyser.

"The air is supporting us," he said.

"Well, tell it to support us more! Get us out of here!"

Jason looked down. The easiest thing would be to sink gently to the canyon floor. Then he looked up. The rain had stopped. The storm clouds didn't seem as bad, but they were still rumbling and flashing. There was no guarantee the spirits were gone for good. He had no idea what had happened to Coach Hedge. And he'd left Leo up there, barely conscious.

"We have to help them," Piper said, as if reading his thoughts. "Can you—"

"Let's see." Jason thought *Up*, and instantly they shot skyward.

The fact he was riding the winds might've been cool under different circumstances, but he was too much in shock. As soon as they landed on the skywalk, they ran to Leo.

Piper turned Leo over, and he groaned. His army coat was soaked from the rain. His curly hair glittered gold from rolling around in monster dust. But at least he wasn't dead.

"Stupid ... ugly ... goat," he muttered.

"Where did he go?" Piper asked.

Leo pointed straight up. "Never came down. Please tell me he didn't actually save my life."

"Twice," Jason said.

Leo groaned even louder. "What happened? The tornado guy, the gold sword ... I hit my head. That's it, right? I'm hallucinating?"

Jason had forgotten about the sword. He walked over to where it was lying and picked it up. The blade was well balanced. On a hunch he flipped it.

Midspin, the sword shrank back into a coin and landed in his palm.

“Yep,” Leo said. “Definitely hallucinating.”

Piper shivered in her rain-soaked clothes. “Jason, those things—”

“*Venti*,” he said. “Storm spirits.”

“Okay. You acted like ... like you’d seen them before. Who *are* you?”

He shook his head. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. I don’t know.”

The storm dissipated. The other kids from the Wilderness School were staring out the glass doors in horror. Security guards were working on the locks now, but they didn’t seem to be having any luck.

“Coach Hedge said he had to protect three people,” Jason remembered. “I think he meant us.”

“And that thing Dylan turned into ...” Piper shuddered. “God, I can’t believe it was *hitting* on me. He called us... what, *demigods*?”

Leo lay on his back, staring at the sky. He didn’t seem anxious to get up. “Don’t know what *demi* means,” he said. “But I’m not feeling too godly. You guys feeling godly?”

There was a brittle sound like dry twigs snapping, and the cracks in the skywalk began to widen.

“We need to get off this thing,” Jason said. “Maybe if we—”

“Ohhh-kay,” Leo interrupted. “Look up there and tell me if those are flying horses.”

At first Jason thought Leo *had* hit his head too hard. Then he saw a dark shape descending from the east—too slow for a plane, too large for a bird. As it got closer he could see a pair of winged animals—gray, four-legged, exactly like horses—except each one had a twenty-foot wingspan. And they were pulling a brightly painted box with two wheels: a chariot.

“Reinforcements,” he said. “Hedge told me an extraction squad was coming for us.”

“Extraction squad?” Leo struggled to his feet. “That sounds painful.”

“And where are they extracting us *to*?” Piper asked.

Jason watched as the chariot landed on the far end of the skywalk. The flying horses tucked in their wings and cantered nervously across the glass, as if they sensed it was near breaking. Two teenagers stood in the chariot—a tall blond girl maybe a little older than Jason, and a bulky dude with a shaved head and a face like a pile of bricks. They both wore jeans and orange T-shirts, with shields tossed over their backs. The girl leaped off before the chariot had even finished moving. She pulled a knife and ran toward Jason’s group while the bulky dude was reining in the horses.

“Where is he?” the girl demanded. Her gray eyes were fierce and a little

startling.

“Where’s who?” Jason asked.

She frowned like his answer was unacceptable. Then she turned to Leo and Piper. “What about Gleeson? Where is your protector, Gleeson Hedge?”

The coach’s first name was Gleeson? Jason might’ve laughed if the morning hadn’t been quite so weird and scary. Gleeson Hedge: football coach, goat man, protector of demigods. Sure. Why not?

Leo cleared his throat. “He got taken by some ... tornado things.”

“*Venti*,” Jason said. “Storm spirits.”

The blond girl arched an eyebrow. “You mean *anemoi thuellai*? That’s the Greek term. Who are you, and what happened?”

Jason did his best to explain, though it was hard to meet those intense gray eyes. About halfway through the story, the other guy from the chariot came over. He stood there glaring at them, his arms crossed. He had a tattoo of a rainbow on his biceps, which seemed a little unusual.

When Jason had finished his story, the blond girl didn’t look satisfied. “No, no, no! She *told* me he would be here. She told me if I came here, I’d find the answer.”

“Annabeth,” the bald guy grunted. “Check it out.” He pointed at Jason’s feet.

Jason hadn’t thought much about it, but he was still missing his left shoe, which had been blown off by the lightning. His bare foot felt okay, but it looked like a lump of charcoal.

“The guy with one shoe,” said the bald dude. “He’s the answer.”

“No, Butch,” the girl insisted. “He can’t be. I was tricked.” She glared at the sky as though it had done something wrong. “What do you want from me?” she screamed. “What have you done with him?”

The skywalk shuddered, and the horses whinnied urgently.

“Annabeth,” said the bald dude, Butch, “we gotta leave. Let’s get these three to camp and figure it out there. Those storm spirits might come back.”

She fumed for a moment. “Fine.” She fixed Jason with a resentful look. “We’ll settle this later.”

She turned on her heel and marched toward the chariot.

Piper shook her head. “What’s *her* problem? What’s going on?”

“Seriously,” Leo agreed.

“We have to get you out of here,” Butch said. “I’ll explain on the way.”

“I’m not going anywhere with *her*.” Jason gestured toward the blonde. “She looks like she wants to kill me.”

Butch hesitated. “Annabeth’s okay. You gotta cut her some slack. She had a

vision telling her to come here, to find a guy with one shoe. That was supposed to be the answer to her problem.”

“What problem?” Piper asked.

“She’s been looking for one of our campers, who’s been missing three days,” Butch said. “She’s going out of her mind with worry. She hoped he’d be here.”

“Who?” Jason asked.

“Her boyfriend,” Butch said. “A guy named Percy Jackson.”

PIPER

AFTER A MORNING OF STORM SPIRIT'S, goat men, and flying boyfriends, Piper should've been losing her mind. Instead, all she felt was dread.

It's starting, she thought. Just like the dream said.

She stood in back of the chariot with Leo and Jason, while the bald guy, Butch, handled the reins, and the blond girl, Annabeth, adjusted a bronze navigation device. They rose over the Grand Canyon and headed east, icy wind ripping straight through Piper's jacket. Behind them, more storm clouds were gathering.

The chariot lurched and bumped. It had no seat belts and the back was wide open, so Piper wondered if Jason would catch her again if she fell. That had been the most disturbing part of the morning—not that Jason could fly, but that he'd held her in his arms and yet didn't know who she was.

All semester she'd worked on a relationship, trying to get Jason to notice her as more than a friend. Finally she'd gotten the big dope to kiss her. The last few weeks had been the best of her life. And then, three nights ago, the dream had ruined everything—that horrible voice, giving her horrible news. She hadn't told anyone about it, not even Jason.

Now she didn't even have *him*. It was like someone had wiped his memory, and she was stuck in the worst “do over” of all time. She wanted to scream. Jason stood right next to her: those sky blue eyes, close-cropped blond hair, that cute little scar on his upper lip. His face was kind and gentle, but always a little sad. And he just stared at the horizon, not even noticing her.

Meanwhile, Leo was being annoying, as usual. “This is so cool!” He spit a pegasus feather out of his mouth. “Where are we going?”

“A safe place,” Annabeth said. “The *only* safe place for kids like us. Camp Half-Blood.”

“Half-Blood?” Piper was immediately on guard. She hated that word. She'd been called a half-blood too many times—half Cherokee, half white—and it was never a compliment. “Is that some kind of bad joke?”

“She means we're demigods,” Jason said. “Half god, half mortal.”

Annabeth looked back. “You seem to know a lot, Jason. But, yes,

demigods. My mom is Athena, goddess of wisdom. Butch here is the son of Iris, the rainbow goddess.”

Leo choked. “Your mom is a rainbow goddess?”

“Got a problem with that?” Butch said.

“No, no,” Leo said. “Rainbows. Very macho.”

“Butch is our best equestrian,” Annabeth said. “He gets along great with the pegasi.”

“Rainbows, ponies,” Leo muttered.

“I’m gonna toss you off this chariot,” Butch warned.

“Demigods,” Piper said. “You mean you think you’re ... you think we’re ___”

Lightning flashed. The chariot shuddered, and Jason yelled, “Left wheel’s on fire!”

Piper stepped back. Sure enough, the wheel was burning, white flames lapping up the side of the chariot.

The wind roared. Piper glanced behind them and saw dark shapes forming in the clouds, more storm spirits spiraling toward the chariot—except these looked more like horses than angels.

She started to say, “Why are they—”

“*Anemoi* come in different shapes,” Annabeth said. “Sometimes human, sometimes stallions, depending on how chaotic they are. Hold on. This is going to get rough.”

Butch flicked the reins. The pegasi put on a burst of speed, and the chariot blurred. Piper’s stomach crawled into her throat. Her vision went black, and when it came back to normal, they were in a totally different place.

A cold gray ocean stretched out to the left. Snow-covered fields, roads, and forests spread to the right. Directly below them was a green valley, like an island of springtime, rimmed with snowy hills on three sides and water to the north. Piper saw a cluster of buildings like ancient Greek temples, a big blue mansion, ball courts, a lake, and a climbing wall that seemed to be on fire. But before she could really process all she was seeing, their wheels came off and the chariot dropped out of the sky.

Annabeth and Butch tried to maintain control. The pegasi labored to hold the chariot in a flight pattern, but they seemed exhausted from their burst of speed, and bearing the chariot and the weight of five people was just too much.

“The lake!” Annabeth yelled. “Aim for the lake!”

Piper remembered something her dad had once told her, about hitting water from up high being as bad as hitting cement.

And then—*BOOM*.

The biggest shock was the cold. She was underwater, so disoriented that she didn't know which way was up.

She just had time to think: *This would be a stupid way to die.* Then faces appeared in the green murk—girls with long black hair and glowing yellow eyes. They smiled at her, grabbed her shoulders, and hauled her up.

They tossed her, gasping and shivering, onto the shore. Nearby, Butch stood in the lake, cutting the wrecked harnesses off the pegasi. Fortunately, the horses looked okay, but they were flapping their wings and splashing water everywhere. Jason, Leo, and Annabeth were already on shore, surrounded by kids giving them blankets and asking questions. Somebody took Piper by the arms and helped her stand. Apparently kids fell into the lake a lot, because a detail of campers ran up with big bronze leaf blower-looking things and blasted Piper with hot air; and in about two seconds her clothes were dry.

There were at least twenty campers milling around—the youngest maybe nine, the oldest college age, eighteen or nineteen—and all of them had orange T-shirts like Annabeth's. Piper looked back at the water and saw those strange girls just below the surface, their hair floating in the current. They waved like, *toodle-oo*, and disappeared into the depths. A second later the wreckage of the chariot was tossed from the lake and landed nearby with a wet crunch.

"Annabeth!" A guy with a bow and quiver on his back pushed through the crowd. "I said you could *borrow* the chariot, not destroy it!"

"Will, I'm sorry," Annabeth sighed. "I'll get it fixed, I promise."

Will scowled at his broken chariot. Then he sized up Piper, Leo, and Jason. "These are the ones? Way older than thirteen. Why haven't they been claimed already?"

"Claimed?" Leo asked.

Before Annabeth could explain, Will said, "Any sign of Percy?"

"No," Annabeth admitted.

The campers muttered. Piper had no idea who this guy Percy was, but his disappearance seemed to be a big deal.

Another girl stepped forward—tall, Asian, dark hair in ringlets, plenty of jewelry, and perfect makeup. Somehow she managed to make jeans and an orange T-shirt look glamorous. She glanced at Leo, fixed her eyes on Jason like he might be worthy of her attention, then curled her lip at Piper as if she were a week-old burrito that had just been pulled out of a Dumpster. Piper knew this girl's type. She'd dealt with a lot of girls like this at Wilderness School and every other stupid school her father had sent her to. Piper knew instantly they were going to be enemies.

"Well," the girl said, "I hope they're worth the trouble."

Leo snorted. “Gee, thanks. What are we, your new pets?”

“No kidding,” Jason said. “How about some answers before you start judging us—like, what is this place, why are we here, how long do we have to stay?”

Piper had the same questions, but a wave of anxiety washed over her. *Worth the trouble.* If they only knew about her dream. They had no idea...

“Jason,” Annabeth said, “I promise we’ll answer your questions. And Drew”—she frowned at the glamour girl—“all demigods are worth saving. But I’ll admit, the trip didn’t accomplish what I hoped.”

“Hey,” Piper said, “we didn’t ask to be brought here.”

Drew sniffed. “And nobody *wants* you, hon. Does your hair always look like a dead badger?”

Piper stepped forward, ready to smack her, but Annabeth said, “Piper, stop.”

Piper did. She wasn’t a bit scared of Drew, but Annabeth didn’t seem like somebody she wanted for an enemy.

“We need to make our new arrivals feel welcome,” Annabeth said, with another pointed look at Drew. “We’ll assign them each a guide, give them a tour of camp. Hopefully by the campfire tonight, they’ll be claimed.”

“Would somebody tell me what *claimed* means?” Piper asked.

Suddenly there was a collective gasp. The campers backed away. At first Piper thought she’d done something wrong. Then she realized their faces were bathed in a strange red light, as if someone had lit a torch behind her. She turned and almost forgot how to breathe.

Floating over Leo’s head was a blazing holographic image—a fiery hammer.

“That,” Annabeth said, “is claiming.”

“What’d I do?” Leo backed toward the lake. Then he glanced up and yelped. “Is my hair on fire?” He ducked, but the symbol followed him, bobbing and weaving so it looked like he was trying to write something in flames with his head.

“This can’t be good,” Butch muttered. “The curse—”

“Butch, shut up,” Annabeth said. “Leo, you’ve just been claimed—”

“By a god,” Jason interrupted. “That’s the symbol of Vulcan, isn’t it?”

All eyes turned to him.

“Jason,” Annabeth said carefully, “how did you know that?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Vulcan?” Leo demanded. “I don’t even LIKE *Star Trek*. What are you talking about?”

“Vulcan is the Roman name for Hephaestus,” Annabeth said, “the god of blacksmiths and fire.”

The fiery hammer faded, but Leo kept swatting the air like he was afraid it was following him. “The god of *what?* Who?”

Annabeth turned to the guy with the bow. “Will, would you take Leo, give him a tour? Introduce him to his bunk-mates in Cabin Nine.”

“Sure, Annabeth.”

“What’s Cabin Nine?” Leo asked. “And I’m not a Vulcan!”

“Come on, Mr. Spock, I’ll explain everything.” Will put a hand on his shoulder and steered him off toward the cabins.

Annabeth turned her attention back to Jason. Usually Piper didn’t like it when other girls checked out her boyfriend, but Annabeth didn’t seem to care that he was a good-looking guy. She studied him more like he was a complicated blueprint. Finally she said, “Hold out your arm.”

Piper saw what she was looking at, and her eyes widened.

Jason had taken off his windbreaker after his dip in the lake, leaving his arms bare, and on the inside of his right forearm was a tattoo. How had Piper never noticed it before? She’d looked at Jason’s arms a million times. The tattoo couldn’t have just *appeared*, but it was darkly etched, impossible to miss: a dozen straight lines like a bar code, and over that an eagle with the letters spqr.

“I’ve never seen marks like this,” Annabeth said. “Where did you get them?”

Jason shook his head. “I’m getting really tired of saying this, but I don’t know.”

The other campers pushed forward, trying to get a look at Jason’s tattoo. The marks seemed to bother them *a lot*—almost like a declaration of war.

“They look burned into your skin,” Annabeth noticed.

“They were,” Jason said. Then he winced as if his head was aching. “I mean ... I think so. I don’t remember.”

No one said anything. It was clear the campers saw Annabeth as the leader. They were waiting for her verdict.

“He needs to go straight to Chiron,” Annabeth decided. “Drew, would you —”

“Absolutely.” Drew laced her arm through Jason’s. “This way, sweetie. I’ll introduce you to our director. He’s ... an *interesting* guy.” She flashed Piper a smug look and led Jason toward the big blue house on the hill.

The crowd began to disperse, until only Annabeth and Piper were left.

“Who’s Chiron?” Piper asked. “Is Jason in some kind of trouble?”

Annabeth hesitated. “Good question, Piper. Come on, I’ll give you a tour.

We need to talk.”

PIPER

PIPER SOON REALIZED ANNABETH'S HEART wasn't in the tour.

She talked about all this amazing stuff the camp offered—magic archery, pegasus riding, the lava wall, fighting monsters—but she showed no excitement, as if her mind were elsewhere. She pointed out the open-air dining pavilion that overlooked Long Island Sound. (Yes, Long Island, New York; they'd traveled *that* far on the chariot.) Annabeth explained how Camp Half-Blood was mostly a summer camp, but some kids stayed here year-round, and they'd added so many campers it was always crowded now, even in winter.

Piper wondered who ran the camp, and how they'd known Piper and her friends belonged here. She wondered if she'd have to stay full-time, or if she'd be any good at the activities. Could you flunk out of monster fighting? A million questions bubbled in her head, but given Annabeth's mood, she decided to keep quiet.

As they climbed a hill at the edge of camp, Piper turned and got an amazing view of the valley—a big stretch of woods to the northwest, a beautiful beach, the creek, the canoe lake, lush green fields, and the whole layout of the cabins—a bizarre assortment of buildings arranged like a Greek omega, Ω , with a loop of cabins around a central green, and two wings sticking out the bottom on either side. Piper counted twenty cabins in all. One glowed golden, another silver. One had grass on the roof. Another was bright red with barbed wire trenches. One cabin was black with fiery green torches out front.

All of it seemed like a different world from the snowy hills and fields outside.

"The valley is protected from mortal eyes," Annabeth said. "As you can see, the weather is controlled, too. Each cabin represents a Greek god—a place for that god's children to live."

She looked at Piper like she was trying to judge how Piper was handling the news.

"You're saying Mom was a goddess."

Annabeth nodded. "You're taking this awfully calmly."

Piper couldn't tell her why. She couldn't admit that this just confirmed

some weird feelings she'd had for years, arguments she'd had with her father about why there were no photos of Mom in the house, and why Dad would never tell her exactly how or why her mom had left them. But mostly, the dream had warned her this was coming. *Soon they will find you, demigod, that voice had rumbled. When they do, follow our directions. Cooperate, and your father might live.*

Piper took a shaky breath. "I guess after this morning, it's a little easier to believe. So who's my mom?"

"We should know soon," Annabeth said. "You're what—fifteen? Gods are supposed to claim you when you're thirteen. That was the deal."

"The deal?"

"They made a promise last summer ... well, long story... but they promised not to ignore their demigod children anymore, to claim them by the time they turn thirteen. Sometimes it takes a little longer, but you saw how fast Leo was claimed once he got here. Should happen for you soon. Tonight at the campfire, I bet we'll get a sign."

Piper wondered if she'd have a big flaming hammer over her head, or with her luck, something even more embarrassing. A flaming wombat, maybe. Whoever her mother was, Piper had no reason to think she'd be proud to claim a kleptomaniac daughter with massive problems. "Why thirteen?"

"The older you get," Annabeth said, "the more monsters notice you, try to kill you. 'Round thirteen is usually when it starts. That's why we send protectors into the schools to find you guys, get you to camp before it's too late."

"Like Coach Hedge?"

Annabeth nodded. "He's—he was a satyr: half man, half goat. Satyrs work for the camp, finding demigods, protecting them, bringing them in when the time is right."

Piper had no trouble believing Coach Hedge was half goat. She'd seen the guy eat. She'd never liked the coach much, but she couldn't believe he'd sacrificed himself to save them.

"What happened to him?" she asked. "When we went up into the clouds, did he ... is he gone for good?"

"Hard to say." Annabeth's expression was pained. "Storm spirits ... difficult to battle. Even our best weapons, Celestial bronze, will pass right through them unless you can catch them by surprise."

"Jason's sword just turned them to dust," Piper remembered.

"He was lucky, then. If you hit a monster just right, you can dissolve them, send their essence back to Tartarus."

"Tartarus?"

“A huge abyss in the Underworld, where the worst monsters come from. Kind of like a bottomless pit of evil. Anyway, once monsters dissolve, it usually takes months, even years before they can re-form again. But since this storm spirit Dylan got away—well, I don’t know why he’d keep Hedge alive. Hedge was a protector, though. He knew the risks. Satyrs don’t have mortal souls. He’ll be reincarnated as a tree or a flower or something.”

Piper tried to imagine Coach Hedge as a clump of very angry pansies. That made her feel even worse.

She gazed at the cabins below, and an uneasy feeling settled over her. Hedge had died to get her here safely. Her mom’s cabin was down there somewhere, which meant she had brothers and sisters, more people she’d have to betray. *Do what we tell you, the voice had said. Or the consequences will be painful.* She tucked her hands under her arms, trying to stop them from shaking.

“It’ll be okay,” Annabeth promised. “You have friends here. We’ve all been through a lot of weird stuff. We know what you’re going through.”

I doubt that, Piper thought.

“I’ve been kicked out of five different schools the past five years,” she said. “My dad’s running out of places to put me.”

“Only five?” Annabeth didn’t sound like she was teasing. “Piper, we’ve all been labeled troublemakers. I ran away from home when I was seven.”

“Seriously?”

“Oh, yeah. Most of us are diagnosed with attention deficit disorder or dyslexia, or both—”

“Leo’s ADHD,” Piper said.

“Right. It’s because we’re hardwired for battle. Restless, impulsive—we don’t fit in with regular kids. You should hear how much trouble Percy—” Her face darkened. “Anyway, demigods get a bad rep. How’d you get in trouble?”

Usually when someone asked that question, Piper started a fight, or changed the subject, or caused some kind of distraction. But for some reason she found herself telling the truth.

“I steal stuff,” she said. “Well, not really *steal* ...”

“Is your family poor?”

Piper laughed bitterly. “Not even. I did it ... I don’t know why. For attention, I guess. My dad never had time for me unless I got in trouble.”

Annabeth nodded. “I can relate. But you said you didn’t really steal? What do you mean?”

“Well ... nobody ever believes me. The police, teachers—even the people I took stuff from: they’re so embarrassed, they’ll deny what happened. But the

truth is, I don't steal anything. I just ask people for things. And they give me stuff. Even a BMW convertible. I just asked. And the dealer said, 'Sure. Take it.' Later, he realized what he'd done, I guess. Then the police came after me."

Piper waited. She was used to people calling her a liar, but when she looked up, Annabeth just nodded.

"Interesting. If your *dad* were the god, I'd say you're a child of Hermes, god of thieves. He can be pretty convincing. But your dad is mortal..."

"Very," Piper agreed.

Annabeth shook her head, apparently mystified. "I don't know, then. With luck, your mom will claim you tonight."

Piper almost hoped it wouldn't happen. If her mom were a goddess, would she know about that dream? Would she know what Piper had been asked to do? Piper wondered if Olympian gods ever blasted their kids with lightning for being evil, or grounded them in the Underworld.

Annabeth was studying her. Piper decided she was going to have to be careful what she said from now on. Annabeth was obviously pretty smart. If anyone could figure out Piper's secret ...

"Come on," Annabeth said at last. "There's something else I need to check."

They hiked a little farther until they reached a cave near the top of the hill. Bones and old swords littered the ground. Torches flanked the entrance, which was covered in a velvet curtain embroidered with snakes. It looked like the set for some kind of twisted puppet show.

"What's in there?" Piper asked.

Annabeth poked her head inside, then sighed and closed the curtains. "Nothing, right now. A friend's place. I've been expecting her for a few days, but so far, nothing."

"Your friend lives in a cave?"

Annabeth almost managed a smile. "Actually, her family has a luxury condo in Queens, and she goes to a finishing school in Connecticut. But when she's here at camp, yeah, she lives in the cave. She's our oracle, tells the future. I was hoping she could help me—"

"Find Percy," Piper guessed.

All the energy drained out of Annabeth, like she'd been holding it together for as long as she could. She sat down on a rock, and her expression was so full of pain, Piper felt like a voyeur.

She forced herself to look away. Her eyes drifted to the crest of the hill, where a single pine tree dominated the skyline. Something glittered in its lowest branch—like a fuzzy gold bath mat.

No ... not a bath mat. It was a sheep's fleece.

Okay, Piper thought. Greek camp. They've got a replica of the Golden Fleece.

Then she noticed the base of the tree. At first she thought it was wrapped in a pile of massive purple cables. But the cables had reptilian scales, clawed feet, and a snakelike head with yellow eyes and smoking nostrils.

"That's—a dragon," she stammered. "That's the *actual* Golden Fleece?"

Annabeth nodded, but it was clear she wasn't really listening. Her shoulders drooped. She rubbed her face and took a shaky breath. "Sorry. A little tired."

"You look ready to drop," Piper said. "How long have been searching for your boyfriend?"

"Three days, six hours, and about twelve minutes."

"And you've got no idea what happened to him?"

Annabeth shook her head miserably. "We were so excited because we both started winter break early. We met up at camp on Tuesday, figured we had three weeks together. It was going to be great. Then after the campfire, he—he kissed me good night, went back to his cabin, and in the morning, he was gone. We searched the whole camp. We contacted his mom. We've tried to reach him every way we know how. Nothing. He just disappeared."

Piper was thinking: *Three days ago*. The same night she'd had her dream. "How long were you guys together?"

"Since August," Annabeth said. "August eighteenth."

"Almost exactly when I met Jason," Piper said. "But we've only been together a few weeks."

Annabeth winced. "Piper ... about that. Maybe you should sit down."

Piper knew where this was going. Panic started building inside her, like her lungs were filling with water. "Look, I know Jason thought—he thought he just *appeared* at our school today. But that's not true. I've known him for four months."

"Piper," Annabeth said sadly. "It's the Mist."

"Missed ... what?"

"M-i-s-t. It's a kind of veil separating the mortal world from the magic world. Mortal minds—they can't process strange stuff like gods and monsters, so the Mist bends reality. It makes mortals see things in a way they *can* understand—like their eyes might just skip over this valley completely, or they might look at that dragon and see a pile of cables."

Piper swallowed. "No. You said yourself I'm not a regular mortal. I'm a demigod."

"Even demigods can be affected. I've seen it lots of times. Monsters

infiltrate some place like a school, pass themselves off as human, and everyone *thinks* they remember that person. They believe he's always been around. The Mist can change memories, even create memories of things that never happened —”

“But Jason's not a monster!” Piper insisted. “He's a human guy, or demigod, or whatever you want to call him. My memories aren't fake. They're so real. The time we set Coach Hedge's pants on fire. The time Jason and I watched a meteor shower on the dorm roof and I finally got the stupid guy to kiss me....”

She found herself rambling, telling Annabeth about her whole semester at Wilderness School. She'd liked Jason from the first week they'd met. He was so nice to her, and so patient, he could even put up with hyperactive Leo and his stupid jokes. He'd accepted her for herself and didn't judge her because of the stupid things she'd done. They'd spent hours talking, looking at the stars, and eventually—*finally*—holding hands. All that *couldn't* be fake.

Annabeth pursed her lips. “Piper, your memories are a lot sharper than most. I'll admit that, and I don't know why that is. But if you know him so well —”

“I do!”

“Then where is he from?”

Piper felt like she'd been hit between the eyes. “He must have told me, but —”

“Did you ever notice his tattoo before today? Did he ever tell you anything about his parents, or his friends, or his last school?”

“I—I don't know, but—”

“Piper, what's his last name?”

Her mind went blank. She didn't know Jason's last name. How could that be?

She started to cry. She felt like a total fool, but she sat down on the rock next to Annabeth and just fell to pieces. It was too much. Did *everything* that was good in her stupid, miserable life have to be taken away?

Yes, the dream had told her. Yes, unless you do exactly what we say.

“Hey,” Annabeth said. “We'll figure it out. Jason's here now. Who knows? Maybe it'll work out with you guys for real.”

Not likely, Piper thought. Not if the dream had told her the truth. But she couldn't say that.

She brushed a tear from her cheek. “You brought me up here so no one would see me blubbering, huh?”

Annabeth shrugged. “I figured it would be hard for you. I know what it's

like to lose your boyfriend.”

“But I still can’t believe ... I *know* we had something. And now it’s just gone, like he doesn’t even recognize me. If he really did just show up today, then why? How’d he get there? Why can’t he remember anything?”

“Good questions,” Annabeth said. “Hopefully Chiron can figure that out. But for now, we need to get you settled. You ready to go back down?”

Piper gazed at the crazy assortment of cabins in the valley. Her new home, a family who supposedly understood her—but soon they’d be just another bunch of people she’d disappointed, just another place she’d been kicked out of. *You’ll betray them for us*, the voice had warned. *Or you’ll lose everything*.

She didn’t have a choice.

“Yeah,” she lied. “I’m ready.”

On the central green, a group of campers was playing basketball. They were incredible shots. Nothing bounced off the rim. Three-pointers went in automatically.

“Apollo’s cabin,” Annabeth explained. “Bunch of showoffs with missile weapons—arrows, basketballs.”

They walked past a central fire pit, where two guys were hacking at each other with swords.

“Real blades?” Piper noted. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

“That’s sort of the point,” Annabeth said. “Uh, sorry. Bad pun. That’s my cabin over there. Number Six.” She nodded to a gray building with a carved owl over the door. Through the open doorway, Piper could see bookshelves, weapon displays, and one of those computerized SMART Boards they have in classrooms. Two girls were drawing a map that looked like a battle diagram.

“Speaking of blades,” Annabeth said, “come here.”

She led Piper around the side of the cabin, to a big metal shed that looked like it was meant for gardening tools. Annabeth unlocked it, and inside were *not* gardening tools, unless you wanted to make war on your tomato plants. The shed was lined with all sorts of weapons—from swords to spears to clubs like Coach Hedge’s.

“Every demigod needs a weapon,” Annabeth said. “Hephaestus makes the best, but we have a pretty good selection, too. Athena’s all about strategy—matching the right weapon to the right person. Let’s see ...”

Piper didn’t feel much like shopping for deadly objects, but she knew Annabeth was trying to do something nice for her.

Annabeth handed her a massive sword, which Piper could hardly lift.

“No,” they both said at once.

Annabeth rummaged a little farther in the shed and brought out something else.

“A shotgun?” Piper asked.

“Mossberg 500.” Annabeth checked the pump action like it was no big deal. “Don’t worry. It doesn’t hurt humans. It’s modified to shoot Celestial bronze, so it only kills monsters.”

“Um, I don’t think that’s my style,” Piper said.

“Mmm, yeah,” Annabeth agreed. “Too flashy.”

She put the shotgun back and started poking through a rack of crossbows when something in the corner of the shed caught Piper’s eye.

“What is that?” she said. “A knife?”

Annabeth dug it out and blew the dust off the scabbard. It looked like it hadn’t seen the light of day in centuries.

“I don’t know, Piper.” Annabeth sounded uneasy. “I don’t think you want this one. Swords are usually better.”

“You use a knife.” Piper pointed to the one strapped to Annabeth’s belt.

“Yeah, but ...” Annabeth shrugged. “Well, take a look if you want.”

The sheath was worn black leather, bound in bronze. Nothing fancy, nothing flashy. The polished wood handle fit beautifully in Piper’s hand. When she unsheathed it, she found a triangular blade eighteen inches long—bronze gleaming like it had been polished yesterday. The edges were deadly sharp. Her reflection in the blade caught her by surprise. She looked older, more serious, not as scared as she felt.

“It suits you,” Annabeth admitted. “That kind of blade is called a parazonium. It was mostly ceremonial, carried by high-ranking officers in the Greek armies. It showed you were a person of power and wealth, but in a fight, it could protect you just fine.”

“I like it,” Piper said. “Why didn’t you think it was right?”

Annabeth exhaled. “That blade has a long story. Most people would be afraid to claim it. Its first owner ... well, things didn’t turn out too well for her. Her name was Helen.”

Piper let that sink in. “Wait, you mean *the* Helen? Helen of Troy?”

Annabeth nodded.

Suddenly Piper felt like she should be handling the dagger with surgical gloves. “And it’s just sitting in your toolshed?”

“We’re surrounded by Ancient Greek stuff,” Annabeth said. “This isn’t a museum. Weapons like that—they’re meant to be used. They’re our heritage as demigods. That was a wedding present from Menelaus, Helen’s first husband.

She named the dagger Katoptris.”

“Meaning?”

“Mirror,” Annabeth said. “Looking glass. Probably because that’s the only thing Helen used it for. I don’t think it’s ever seen battle.”

Piper looked at the blade again. For a moment, her own image stared up at her, but then the reflection changed. She saw flames, and a grotesque face like something carved from bedrock. She heard the same laughter as in her dream. She saw her dad in chains, tied to a post in front of a roaring bonfire.

She dropped the blade.

“Piper?” Annabeth shouted to the Apollo kids on the court, “Medic! I need some help over here!”

“No, it’s—it’s okay,” Piper managed.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I just ...” She had to control herself. With trembling fingers, she picked up the dagger. “I just got overwhelmed. So much happening today. But ... I want to keep the dagger, if that’s okay.”

Annabeth hesitated. Then she waved off the Apollo kids. “Okay, if you’re sure. You turned really pale, there. I thought you were having a seizure or something.”

“I’m fine,” Piper promised, though her heart was still racing. “Is there ... um, a phone at camp? Can I call my dad?”

Annabeth’s gray eyes were almost as unnerving as the dagger blade. She seemed to be calculating a million possibilities, trying to read Piper’s thoughts.

“We aren’t allowed phones,” she said. “Most demigods, if they use a cell phone, it’s like sending up a signal, letting monsters know where you are. But ... I’ve got one.” She slipped it out of her pocket. “Kind of against the rules, but if it can be our secret ...”

Piper took it gratefully, trying not to let her hands shake. She stepped away from Annabeth and turned to face the commons area.

She called her dad’s private line, even though she knew what would happen. Voice mail. She’d been trying for three days, ever since the dream. Wilderness School only allowed phone privileges once a day, but she’d called every evening, and gotten nowhere.

Reluctantly she dialed the other number. Her dad’s personal assistant answered immediately. “Mr. McLean’s office.”

“Jane,” Piper said, gritting her teeth. “Where’s my dad?”

Jane was silent for a moment, probably wondering if she could get away with hanging up. “Piper, I thought you weren’t supposed to call from school.”

“Maybe I’m not at school,” Piper said. “Maybe I ran away to live among

the woodland creatures.”

“Mmm.” Jane didn’t sound concerned. “Well, I’ll tell him you called.”

“Where is he?”

“Out.”

“You don’t know, do you?” Piper lowered her voice, hoping Annabeth was too nice to eavesdrop. “When are you going to call the police, Jane? He could be in trouble.”

“Piper, we are not going to turn this into a media circus. I’m sure he’s fine. He does take off occasionally. He always comes back.”

“So it’s true. You *don’t* know—”

“I have to go, Piper,” Jane snapped. “Enjoy school.”

The line went dead. Piper cursed. She walked back to Annabeth and handed her the phone.

“No luck?” Annabeth asked.

Piper didn’t answer. She didn’t trust herself not to start crying again.

Annabeth glanced at the phone display and hesitated. “Your last name is McLean? Sorry, it’s not my business. But that sounds really familiar.”

“Common name.”

“Yeah, I guess. What does your dad do?”

“He’s got a degree in the arts,” Piper said automatically. “He’s a Cherokee artist.”

Her standard response. Not a lie, just not the whole truth. Most people, when they heard that, figured her dad sold Indian souvenirs at a roadside stand on a reservation. Sitting Bull bobble-heads, wampum necklaces, Big Chief tablets—that kind of thing.

“Oh.” Annabeth didn’t look convinced, but she put the phone away. “You feeling okay? Want to keep going?”

Piper fastened her new dagger to her belt and promised herself that later, when she was alone, she’d figure out how it worked. “Sure,” she said. “I want to see everything.”

All the cabins were cool, but none of them struck Piper as *hers*. No burning signs—wombats or otherwise—appeared over her head.

Cabin Eight was entirely silver and glowed like moonlight.

“Artemis?” Piper guessed.

“You know Greek mythology,” Annabeth said.

“I did some reading when my dad was working on a project last year.”

“I thought he did Cherokee art.”

Piper bit back a curse. “Oh, right. But—you know, he does other stuff too.”

Piper thought she'd blown it: McLean, Greek mythology. Thankfully, Annabeth didn't seem to make the connection.

"Anyway," Annabeth continued, "Artemis is goddess of the moon, goddess of hunting. But no campers. Artemis was an eternal maiden, so she doesn't have any kids."

"Oh." That kind of bummed Piper out. She'd always liked the stories of Artemis, and figured she would make a cool mom.

"Well, there *are* the Hunters of Artemis," Annabeth amended. "They visit sometimes. They're not the children of Artemis, but they're her handmaidens—this band of immortal teenage girls who adventure together and hunt monsters and stuff."

Piper perked up. "That sounds cool. They get to be immortal?"

"Unless they die in combat, or break their vows. Did I mention they have to swear off boys? No dating—ever. For eternity."

"Oh," Piper said. "Never mind."

Annabeth laughed. For a moment she looked almost happy, and Piper thought she'd be a cool friend to hang out with in better times.

Forget it, Piper reminded herself. You're not going to make any friends here. Not once they find out.

They passed the next cabin, Number Ten, which was decorated like a Barbie house with lace curtains, a pink door, and potted carnations in the windows. They walked by the doorway, and the smell of perfume almost made Piper gag.

"Gah, is that where supermodels go to die?"

Annabeth smirked. "Aphrodite's cabin. Goddess of love. Drew is the head counselor."

"Figures," Piper grumbled.

"They're not all bad," Annabeth said. "The last head counselor we had was great."

"What happened to her?"

Annabeth's expression darkened. "We should keep moving."

They looked at the other cabins, but Piper just got more depressed. She wondered if she could be the daughter of Demeter, the farming goddess. Then again, Piper killed every plant she ever touched. Athena was cool. Or maybe Hecate, the magic goddess. But it didn't really matter. Even here, where everyone was supposed to find a lost parent, she knew she would still end up the unwanted kid. She was not looking forward to the campfire tonight.

"We started with the twelve Olympian gods," Annabeth explained. "Male gods on the left, female on the right. Then last year, we added a whole bunch of

new cabins for the other gods who didn't have thrones on Olympus—Hecate, Hades, Iris—”

“What are the two big ones on the end?” Piper asked.

Annabeth frowned. “Zeus and Hera. King and queen of the gods.”

Piper headed that way, and Annabeth followed, though she didn't act very excited. The Zeus cabin reminded Piper of a bank. It was white marble with big columns out front and polished bronze doors emblazoned with lightning bolts.

Hera's cabin was smaller but done in the same style, except the doors were carved with peacock feather designs, shimmering in different colors.

Unlike the other cabins, which were all noisy and open and full of activity, the Zeus and Hera cabins looked closed and silent.

“Are they empty?” Piper asked.

Annabeth nodded. “Zeus went a long time without having any children. Well, mostly. Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades, the eldest brothers among the gods—they're called the Big Three. Their kids are really powerful, really dangerous. For the last seventy years or so, they tried to avoid having demigod children.”

“*Tried* to avoid it?”

“Sometimes they ... um, cheated. I've got a friend, Thalia Grace, who's the daughter of Zeus. But she gave up camp life and became a Hunter of Artemis. My boyfriend, Percy, he's a son of Poseidon. And there's a kid who shows up sometimes, Nico—son of Hades. Except for them, there are no demigod children of the Big Three gods. At least, not that we know of.”

“And Hera?” Piper looked at the peacock-decorated doors. The cabin bothered her, though she wasn't sure why.

“Goddess of marriage.” Annabeth's tone was carefully controlled, like she was trying to avoid cursing. “She doesn't have kids with anyone but Zeus. So, yeah, no demigods. The cabin's just honorary.”

“You don't like her,” Piper noticed.

“We have a long history,” Annabeth admitted. “I thought we'd made peace, but when Percy disappeared ... I got this weird dream vision from her.”

“Telling you to come get us,” Piper said. “But you thought Percy would be there.”

“It's probably better I don't talk about it,” Annabeth said. “I've got nothing good to say about Hera right now.”

Piper looked down the base of the doors. “So who goes in here?”

“No one. The cabin is just honorary, like I said. No one goes in.”

“Someone does.” Piper pointed at a footprint on the dusty threshold. On instinct, she pushed the doors and they swung open easily.

Annabeth stepped back. “Um, Piper, I don't think we should—”

“We’re supposed to do dangerous stuff, right?” And Piper walked inside.

Hera’s cabin was not someplace Piper would want to live. It was as cold as a freezer, with a circle of white columns around a central statue of the goddess, ten feet tall, seated on a throne in flowing golden robes. Piper had always thought of Greek statues as white with blank eyes, but this one was brightly painted so it looked almost human—except huge. Hera’s piercing eyes seemed to follow Piper.

At the goddess’s feet, a fire burned in a bronze brazier. Piper wondered who tended it if the cabin was always empty. A stone hawk sat on Hera’s shoulder, and in her hand was a staff topped with a lotus flower. The goddess’s hair was done in black plaits. Her face smiled, but the eyes were cold and calculating, as if she were saying: *Mother knows best. Now don’t cross me or I will have to step on you.*

There was nothing else in the cabin—no beds, no furniture, no bathroom, no windows, nothing that anyone could actually use to live. For a goddess of home and marriage, Hera’s place reminded Piper of a tomb.

No, this wasn’t her mom. At least Piper was sure of *that*. She hadn’t come in here because she felt a *good* connection, but because her sense of dread was stronger here. Her dream—that horrible ultimatum she’d been handed—had something to do with this cabin.

She froze. They weren’t alone. Behind the statue, at a little altar in the back, stood a figure covered in a black shawl. Only her hands were visible, palms up. She seemed to be chanting something like a spell or a prayer.

Annabeth gasped. “Rachel?”

The other girl turned. She dropped her shawl, revealing a mane of curly red hair and a freckled face that didn’t go with the seriousness of the cabin or the black shawl at all. She looked about seventeen, a totally normal teen in a green blouse and tattered jeans covered with marker doodles. Despite the cold floor, she was barefoot.

“Hey!” She ran to give Annabeth a hug. “I’m so sorry! I came as fast as I could.”

They talked for a few minutes about Annabeth’s boyfriend and how there was no news, et cetera, until finally Annabeth remembered Piper, who was standing there feeling uncomfortable.

“I’m being rude,” Annabeth apologized. “Rachel, this is Piper, one of the half-bloods we rescued today. Piper, this is Rachel Elizabeth Dare, our oracle.”

“The friend who lives in the cave,” Piper guessed.

Rachel grinned. "That's me."

"So you're an oracle?" Piper asked. "You can tell the future?"

"More like the future mugs me from time to time," Rachel said. "I speak prophecies. The oracle's spirit kind of hijacks me every once in a while and speaks important stuff that doesn't make any sense to anybody. But yeah, the prophecies tell the future."

"Oh." Piper shifted from foot to foot. "That's cool."

Rachel laughed. "Don't worry. Everybody finds it a little creepy. Even me. But usually I'm harmless."

"You're a demigod?"

"Nope," Rachel said. "Just mortal."

"Then what are you ..." Piper waved her hand around the room.

Rachel's smile faded. She glanced at Annabeth, then back at Piper. "Just a hunch. Something about this cabin and Percy's disappearance. They're connected somehow. I've learned to follow my hunches, especially the last month, since the gods went silent."

"Went silent?" Piper asked.

Rachel frowned at Annabeth. "You haven't told her yet?"

"I was getting to that," Annabeth said. "Piper, for the last month ... well, it's normal for the gods not to talk to their children very much, but usually we can count on some messages now and then. Some of us can even visit Olympus. I spent practically all semester at the Empire State Building."

"Excuse me?"

"The entrance to Mount Olympus these days."

"Oh," Piper said. "Sure, why not?"

"Annabeth was redesigning Olympus after it was damaged in the Titan War," Rachel explained. "She's an amazing architect. You should see the salad bar—"

"Anyway," Annabeth said, "starting about a month ago, Olympus fell silent. The entrance closed, and no one could get in. Nobody knows why. It's like the gods have sealed themselves off. Even my mom won't answer my prayers, and our camp director, Dionysus, was recalled."

"Your camp director was the god of ... wine?"

"Yeah, it's a—"

"Long story," Piper guessed. "Right. Go on."

"That's it, really," Annabeth said. "Demigods still get claimed, but nothing else. No messages. No visits. No sign the gods are even listening. It's like something has happened—something *really* bad. Then Percy disappeared."

"And Jason showed up on our field trip," Piper supplied. "With no

memory.”

“Who’s Jason?” Rachel asked.

“My—” Piper stopped herself before she could say “boyfriend,” but the effort made her chest hurt. “My friend. But Annabeth, you said Hera sent you a dream vision.”

“Right,” Annabeth said. “The first communication from a god in a month, and it’s Hera, the least helpful goddess, and she contacts me, her least favorite demigod. She tells me I’ll find out what happened to Percy if I go to the Grand Canyon skywalk and look for a guy with one shoe. Instead, I find you guys, and the guy with one shoe is Jason. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Something bad is happening,” Rachel agreed. She looked at Piper, and Piper felt an overwhelming desire to tell them about her dream, to confess that *she* knew what was happening—at least part of the story. And the bad stuff was only beginning.

“Guys,” she said. “I—I need to—”

Before she could continue, Rachel’s body stiffened. Her eyes began to glow with a greenish light, and she grabbed Piper by the shoulders.

Piper tried to back away, but Rachel’s hands were like steel clamps.

Free me, she said. But it wasn’t Rachel’s voice. It sounded like an older woman, speaking from somewhere far away, down a long, echoing pipe. *Free me, Piper McLean, or the earth shall swallow us. It must be by the solstice.*

The room started spinning. Annabeth tried to separate Piper from Rachel, but it was no use. Green smoke enveloped them, and Piper was no longer sure if she was awake or dreaming. The giant statue of the goddess seemed to rise from its throne. It leaned over Piper, its eyes boring into her. The statue’s mouth opened, its breath like horribly thick perfume. It spoke in the same echoing voice: *Our enemies stir. The fiery one is only the first. Bow to his will, and their king shall rise, dooming us all. FREE ME!*

Piper’s knees buckled, and everything went black.

LEO

LEO'S TOUR WAS GOING GREAT UNTIL he learned about the dragon.

The archer dude, Will Solace, seemed pretty cool. Everything he showed Leo was so amazing, it should've been illegal. Real Greek warships moored at the beach that sometimes had practice fights with flaming arrows and explosives? Sweet! Arts & crafts sessions where you could make sculptures with chain saws and blowtorches? Leo was like, *Sign me up!* The woods were stocked with dangerous monsters, and no one should ever go in there alone? Nice! And the camp was overflowing with fine-looking girls. Leo didn't quite understand the whole related-to-the-gods business, but he hoped that didn't mean he was cousins with all these ladies. That would suck. At the very least, he wanted to check out those underwater girls in the lake again. They were definitely worth drowning for.

Will showed him the cabins, the dining pavilion, and the sword arena.

"Do I get a sword?" Leo asked.

Will glanced at him like he found the idea disturbing. "You'll probably make your own, seeing as how you're in Cabin Nine."

"Yeah, what's up with that? Vulcan?"

"Usually we don't call the gods by their Roman names," Will said. "The original names are Greek. Your dad is Hephaestus."

"Festus?" Leo had heard somebody say that before, but he was still dismayed. "Sounds like the god of cowboys."

"*He*-phaestus," Will corrected. "God of blacksmiths and fire."

Leo had heard that too, but he was trying not to think about it. The god of fire ... seriously? Considering what had happened to his mom, that seemed like a sick joke.

"So the flaming hammer over my head," Leo said. "Good thing, or bad thing?"

Will took a while to answer. "You were claimed almost immediately. That's usually good."

"But that Rainbow Pony dude, Butch—he mentioned a curse."

"Ah ... look, it's nothing. Since Cabin Nine's last head counselor died—"

“Died? Like, painfully?”

“I ought to let your bunkmates tell you about it.”

“Yeah, where *are* my home dawgs? Shouldn’t their counselor be giving me the VIP tour?”

“He, um, can’t. You’ll see why.” Will forged ahead before Leo could ask anything else.

“Curses and death,” Leo said to himself. “This just gets better and better.”

He was halfway across the green when he spotted his old babysitter. And she was *not* the kind of person he expected to see at a demigod camp.

Leo froze in his tracks.

“What’s wrong?” Will asked.

Tía Callida—*Auntie* Callida. That’s what she’d called herself, but Leo hadn’t seen her since he was five years old. She was just standing there, in the shadow of a big white cabin at the end of the green, watching him. She wore her black linen widow’s dress, with a black shawl pulled over her hair. Her face hadn’t changed—leathery skin, piercing dark eyes. Her withered hands were like claws. She looked ancient, but no different than Leo remembered.

“That old lady ...” Leo said. “What’s she doing here?”

Will tried to follow his gaze. “What old lady?”

“Dude, *the* old lady. The one in black. How many old ladies do you see over there?”

Will frowned. “I think you’ve had a long day, Leo. The Mist could still be playing tricks on your mind. How about we head straight to your cabin now?”

Leo wanted to protest, but when he looked back toward the big white cabin, Tía Callida was gone. He was *sure* she’d been there, almost as if thinking about his mom had summoned Callida back from the past.

And that wasn’t good, because Tía Callida had tried to kill him.

“Just messing with you, man.” Leo pulled some gears and levers from his pockets and started fiddling with them to calm his nerves. He couldn’t have everybody at camp thinking he was crazy. At least, not crazier than he really was.

“Let’s go see Cabin Nine,” he said. “I’m in the mood for a good curse.”

From the outside, the Hephaestus cabin looked like an oversize RV with shiny metal walls and metal-slatted windows. The entrance was like a bank vault door, circular and several feet thick. It opened with lots of brass gears turning and hydraulic pistons blowing smoke.

Leo whistled. “They got a steampunk theme going on, huh?”

Inside, the cabin seemed deserted. Steel bunks were folded against the walls like high-tech Murphy beds. Each had a digital control panel, blinking LED lights, glowing gems, and interlocking gears. Leo figured each camper had his own combination lock to release his bed, and there was probably an alcove behind it with storage, maybe some traps to keep out unwanted visitors. At least, that’s the way Leo would’ve designed it. A fire pole came down from the second floor, even though the cabin didn’t appear to *have* a second floor from the outside. A circular staircase led down into some kind of basement. The walls were lined with every kind of power tool Leo could imagine, plus a huge assortment of knives, swords, and other implements of destruction. A large workbench overflowed with scrap metal—screws, bolts, washers, nails, rivets, and a million other machine parts. Leo had a strong urge to shovel them all into his coat pockets. He loved that kind of stuff. But he’d need a hundred more coats to fit it all.

Looking around, he could almost imagine he was back in his mom’s machine shop. Not the weapons, maybe—but the tools, the piles of scrap, the smell of grease and metal and hot engines. She would’ve loved this place.

He pushed that thought away. He didn’t like painful memories. *Keep moving*—that was his motto. Don’t dwell on things. Don’t stay in one place too long. It was the only way to stay ahead of the sadness.

He picked a long implement from the wall. “A weed whacker? What’s the god of fire want with a weed whacker?”

A voice in the shadows said, “You’d be surprised.”

At the back of the room, one of the bunk beds was occupied. A curtain of dark camouflage material retracted, and Leo could see the guy who’d been invisible a second before. It was hard to tell much about him because he was covered in a body cast. His head was wrapped in gauze except for his face, which was puffy and bruised. He looked like the Pillsbury Doughboy after a beat-down.

“I’m Jake Mason,” the guy said. “I’d shake your hand, but ...”

“Yeah,” Leo said. “Don’t get up.”

The guy cracked a smile, then winced like it hurt to move his face. Leo wondered what had happened to him, but he was afraid to ask.

“Welcome to Cabin Nine,” Jake said. “Been almost a year since we had any new kids. I’m head counselor for now.”

“For now?” Leo asked.

Will Solace cleared his throat. “So where is everybody, Jake?”

“Down at the forges,” Jake said wistfully. “They’re working on ... you

know, that problem.”

“Oh.” Will changed the subject. “So, you got a spare bed for Leo?”

Jake studied Leo, sizing him up. “You believe in curses, Leo? Or ghosts?”

I just saw my evil babysitter Tía Callida, Leo thought. She’s *got* to be dead after all these years. And I can’t go a day without remembering my mom in that machine shop fire. Don’t talk to me about ghosts, doughboy.

But aloud, he said, “Ghosts? Pfft. Nah. I’m cool. A storm spirit chucked me down the Grand Canyon this morning, but you know, all in a day’s work, right?”

Jake nodded. “That’s good. Because I’ll give you the best bed in the cabin—Beckendorf’s.”

“Whoa, Jake,” Will said. “You sure?”

Jake called out: “Bunk 1-A, please.”

The whole cabin rumbled. A circular section of the floor spiraled open like a camera lens, and a full-size bed popped up. The bronze frame had a built-in game station at the footboard, a stereo system in the headboard, a glass-door refrigerator mounted into the base, and a whole bunch of control panels running down the side.

Leo jumped right in and lay back with arms behind his head. “I can handle this.”

“It retracts into a private room below,” Jake said.

“Oh, heck, yes,” Leo said. “See y’all. I’ll be down in the Leo Cave. Which button do I press?”

“Hold on,” Will Solace protested. “You guys have private underground rooms?”

Jake probably would’ve smiled if it didn’t hurt so much. “We got lots of secrets, Will. You Apollo guys can’t have all the fun. Our campers have been excavating the tunnel system under Cabin Nine for almost a century. We still haven’t found the end. Anyway, Leo, if you don’t mind sleeping in a dead man’s bed, it’s yours.”

Suddenly Leo didn’t feel like kicking back. He sat up, careful not to touch any of the buttons. “The counselor who died—this was his bed?”

“Yeah,” Jake said. “Charles Beckendorf.”

Leo imagined saw blades coming through the mattress, or maybe a grenade sewn inside the pillows. “He didn’t, like, die *in* this bed, did he?”

“No,” Jake said. “In the Titan War, last summer.”

“The Titan War,” Leo repeated, “which has *nothing* to do with this very fine bed?”

“The Titans,” Will said, like Leo was an idiot. “The big powerful guys that ruled the world before the gods. They tried to make a comeback last summer.

Their leader, Kronos, built a new palace on top of Mount Tam in California. Their armies came to New York and almost destroyed Mount Olympus. A lot of demigods died trying to stop them.”

“I’m guessing this wasn’t on the news?” Leo said.

It seemed like a fair question, but Will shook his head in disbelief. “You didn’t hear about Mount St. Helens erupting, or the freak storms across the country, or that building collapsing in St. Louis?”

Leo shrugged. Last summer, he’d been on the run from another foster home. Then a truancy officer caught him in New Mexico, and the court sentenced him to the nearest correctional facility—the Wilderness School. “Guess I was busy.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Jake said. “You were lucky to miss it. The thing is, Beckendorf was one of the first casualties, and ever since then—”

“Your cabin’s been cursed,” Leo guessed.

Jake didn’t answer. Then again, the dude was in a body cast. That *was* an answer. Leo started noticing little things that he hadn’t seen before—an explosion mark on the wall, a stain on the floor that might’ve been oil ... or blood. Broken swords and smashed machines kicked into the corners of the room, maybe out of frustration. The place *did* feel unlucky.

Jake sighed halfheartedly. “Well, I should get some sleep. I hope you like it here, Leo. It used to be ... really nice.”

He closed his eyes, and the camouflage curtain drew itself across the bed.

“Come on, Leo,” Will said. “I’ll take you to the forges.”

As they were leaving, Leo looked back at his new bed, and he could almost imagine a dead counselor sitting there—another ghost who wasn’t going to leave Leo alone.

LEO

“HOW DID HE DIE?” LEO ASKED. “I mean Beckendorf.”

Will Solace trudged ahead. “Explosion. Beckendorf and Percy Jackson blew up a cruise ship full of monsters. Beckendorf didn’t make it out.”

There was that name again—Percy Jackson, Annabeth’s missing boyfriend. That guy must’ve been into everything around here, Leo thought.

“So Beckendorf was pretty popular?” Leo asked. “I mean —before he blew up?”

“He was awesome,” Will agreed. “It was hard on the whole camp when he died. Jake—he became head counselor in the middle of the war. Same as I did, actually. Jake did his best, but he never wanted to be leader. He just likes building stuff. Then after the war, things started to go wrong. Cabin Nine’s chariots blew up. Their automatons went haywire. Their inventions started to malfunction. It was like a curse, and eventually people started calling it that—the Curse of Cabin Nine. Then Jake had his accident—”

“Which had something to do with the problem he mentioned,” Leo guessed.

“They’re working on it,” Will said without enthusiasm. “And here we are.”

The forge looked like a steam-powered locomotive had smashed into the Greek Parthenon and they had fused together. White marble columns lined the soot-stained walls. Chimneys pumped smoke over an elaborate gable carved with a bunch of gods and monsters. The building sat at the edge of a stream, with several waterwheels turning a series of bronze gears. Leo heard machinery grinding inside, fires roaring, and hammers ringing on anvils.

They stepped through the doorway, and a dozen guys and girls who’d been working on various projects all froze. The noise died down to the roar of the forge and the *click-click-click* of gears and levers.

“Sup, guys,” Will said. “This is your new brother, Leo—um, what’s your last name?”

“Valdez.” Leo looked around at the other campers. Was he really related to all of them? His cousins came from some big families, but he’d always just had his mom—until she died.

Kids came up and started shaking hands and introducing themselves. Their

names blurred together: Shane, Christopher, Nyssa, Harley (yeah, like the motorcycle). Leo knew he'd never keep everybody straight. Too many of them. Too overwhelming.

None of them looked like the others—all different face types, skin tone, hair color, height. You'd never think, *Hey, look, it's the Hephaestus Bunch!* But they all had powerful hands, rough with calluses and stained with engine grease. Even little Harley, who couldn't have been more than eight, looked like he could go six rounds with Chuck Norris without breaking a sweat.

And all the kids shared a sad kind of seriousness. Their shoulders slumped like life had beaten them down pretty hard. Several looked like they'd been physically beaten up, too. Leo counted two arm slings, one pair of crutches, an eye patch, six Ace bandages, and about seven thousand Band-Aids.

"Well, all right!" Leo said. "I hear this is the party cabin!"

Nobody laughed. They all just stared at him.

Will Solace patted Leo's shoulder. "I'll leave you guys to get acquainted. Somebody show Leo to dinner when it's time?"

"I got it," one of the girls said. Nyssa, Leo remembered. She wore camo pants, a tank top that showed off her buffarms, and a red bandanna over a mop of dark hair. Except for the smiley-face Band-Aid on her chin, she looked like one of those female action heroes, like any second she was going to grab a machine gun and start mowing down evil aliens.

"Cool," Leo said. "I always wanted a sister who could beat me up."

Nyssa didn't smile. "Come on, joker boy. I'll show you around."

* * *

Leo was no stranger to workshops. He'd grown up around grease monkeys and power tools. His mom used to joke that his first pacifier was a lug wrench. But he'd never seen any place like the camp forge.

One guy was working on a battle-ax. He kept testing the blade on a slab of concrete. Each time he swung, the ax cut into the slab like it was warm cheese, but the guy looked unsatisfied and went back to honing the edge.

"What's he planning to kill with that thing?" Leo asked Nyssa. "A battleship?"

"You never know. Even with Celestial bronze—"

"That's the metal?"

She nodded. "Mined from Mount Olympus itself. Extremely rare. Anyway, it usually disintegrates monsters on contact, but big powerful ones have notoriously tough hides. Drakons, for instances—"

"You mean dragons?"

"Similar species. You'll learn the difference in monster-fighting class."

“Monster-fighting class. Yeah, I already got my black belt in that.”

She didn’t crack a smile. Leo hoped she wasn’t this serious all the time. His dad’s side of the family had to have *some* sense of humor, right?

They passed a couple of guys making a bronze windup toy. At least that’s what it looked like. It was a six-inch-tall centaur—half man, half horse—armed with a miniature bow. One of the campers cranked the centaur’s tail, and it whirred to life. It galloped across the table, yelling, “Die, mosquito! Die, mosquito!” and shooting everything in sight.

Apparently this had happened before, because everybody knew to hit the floor except Leo. Six needle-sized arrows embedded themselves in his shirt before a camper grabbed a hammer and smashed the centaur to pieces.

“Stupid curse!” The camper waved his hammer at the sky. “I just want a magic bug killer! Is that too much to ask?”

“Ouch,” Leo said.

Nyssa pulled the needles out of his shirt. “Ah, you’re fine. Let’s move on before they rebuild it.”

Leo rubbed his chest as they walked. “That sort of thing happen a lot?”

“Lately,” Nyssa said, “everything we build turns to junk.”

“The curse?”

Nyssa frowned. “I don’t believe in curses. But *something’s* wrong. And if we don’t figure out the dragon problem, it’s gonna get even worse.”

“The dragon problem?” Leo hoped she was talking about a miniature dragon, maybe one that killed cockroaches, but he got the feeling he wasn’t going to be so lucky.

Nyssa took him over to a big wall map that a couple of girls were studying. The map showed the camp—a semicircle of land with Long Island Sound on the north shore, the woods to the west, the cabins to the east, and a ring of hills to the south.

“It’s got to be in the hills,” the first girl said.

“We *looked* in the hills,” the second argued. “The woods are a better hiding place.”

“But we already set traps—”

“Hold up,” Leo said. “You guys lost a dragon? A *real* full-size dragon?”

“It’s a bronze dragon,” Nyssa said. “But yes, it’s a life-size automaton. Hephaestus cabin built it years ago. Then it was lost in the woods until a few summers back, when Beckendorf found it in pieces and rebuilt it. It’s been helping protect the camp, but, um, it’s a little unpredictable.”

“Unpredictable,” Leo said.

“It goes haywire and smashes down cabins, sets people on fire, tries to eat

the satyrs.”

“That’s pretty unpredictable.”

Nyssa nodded. “Beckendorf was the only one who could control it. Then he died, and the dragon just got worse and worse. Finally it went berserk and ran off. Occasionally it shows up, demolishes something, and runs away again. Everyone expects us to find it and destroy it—”

“*Destroy* it?” Leo was appalled. “You’ve got a life-size bronze dragon, and you want to *destroy* it?”

“It breathes fire,” Nyssa explained. “It’s deadly and out of control.”

“But it’s a dragon! Dude, that’s so awesome. Can’t you try talking to it, controlling it?”

“We tried. Jake Mason tried. You saw how well that worked.”

Leo thought about Jake, wrapped in a body cast, lying alone on his bunk. “Still—”

“There’s no other option.” Nyssa turned to the other girls. “Let’s try more traps in the woods—here, here, and here. Bait them with thirty-weight motor oil.”

“The dragon drinks that?” Leo asked.

“Yeah.” Nyssa sighed regretfully. “He used to like it with a little Tabasco sauce, right before bed. If he springs a trap, we can come in with acid sprayers—should melt through his hide. Then we get metal cutters and ... and finish the job.”

They all looked sad. Leo realized they didn’t want to kill the dragon any more than he did.

“Guys,” he said. “There has to be another way.”

Nyssa looked doubtful, but a few other campers stopped what they were working on and drifted over to hear the conversation.

“Like what?” one asked. “The thing breathes fire. We can’t even get close.”

Fire, Leo thought. Oh, man, the things he could tell them about fire... But he had to be careful, even if these were his brothers and sisters. *Especially* if he had to live with them.

“Well ...” He hesitated. “Hephaestus is the god of fire, right? So don’t any of you have like fire resistance or something?”

Nobody acted as if it was a crazy question, which was a relief, but Nyssa shook her head gravely.

“That’s a Cyclops ability, Leo. Demigod children of Hephaestus ... we’re just good with our hands. We’re builders, craftsmen, weaponsmiths—stuff like that.”

Leo’s shoulders slumped. “Oh.”

A guy in back said, “Well, a long *time* ago—”

“Yeah, okay,” Nyssa conceded. “A long time ago some children of Hephaestus were born with power over fire. But that ability was very, very rare. And always dangerous. No demigod like that has been born in centuries. The last one ...” She looked at one of the other kids for help.

“Sixteen sixty-six,” the girl offered. “Guy named Thomas Faynor. He started the Great Fire of London, destroyed most of the city.”

“Right,” Nyssa said. “When a child of Hephaestus like that appears, it usually means something catastrophic is about to happen. And we don’t need any more catastrophes.”

Leo tried to keep his face clear of emotion, which wasn’t his strong suit. “I guess I see your point. Too bad, though. If you could resist flames, you could get close to the dragon.”

“Then it would kill you with its claws and fangs,” Nyssa said. “Or simply step on you. No, we’ve got to destroy it. Trust me, if anyone *could* figure out another answer ...”

She didn’t finish, but Leo got the message. This was the cabin’s big test. If they could do something only Beckendorf could do, if they could subdue the dragon without killing it, then maybe their curse would be lifted. But they were stumped for ideas. Any camper who figured out how would be a hero.

A conch horn blew in the distance. Campers started putting up their tools and projects. Leo hadn’t realized it was getting so late, but he looked through the windows and saw the sun going down. His ADHD did that to him sometimes. If he was bored, a fifty-minute class seemed like six hours. If he was interested in something, like touring a demigod camp, hours slipped away and *bam*—the day was over.

“Dinner,” Nyssa said. “Come on, Leo.”

“Up at the pavilion, right?” he asked.

She nodded.

“You guys go ahead,” Leo said. “Can you ... give me a second?”

Nyssa hesitated. Then her expression softened. “Sure. It’s a lot to process. I remember my first day. Come up when you’re ready. Just don’t touch anything. Almost every project in here can kill you if you’re not careful.”

“No touching,” Leo promised.

His cabinmates filed out of the forge. Soon Leo was alone with the sounds of the bellows, the waterwheels, and small machines clicking and whirring.

He stared at the map of camp—the locations where his newfound siblings were going to put traps to catch a dragon. It was wrong. Plain wrong.

Very rare, he thought. And always dangerous.

He held out his hand and studied his fingers. They were long and thin, not callused like the other Hephaestus campers'. Leo had never been the biggest or the strongest kid. He'd survived in tough neighborhoods, tough schools, tough foster homes by using his wits. He was the class clown, the court jester, because he'd learned early that if you cracked jokes and pretended you weren't scared, you usually didn't get beat up. Even the baddest gangster kids would tolerate you, keep you around for laughs. Plus, humor was a good way to hide the pain. And if that didn't work, there was always Plan B. Run away. Over and over.

There *was* a Plan C, but he'd promised himself never to use it again.

He felt an urge to try it now—something he hadn't done since the accident, since his mom's death.

He extended his fingers and felt them tingle, like they were waking up—pins and needles. Then flames flickered to life, curls of red-hot fire dancing across his palm.

JASON

AS SOON AS JASON SAW THE HOUSE, he knew he was a dead man.

“Here we are!” Drew said cheerfully. “The Big House, camp headquarters.”

It didn’t look threatening, just a four-story manor painted baby blue with white trim. The wraparound porch had lounge chairs, a card table, and an empty wheelchair. Wind chimes shaped like nymphs turned into trees as they spun. Jason could imagine old people coming here for summer vacation, sitting on the porch and sipping prune juice while they watched the sunset. Still, the windows seemed to glare down at him like angry eyes. The wide-open doorway looked ready to swallow him. On the highest gable, a bronze eagle weathervane spun in the wind and pointed straight in his direction, as if telling him to turn around.

Every molecule in Jason’s body told him he was on enemy ground.

“I am *not* supposed to be here,” he said.

Drew circled her arm through his. “Oh, please. You’re *perfect* here, sweetie. Believe me, I’ve seen a lot of heroes.”

Drew smelled like Christmas—a strange combination of pine and nutmeg. Jason wondered if she always smelled like that, or if it was some kind of special perfume for the holidays. Her pink eyeliner was really distracting. Every time she blinked, he felt compelled to look at her. Maybe that was the point, to show off her warm brown eyes. She was pretty. No doubt about that. But she made Jason feel uncomfortable.

He slipped his arm away as gently as he could. “Look, I appreciate—”

“Is it that girl?” Drew pouted. “Oh, please, tell me you are *not* dating the Dumpster Queen.”

“You mean Piper? Um ...”

Jason wasn’t sure how to answer. He didn’t think he’d ever seen Piper before today, but he felt strangely guilty about it. He knew he shouldn’t be in this place. He shouldn’t befriend these people, and certainly he shouldn’t date one of them. Still ... Piper had been holding his hand when he woke up on that bus. She believed she was his girlfriend. She’d been brave on the skywalk, fighting those *venti*, and when Jason had caught her in midair and they’d held each other face-to-face, he couldn’t pretend he wasn’t a little tempted to kiss her.

But that wasn't right. He didn't even know his own story. He couldn't play with her emotions like that.

Drew rolled her eyes. "Let me help you decide, sweetie. You can do better. A guy with your looks and obvious talent?"

She wasn't looking at him, though. She was staring at a spot right above his head.

"You're waiting for a sign," he guessed. "Like what popped over Leo's head."

"What? No! Well ... yes. I mean, from what I heard, you're pretty powerful, right? You're going to be important at camp, so I figure your parent will claim you right away. And I'd love to see that. I wanna be with you every step of the way! So is your dad or mom the god? Please tell me it's not your mom. I would hate it if you were an *Aphrodite* kid."

"Why?"

"Then you'd be my half brother, silly. You can't date somebody from your own cabin. Yuck!"

"But aren't all the gods related?" Jason asked. "So isn't everyone here your cousin or something?"

"Aren't you cute! Sweetie, the godly side of your family doesn't count except for your parent. So anybody from another cabin—they're fair game. So who's your godly parent—mom or dad?"

As usual, Jason didn't have an answer. He looked up, but no glowing sign popped above his head. At the top of the Big House, the weathervane was still pointing his direction, that bronze eagle glaring as if to say, *Turn around, kid, while you still can.*

Then he heard footsteps on the front porch. No—not footsteps—*hooves*.

"Chiron!" Drew called. "This is Jason. He's totally awesome!"

Jason backed up so fast he almost tripped. Rounding the corner of the porch was a man on horseback. Except he wasn't on horseback—he was part of the horse. From the waist up he was human, with curly brown hair and a well-trimmed beard. He wore a T-shirt that said *World's Best Centaur*, and had a quiver and bow strapped to his back. His head was so high up he had to duck to avoid the porch lights, because from the waist down, he was a white stallion.

Chiron started to smile at Jason. Then the color drained from his face.

"You ..." The centaur's eyes flared like a cornered animal's. "You should be dead."

Chiron ordered Jason—well, *invited*, but it sounded like an order—to come inside the house. He told Drew to go back to her cabin, which Drew didn't look

happy about.

The centaur trotted over to the empty wheelchair on the porch. He slipped off his quiver and bow and backed up to the chair, which opened like a magician's box. Chiron gingerly stepped into it with his back legs and began scrunching himself into a space that should've been much too small. Jason imagined a truck's reversing noises—*beep, beep, beep*—as the centaur's lower half disappeared and the chair folded up, popping out a set of fake human legs covered in a blanket, so Chiron appeared to be a regular mortal guy in a wheelchair.

"Follow me," he ordered. "We have lemonade."

The living room looked like it had been swallowed by a rain forest. Grapevines curved up the walls and across the ceiling, which Jason found a little strange. He didn't think plants grew like that inside, especially in the winter, but these were leafy green and bursting with bunches of red grapes.

Leather couches faced a stone fireplace with a crackling fire. Wedged in one corner, an old-style Pac-Man arcade game beeped and blinked. Mounted on the walls was an assortment of masks—smiley/frowny Greek theater types, feathered Mardi Gras masks, Venetian *Carnevale* masks with big beaklike noses, carved wooden masks from Africa. Grapevines grew through their mouths so they seemed to have leafy tongues. Some had red grapes bulging through their eyeholes.

But the weirdest thing was the stuffed leopard's head above the fireplace. It looked so real, its eyes seemed to follow Jason. Then it snarled, and Jason nearly leaped out of his skin.

"Now, Seymour," Chiron chided. "Jason is a friend. Behave yourself."

"That thing is alive!" Jason said.

Chiron rummaged through the side pocket of his wheelchair and brought out a package of Snausages. He threw one to the leopard, who snapped it up and licked his lips.

"You must excuse the décor," Chiron said. "All this was a parting gift from our old director before he was recalled to Mount Olympus. He thought it would help us to remember him. Mr. D has a strange sense of humor."

"Mr. D," Jason said. "Dionysus?"

"Mmm hmm." Chiron poured lemonade, though his hands were trembling a little. "As for Seymour, well, Mr. D liberated him from a Long Island garage sale. The leopard is Mr. D's sacred animal, you see, and Mr. D was appalled that someone would stuff such a noble creature. He decided to grant it life, on the assumption that life as a mounted head was better than no life at all. I must say it's a kinder fate than Seymour's previous owner got."

Seymour bared his fangs and sniffed the air, as if hunting for more Snausages.

“If he’s only a head,” Jason said, “where does the food go when he eats?”

“Better not to ask,” Chiron said. “Please, sit.”

Jason took some lemonade, though his stomach was fluttering. Chiron sat back in his wheelchair and tried for a smile, but Jason could tell it was forced. The old man’s eyes were as deep and dark as wells.

“So, Jason,” he said, “would you mind telling me—ah—where you’re from?”

“I wish I knew.” Jason told him the whole story, from waking up on the bus to crash-landing at Camp Half-Blood. He didn’t see any point in hiding the details, and Chiron was a good listener. He didn’t react to the story, other than to nod encouragingly for more.

When Jason was done, the old man sipped his lemonade.

“I see,” Chiron said. “And you must have questions for me.”

“Only one,” Jason admitted. “What did you mean when you said that I should be dead?”

Chiron studied him with concern, as if he expected Jason to burst into flames. “My boy, do you know what those marks on your arm mean? The color of your shirt? Do you remember anything?”

Jason looked at the tattoo on his forearm: SPQR, the eagle, twelve straight lines.

“No,” he said. “Nothing.”

“Do you know where you are?” Chiron asked. “Do you understand what this place is, and who I am?”

“You’re Chiron the centaur,” Jason said. “I’m guessing you’re the same one from the old stories, who used to train the Greek heroes like Heracles. This is a camp for demigods, children of the Olympian gods.”

“So you believe those gods still exist?”

“Yes,” Jason said immediately. “I mean, I don’t think we should *worship* them or sacrifice chickens to them or anything, but they’re still around because they’re a powerful part of civilization. They move from country to country as the center of power shifts—like they moved from Ancient Greece to Rome.”

“*I couldn’t have said it better.*” Something about Chiron’s voice had changed. “*So you already know the gods are real. You have already been claimed, haven’t you?*”

“*Maybe,*” Jason answered. “*I’m not really sure.*”

Seymour the leopard snarled.

Chiron waited, and Jason realized what had just happened. The centaur had

switched to another language and Jason had understood, automatically answering in the same tongue.

“*Quis erat*—” Jason faltered, then made a conscious effort to speak English. “What was that?”

“You know Latin,” Chiron observed. “Most demigods recognize a few phrases, of course. It’s in their blood, but not as much as Ancient Greek. None can speak Latin fluently without practice.”

Jason tried to wrap his mind around what that meant, but too many pieces were missing from his memory. He still had the feeling that he shouldn’t be here. It was wrong—and dangerous. But at least Chiron wasn’t threatening. In fact the centaur seemed concerned for him, afraid for his safety.

The fire reflected in Chiron’s eyes, making them dance fretfully. “I taught your namesake, you know, the original Jason. He had a hard path. I’ve seen many heroes come and go. Occasionally, they have happy endings. Mostly, they don’t. It breaks my heart, like losing a child each time one of my pupils dies. But you—you are not like any pupil I’ve ever taught. Your presence here could be a disaster.”

“Thanks,” Jason said. “You must be an inspiring teacher.”

“I am sorry, my boy. But it’s true. I had hoped that after Percy’s success—”

“Percy Jackson, you mean. Annabeth’s boyfriend, the one who’s missing.”

Chiron nodded. “I hoped that after he succeeded in the Titan War and saved Mount Olympus, we might have some peace. I might be able to enjoy one final triumph, a happy ending, and perhaps retire quietly. I should have known better. The last chapter approaches, just as it did before. The worst is yet to come.”

In the corner, the arcade game made a sad *pew-pew-pew-pew* sound, like a Pac-Man had just died.

“Ohh-kay,” Jason said. “So—last chapter, happened before, worst yet to come. Sounds fun, but can we go back to the part where I’m supposed to be dead? I don’t like that part.”

“I’m afraid I can’t explain, my boy. I swore on the River Styx and on all things sacred that I would never ...” Chiron frowned. “But you’re here, in violation of the same oath. That too, should not be possible. I don’t understand. Who would’ve done such a thing? Who—”

Seymour the leopard howled. His mouth froze, half open. The arcade game stopped beeping. The fire stopped crackling, its flames hardening like red glass. The masks stared down silently at Jason with their grotesque grape eyes and leafy tongues.

“Chiron?” Jason asked. “What’s going—”

The old centaur had frozen, too. Jason jumped off the couch, but Chiron

kept staring at the same spot, his mouth open mid-sentence. His eyes didn't blink. His chest didn't move.

Jason, a voice said.

For a horrible moment, he thought the leopard had spoken. Then dark mist boiled out of Seymour's mouth, and an even worse thought occurred to Jason: *storm spirits.*

He grabbed the golden coin from his pocket. With a quick flip, it changed into a sword.

The mist took the form of a woman in black robes. Her face was hooded, but her eyes glowed in the darkness. Over her shoulders she wore a goatskin cloak. Jason wasn't sure how he knew it was goatskin, but he recognized it and knew it was important.

Would you attack your patron? the woman chided. Her voice echoed in Jason's head. *Lower your sword.*

"Who are you?" he demanded. "How did you—"

Our time is limited, Jason. My prison grows stronger by the hour. It took me a full month to gather enough energy to work even the smallest magic through its bonds. I've managed to bring you here, but now I have little time left, and even less power. This may be the last time I can speak to you.

"You're in prison?" Jason decided maybe he wouldn't lower his sword. "Look, I don't know you, and you're not my patron."

You know me, she insisted. I have known you since your birth.

"I don't remember. I don't remember anything."

No, you don't, she agreed. That also was necessary. Long ago, your father gave me your life as a gift to placate my anger. He named you Jason, after my favorite mortal. You belong to me.

"Whoa," Jason said. "I don't belong to anyone."

Now is the time to pay your debt, she said. Find my prison. Free me, or their king will rise from the earth, and I will be destroyed. You will never retrieve your memory.

"Is that a threat? You took my memories?"

You have until sunset on the solstice, Jason. Four short days. Do not fail me.

The dark woman dissolved, and the mist curled into the leopard's mouth.

Time unfroze. Seymour's howl turned into a cough like he'd sucked in a hair ball. The fire crackled to life, the arcade machine beeped, and Chiron said, "—would dare to bring you here?"

"Probably the lady in the mist," Jason offered.

Chiron looked up in surprise. "Weren't you just sitting ... why do you have

a sword drawn?"

"I hate to tell you this," Jason said, "but I think your leopard just ate a goddess."

He told Chiron about the frozen-in-time visit, the dark misty figure that disappeared into Seymour's mouth.

"Oh, dear," Chiron murmured. "That does explain a lot."

"Then why don't you explain a lot to me?" Jason said. "Please."

Before Chiron could say anything, footsteps reverberated on the porch outside. The front door blew open, and Annabeth and another girl, a redhead, burst in, dragging Piper between them. Piper's head lolled like she was unconscious.

"What happened?" Jason rushed over. "What's wrong with her?"

"Hera's cabin," Annabeth gasped, like they'd run all the way. "Vision. Bad."

The redheaded girl looked up, and Jason saw that she'd been crying.

"I think ..." The redheaded girl gulped. "I think I may have killed her."

JASON

JASON AND THE REDHEAD, WHO INTRODUCED herself as Rachel, put Piper on the couch while Annabeth rushed down the hall to get a med kit. Piper was still breathing, but she wouldn't wake up. She seemed to be in some kind of coma.

"We've got to heal her," Jason insisted. "There's a way, right?"

Seeing her so pale, barely breathing, Jason felt a surge of protectiveness. Maybe he didn't really know her. Maybe she wasn't his girlfriend. But they'd survived the Grand Canyon together. They'd come all this way. He'd left her side for a little while, and *this* had happened.

Chiron put his hand on her forehead and grimaced. "Her mind is in a fragile state. Rachel, what happened?"

"I wish I knew," she said. "As soon as I got to camp, I had a premonition about Hera's cabin. I went inside. Annabeth and Piper came in while I was there. We talked, and then—I just blanked out. Annabeth said I spoke in a different voice."

"A prophecy?" Chiron asked.

"No. The spirit of Delphi comes from within. I know how that feels. This was like long distance, a power trying to speak through me."

Annabeth ran in with a leather pouch. She knelt next to Piper. "Chiron, what happened back there—I've never seen anything like it. I've heard Rachel's prophecy voice. This was different. She sounded like an older woman. She grabbed Piper's shoulders and told her—"

"To free her from a prison?" Jason guessed.

Annabeth stared at him. "How did you know that?"

Chiron made a three-fingered gesture over his heart, like a ward against evil.

"Jason, tell them. Annabeth, the medicine bag, please."

Chiron trickled drops from a medicine vial into Piper's mouth while Jason explained what had happened when the room froze—the dark misty woman who had claimed to be Jason's patron.

When he was done, no one spoke, which made him more anxious.

"So does this happen often?" he asked. "Supernatural phone calls from

convicts demanding you bust them out of jail?”

“Your patron,” Annabeth said. “Not your godly parent?”

“No, she said *patron*. She also said my dad had given her my life.”

Annabeth frowned. “I’ve never of heard anything like that before. You said the storm spirit on the skywalk—he claimed to be working for some mistress who was giving him orders, right? Could it be this woman you saw, messing with your mind?”

“I don’t think so,” Jason said. “If she were my enemy, why would she be asking for my help? She’s imprisoned. She’s worried about some enemy getting more powerful. Something about a king rising from the earth on the solstice—”

Annabeth turned to Chiron. “Not Kronos. Please tell me it’s not that.”

The centaur looked miserable. He held Piper’s wrist, checking her pulse.

At last he said, “It is not Kronos. That threat is ended. But ...”

“But what?” Annabeth asked.

Chiron closed the medicine bag. “Piper needs rest. We should discuss this later.”

“Or now,” Jason said. “Sir, Mr. Chiron, you told me the greatest threat was coming. The last chapter. You can’t possibly mean something worse than an army of Titans, right?”

“Oh,” Rachel said in a small voice. “Oh, dear. The woman was Hera. Of course. Her cabin, her voice. She showed herself to Jason at the same moment.”

“Hera?” Annabeth’s snarl was even fiercer than Seymour’s. “*She* took you over? She did this to Piper?”

“I think Rachel’s right,” Jason said. “The woman did seem like a goddess. And she wore this—this goatskin cloak. That’s a symbol of Juno, isn’t it?”

“It is?” Annabeth scowled. “I’ve never heard that.”

Chiron nodded reluctantly. “Of Juno, Hera’s Roman aspect, in her most warlike state. The goatskin cloak was a symbol of the Roman soldier.”

“So Hera is imprisoned?” Rachel asked. “Who could do that to the queen of the gods?”

Annabeth crossed her arms. “Well, whoever they are, maybe we should thank them. If they can shut up Hera—”

“Annabeth,” Chiron warned, “she is still one of the Olympians. In many ways, she is the glue that holds the gods’ family together. If she truly has been imprisoned and is in danger of destruction, this could shake the foundations of the world. It could unravel the stability of Olympus, which is never great even in the best of times. And if Hera has asked Jason for help—”

“Fine,” Annabeth grumbled. “Well, we know Titans can capture a god, right? Atlas captured Artemis a few years ago. And in the old stories, the gods

captured each other in traps all the time. But something worse than a Titan ... ?”

Jason looked at the leopard’s head. Seymour was smacking his lips like the goddess had tasted much better than a Sausage. “Hera said she’d been trying to break through her prison bonds for a month.”

“Which is how long Olympus has been closed,” Annabeth said. “So the gods must know something bad is going on.”

“But why use her energy to send me here?” Jason asked. “She wiped my memory, plopped me into the Wilderness School field trip, and sent you a dream vision to come pick me up. Why am I so important? Why not just send up an emergency flare to the other gods—let them know where she is so they bust her out?”

“The gods need heroes to do their will down here on earth,” Rachel said. “That’s right, isn’t it? Their fates are always intertwined with demigods.”

“That’s true,” Annabeth said, “but Jason’s got a point. Why him? Why take his memory?”

“And Piper’s involved somehow,” Rachel said. “Hera sent her the same message—*Free me*. And, Annabeth, this must have something to do with Percy’s disappearing.”

Annabeth fixed her eyes on Chiron. “Why are you so quiet, Chiron? What is it we’re facing?”

The old centaur’s face looked like it had aged ten years in a matter of minutes. The lines around his eyes were deeply etched. “My dear, in this, I cannot help you. I am so sorry.”

Annabeth blinked. “You’ve never ... you’ve *never* kept information from me. Even the last great prophecy—”

“I will be in my office.” His voice was heavy. “I need some time to think before dinner. Rachel, will you watch the girl? Call Argus to bring her to the infirmary, if you’d like. And Annabeth, you should speak with Jason. Tell him about—about the Greek and Roman gods.”

“But ...”

The centaur turned his wheelchair and rolled off down the hallway. Annabeth’s eyes turned stormy. She muttered something in Greek, and Jason got the feeling it wasn’t complimentary toward centaurs.

“I’m sorry,” Jason said. “I think my being here—I don’t know. I’ve messed things up coming to the camp, somehow. Chiron said he’d sworn an oath and couldn’t talk about it.”

“What oath?” Annabeth demanded. “I’ve never seen him act this way. And why would he tell me to talk to you about the gods...”

Her voice trailed off. Apparently she’d just noticed Jason’s sword sitting on

the coffee table. She touched the blade gingerly, like it might be hot.

“Is this gold?” she said. “Do you remember where you got it?”

“No,” Jason said. “Like I said, I don’t remember anything.”

Annabeth nodded, like she’d just come up with a rather desperate plan. “If Chiron won’t help, we’ll need to figure things out ourselves. Which means ... Cabin Fifteen. Rachel, you’ll keep an eye on Piper?”

“Sure,” Rachel promised. “Good luck, you two.”

“Hold on,” Jason said. “What’s in Cabin Fifteen?”

Annabeth stood. “Maybe a way to get your memory back.”

They headed toward a newer wing of cabins in the southwest corner of the green. Some were fancy, with glowing walls or blazing torches, but Cabin Fifteen was not so dramatic. It looked like an old-fashioned prairie house with mud walls and a rush roof. On the door hung a wreath of crimson flowers—red poppies, Jason thought, though he wasn’t sure how he knew.

“You think this is my parent’s cabin?” he asked.

“No,” Annabeth said. “This is the cabin for Hypnos, the god of sleep.”

“Then why—”

“You’ve forgotten everything,” she said. “If there’s any god who can help us figure out memory loss, it’s Hypnos.”

Inside, even though it was almost dinnertime, three kids were sound asleep under piles of covers. A warm fire crackled in the hearth. Above the mantel hung a tree branch, each twig dripping white liquid into a collection of tin bowls. Jason was tempted to catch a drop on his finger just to see what it was, but he held himself back.

Soft violin music played from somewhere. The air smelled like fresh laundry. The cabin was so cozy and peaceful that Jason’s eyelids started to feel heavy. A nap sounded like a great idea. He was exhausted. There were plenty of empty beds, all with feather pillows and fresh sheets and fluffy quilts and—Annabeth nudged him. “Snap out of it.”

Jason blinked. He realized his knees had been starting to buckle.

“Cabin Fifteen does that to everyone,” Annabeth warned. “If you ask me, this place is even more dangerous than the Ares cabin. At least with Ares, you can learn where the land mines are.”

“Land mines?”

She walked up to the nearest snoring kid and shook his shoulder. “Clovis! Wake up!”

The kid looked like a baby cow. He had a blond tuft of hair on a wedge-shaped head, with thick features and a thick neck. His body was stocky, but he

had spindly little arms like he'd never lifted anything heavier than a pillow.

"Clovis!" Annabeth shook harder, then finally knocked on his forehead about six times.

"Wh-wh-what?" Clovis complained, sitting up and squinting. He yawned hugely, and both Annabeth and Jason yawned too.

"Stop that!" Annabeth said. "We need your help."

"I was sleeping."

"You're *always* sleeping."

"Good night."

Before he could pass out, Annabeth yanked his pillow off the bed.

"That's not fair," Clovis complained meekly. "Give it back."

"First help," Annabeth said. "Then sleep."

Clovis sighed. His breath smelled like warm milk. "Fine. What?"

Annabeth explained about Jason's problem. Every once in a while she'd snap her fingers under Clovis's nose to keep him awake.

Clovis must have been really excited, because when Annabeth was done, he didn't pass out. He actually stood and stretched, then blinked at Jason. "So you don't remember anything, huh?"

"Just impressions," Jason said. "Feelings, like ..."

"Yes?" Clovis said.

"Like I know I shouldn't be here. At this camp. I'm in danger."

"Hmm. Close your eyes."

Jason glanced at Annabeth, but she nodded reassuringly.

Jason was afraid he'd end up snoring in one of the bunks forever, but he closed his eyes. His thoughts became murky, as if he were sinking into a dark lake.

The next thing he knew, his eyes snapped open. He was sitting in a chair by the fire. Clovis and Annabeth knelt next to him.

"—serious, all right," Clovis was saying.

"What happened?" Jason said. "How long—"

"Just a few minutes," Annabeth said. "But it was tense. You almost dissolved."

Jason hoped she didn't mean *literally*, but her expression was solemn.

"Usually," Clovis said, "memories are lost for a good reason. They sink under the surface like dreams, and with a good sleep, I can bring them back. But this ..."

"Lethe?" Annabeth asked.

"No," Clovis said. "Not even Lethe."

“Lethe?” Jason asked.

Clovis pointed to the tree branch dripping milky drops above the fireplace. “The River Lethe in the Underworld. It dissolves your memories, wipes your mind clean permanently. That’s the branch of a poplar tree from the Underworld, dipped into the Lethe. It’s the symbol of my father, Hypnos. Lethe is not a place you want to go swimming.”

Annabeth nodded. “Percy went there once. He told me it was powerful enough to wipe the mind of a Titan.”

Jason was suddenly glad he hadn’t touched the branch. “But ... that’s not my problem?”

“No,” Clovis agreed. “Your mind wasn’t wiped, and your memories weren’t buried. They’ve been stolen.”

The fire crackled. Drops of Lethe water plinked into the tin cups on the mantel. One of the other Hypnos campers muttered in his sleep—something about a duck.

“Stolen,” Jason said. “How?”

“A god,” Clovis said. “Only a god would have that kind of power.”

“We know that,” said Jason. “It was Juno. But how did she do it, and why?”

Clovis scratched his neck. “Juno?”

“He means Hera,” Annabeth said. “For some reason, Jason likes the Roman names.”

“Hmm,” Clovis said.

“What?” Jason asked. “Does that mean something?”

“Hmm,” Clovis said again, and this time Jason realized he was snoring.

“Clovis!” he yelled.

“What? What?” His eyes fluttered open. “We were talking about pillows, right? No, gods. I remember. Greek and Roman. Sure, could be important.”

“But they’re the same gods,” Annabeth said. “Just different names.”

“Not exactly,” Clovis said.

Jason sat forward, now very much awake. “What do you mean, not exactly?”

“Well ...” Clovis yawned. “Some gods are only Roman. Like Janus, or Pomona. But even the major Greek gods—it’s not just their names that changed when they moved to Rome. Their appearances changed. Their attributes changed. They even had slightly different personalities.”

“But ...” Annabeth faltered. “Okay, so maybe people saw them differently through the centuries. That doesn’t change who they are.”

“Sure it does.” Clovis began to nod off, and Jason snapped his fingers under his nose.

“Coming, Mother!” he yelled. “I mean ... Yeah, I’m awake. So, um, personalities. The gods change to reflect their host cultures. You know that, Annabeth. I mean, these days, Zeus likes tailored suits, reality television, and that Chinese food place on East Twenty-eighth Street, right? It was the same in Roman times, and the gods were Roman almost as long as they were Greek. It was a big empire, lasted for centuries. So of course their Roman aspects are still a big part of their character.”

“Makes sense,” Jason said.

Annabeth shook her head, mystified. “But how do you know all this, Clovis?”

“Oh, I spend a lot of time dreaming. I see the gods there all the time—always shifting forms. Dreams are fluid, you know. You can be in different places at once, always changing identities. It’s a lot like being a god, actually. Like recently, I dreamed I was watching a Michael Jackson concert, and then I was onstage *with* Michael Jackson, and we were singing this duet, and I could *not* remember the words for ‘The Girl Is Mine.’ Oh, man, it was so embarrassing, I—”

“Clovis,” Annabeth interrupted. “Back to Rome?”

“Right, Rome,” Clovis said. “So we call the gods by their Greek names because that’s their original form. But saying their Roman aspects are exactly the same—that’s not true. In Rome, they became more warlike. They didn’t mingle with mortals as much. They were harsher, more powerful—the gods of an empire.”

“Like the dark side of the gods?” Annabeth asked.

“Not exactly,” Clovis said. “They stood for discipline, honor, strength—”

“Good things, then,” Jason said. For some reason, he felt the need to speak up for the Roman gods, though wasn’t sure why it mattered to him. “I mean, discipline is important, right? That’s what made Rome last so long.”

Clovis gave him a curious look. “That’s true. But the Roman gods weren’t very friendly. For instance, my dad, Hypnos ... he didn’t do much except sleep in Greek times. In Roman times, they called him Somnus. He liked killing people who didn’t stay alert at their jobs. If they nodded off at the wrong time, *boom*—they never woke up. He killed the helmsman of Aeneas when they were sailing from Troy.”

“Nice guy,” Annabeth said. “But I still don’t understand what it has to do with Jason.”

“Neither do I,” Clovis said. “But if Hera took your memory, only she can give it back. And if I had to meet the queen of the gods, I’d hope she was more in a Hera mood than a Juno mood. Can I go back to sleep now?”

Annabeth stared at the branch above the fire, dripping Lethe water into the cups. She looked so worried, Jason wondered if she was considering a drink to forget her troubles. Then she stood and tossed Clovis his pillow. “Thanks, Clovis. We’ll see you at dinner.”

“Can I get room service?” Clovis yawned and stumbled to his bunk. “I feel like ... zzzz ...” He collapsed with his butt in the air and his face buried in pillow.

“Won’t he suffocate?” Jason asked.

“He’ll be fine,” Annabeth said. “But I’m beginning to think that you are in serious trouble.”

PIPER

PIPER DREAMED ABOUT HER LAST DAY with her dad.

They were on the beach near Big Sur, taking a break from surfing. The morning had been so perfect, Piper knew something had to go wrong soon—a rabid horde of paparazzi, or maybe a great white shark attack. No way her luck could hold.

But so far, they'd had excellent waves, an overcast sky, and a mile of oceanfront completely to themselves. Dad had found this out-of-the-way spot, rented a beachfront villa *and* the properties on either side, and somehow managed to keep it secret. If he stayed there too long, Piper knew the photographers would find him. They always did.

“Nice job out there, Pipes.” He gave her the smile he was famous for: perfect teeth, dimpled chin, a twinkle in his dark eyes that always made grown women scream and ask him to sign their bodies in permanent marker. (*Seriously*, Piper thought, *get a life*.) His close-cropped black hair gleamed with salt water. “You’re getting better at hanging ten.”

Piper flushed with pride, though she suspected Dad was just being nice. She still spent most of her time wiping out. It took special talent to run over yourself with a surfboard. Her *dad* was the natural surfer—which made no sense since he'd been raised a poor kid in Oklahoma, hundreds of miles from the ocean—but he was amazing on the curls. Piper would've given up surfing a long time ago except it let her spend time with him. There weren't many ways she could do that.

“Sandwich?” Dad dug into the picnic basket his chef, Arno, had made. “Let's see: turkey pesto, crabcake wasabi—ah, a Piper special. Peanut butter and jelly.”

She took the sandwich, though her stomach was too upset to eat. She always asked for PB&J. Piper was vegetarian, for one thing. She had been ever since they'd driven past that slaughterhouse in Chino and the smell had made her insides want to come outside. But it was more than that. PB&J was simple food, like a regular kid would have for lunch. Sometimes she pretended her dad had actually made it for her, not a personal chef from France who liked to wrap the

sandwich in gold leaf paper with a light-up sparkler instead of a toothpick.

Couldn't anything be simple? That's why she turned down the fancy clothes Dad always offered, the designer shoes, the trips to the salon. She cut her own hair with a pair of plastic Garfield safety scissors, deliberately making it uneven. She preferred to wear beat-up running shoes, jeans, a T-shirt, and her old Polartec jacket from the time they went snowboarding.

And she hated the snobby private schools Dad thought were good for her. She kept getting herself kicked out. He kept finding more schools.

Yesterday, she'd pulled her biggest heist yet—driving that “borrowed” BMW out of the dealership. She *had* to pull a bigger stunt each time, because it took more and more to get Dad's attention.

Now she regretted it. Dad didn't know yet.

She'd meant to tell him that morning. Then he'd surprised her with this trip, and she couldn't ruin it. It was the first time they'd had a day together in what—three months?

“What's wrong?” He passed her a soda.

“Dad, there's something—”

“Hold on, Pipes. That's a serious face. Ready for Any Three Questions?”

They'd been playing that game for years—her dad's way of staying connected in the shortest possible amount of time. They could ask each other any three questions. Nothing off-limits, and you had to answer honestly. The rest of the time, Dad promised to stay out of her business—which was easy, since he was never around.

Piper knew most kids would find a Q&A like this with their parents totally mortifying. But she looked forward to it. It was like surfing—not easy, but a way to feel like she actually had a father.

“First question,” she said. “Mom.”

No surprise. That was always one of her topics.

Her dad shrugged with resignation. “What do you want to know, Piper? I've already told you—she disappeared. I don't know why, or where she went. After you were born, she simply left. I never heard from her again.”

“Do you think she's still alive?”

It wasn't a real question. Dad was allowed to say he didn't know. But she wanted to hear how he'd answer.

He stared at the waves.

“Your Grandpa Tom,” he said at last, “he used to tell me that if you walked far enough toward the sunset, you'd come to Ghost Country, where you could talk to the dead. He said a long time ago, you could bring the dead back; but then mankind messed up. Well, it's a long story.”

“Like the Land of the Dead for the Greeks,” Piper remembered. “It was in the west, too. And Orpheus—he tried to bring his wife back.”

Dad nodded. A year before, he’d had his biggest role as an Ancient Greek king. Piper had helped him research the myths—all those old stories about people getting turned to stone and boiled in lakes of lava. They’d had a fun time reading together, and it made Piper’s life seem not so bad. For a while she’d felt closer to her dad, but like everything, it didn’t last.

“Lot of similarities between Greek and Cherokee,” Dad agreed. “Wonder what your grandpa would think if he saw us now, sitting at the end of the western land. He’d probably think we’re ghosts.”

“So you’re saying you believe those stories? You think Mom is dead?”

His eyes watered, and Piper saw the sadness behind them. She figured that’s why women were so attracted to him. On the surface, he seemed confident and rugged, but his eyes held so much sadness. Women wanted to find out why. They wanted to comfort him, and they never could. Dad told Piper it was a Cherokee thing—they all had that darkness inside them from generations of pain and suffering. But Piper thought it was more than that.

“I don’t believe the stories,” he said. “They’re fun to tell, but if I really believed in Ghost Country, or animal spirits, or Greek gods ... I don’t think I could sleep at night. I’d always be looking for somebody to blame.”

Somebody to blame for Grandpa Tom dying of lung cancer, Piper thought, before Dad got famous and had the money to help. For Mom—the only woman he’d ever loved —abandoning him without even a good-bye note, leaving him with a newborn girl he wasn’t ready to care for. For his being so successful, and yet still not happy.

“I don’t know if she’s alive,” he said. “But I do think she might as well be in Ghost Country, Piper. There’s no getting her back. If I believed otherwise ... I don’t think I could stand that, either.”

Behind them, a car door opened. Piper turned, and her heart sank. Jane was marching toward them in her business suit, wobbling over the sand in her high heels, her PDA in hand. The look on her face was partly annoyed, partly triumphant, and Piper knew she’d been in touch with the police.

Please fall down, Piper prayed. If there’s any animal spirit or Greek god that can help, make Jane take a header. I’m not asking for permanent damage, just knock her out for the rest of the day, please?

But Jane kept advancing.

“Dad,” Piper said quickly. “Something happened yesterday...”

But he’d seen Jane, too. He was already reconstructing his business face. Jane wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t serious. A studio head called—a project fell

through—or Piper had messed up again.

“We’ll get back to that, Pipes,” he promised. “I’d better see what Jane wants. You know how she is.”

Yes—Piper knew. Dad trudged across the sand to meet her. Piper couldn’t hear them talking, but she didn’t need to. She was good at reading faces. Jane gave him the facts about the stolen car, occasionally pointing at Piper like she was a disgusting pet that had whizzed on the carpet.

Dad’s energy and enthusiasm drained away. He gestured for Jane to wait. Then he walked back to Piper. She couldn’t stand that look in his eyes—like she’d betrayed his trust.

“You told me you would try, Piper,” he said.

“Dad, I hate that school. I can’t do it. I wanted to tell you about the BMW, but—”

“They’ve expelled you,” he said. “A car, Piper? You’re sixteen next year. I would buy you any car you want. How could you—”

“You mean *Jane* would buy me a car?” Piper demanded. She couldn’t help it. The anger just welled up and spilled out of her. “Dad, just listen for once. Don’t make me wait for you to ask your stupid three questions. I want to go to regular school. I want *you* to take me to parents’ night, not Jane. Or homeschool me! I learned so much when we read about Greece together. We could do that all the time! We could—”

“Don’t make this about me,” her dad said. “I do the best I can, Piper. We’ve had this conversation.”

No, she thought. You’ve cut off this conversation. For years.

Her dad sighed. “Jane’s talked to the police, brokered a deal. The dealership won’t press charges, but you have to agree to go to a boarding school in Nevada. They specialize in problems ... in kids with tough issues.”

“That’s what I am.” Her voice trembled. “A problem.”

“Piper ... you said you’d try. You let me down. I don’t know what else to do.”

“Do anything,” she said. “But do it yourself! Don’t let Jane handle it for you. You can’t just send me away.”

Dad looked down at the picnic basket. His sandwich sat uneaten on a piece of gold leaf paper. They’d planned for a whole afternoon in the surf. Now that was ruined.

Piper couldn’t believe he’d really give in to Jane’s wishes. Not this time. Not on something as huge as boarding school.

“Go see her,” Dad said. “She’s got the details.”

“Dad ...”

He looked away, gazing at the ocean like he could see all the way to Ghost Country. Piper promised herself she wouldn't cry. She headed up the beach toward Jane, who smiled coldly and held up a plane ticket. As usual, she'd already arranged everything. Piper was just another problem of the day that Jane could now check off her list.

Piper's dream changed.

She stood on a mountaintop at night, city lights glimmering below. In front of her, a bonfire blazed. Purplish flames seemed to cast more shadows than light, but the heat was so intense, her clothes steamed.

"This is your second warning," a voice rumbled, so powerful it shook the earth. Piper had heard that voice before in her dreams. She'd tried to convince herself it wasn't as scary as she remembered, but it was worse.

Behind the bonfire, a huge face loomed out of the darkness. It seemed to float above the flames, but Piper knew it must be connected to an enormous body. The crude features might've been chiseled out of rock. The face hardly seemed alive except for its piercing white eyes, like raw diamonds, and its horrible frame of dreadlocks, braided with human bones. It smiled, and Piper shivered.

"You'll do what you're told," the giant said. "You'll go on the quest. Do our bidding, and you may walk away alive. Otherwise—"

He gestured to one side of the fire. Piper's father was hanging unconscious, tied to a stake.

She tried to cry out. She wanted to call to her dad, and demand the giant let him go, but her voice wouldn't work.

"I'll be watching," the giant said. "Serve me, and you both live. You have the word of Enceladus. Fail me ... well, I've slept for millennia, young demigod. I am very hungry. Fail, and I'll eat well."

The giant roared with laughter. The earth trembled. A crevice opened at Piper's feet, and she tumbled into darkness.

She woke feeling like she'd been trampled by an Irish step-dancing troupe. Her chest hurt, and she could barely breathe. She reached down and closed her hand around the hilt of the dagger Annabeth had given her—Katoptris, Helen of Troy's weapon.

So Camp Half-Blood hadn't been a dream.

"How are you feeling?" someone asked.

Piper tried to focus. She was lying in a bed with a white curtain on one side,

like in a nurse's office. That redheaded girl, Rachel Dare, sat next to her. On the wall was a poster of a cartoon satyr who looked disturbingly like Coach Hedge with a thermometer sticking out of his mouth. The caption read: *Don't let sickness get your goat!*

"Where—" Piper's voice died when she saw the guy at the door.

He looked like a typical California surfer dude—buff and tan, blond hair, dressed in shorts and a T-shirt. But he had hundreds of blue eyes all over his body—along his arms, down his legs, and all over his face. Even his feet had eyes, peering up at her from between the straps of his sandals.

"That's Argus," Rachel said, "our head of security. He's just keeping an eye on things ... so to speak."

Argus nodded. The eye on his chin winked.

"Where—?" Piper tried again, but she felt like she was talking through a mouthful of cotton.

"You're in the Big House," Rachel said. "Camp offices. We brought you here when you collapsed."

"You grabbed me," Piper remembered. "Hera's voice—"

"I'm so sorry about that," Rachel said. "Believe me, it was *not* my idea to get possessed. Chiron healed you with some nectar—"

"Nectar?"

"The drink of the gods. In small amounts, it heals demigods, if it doesn't—ah—burn you to ashes."

"Oh. Fun."

Rachel sat forward. "Do you remember your vision?"

Piper had a moment of dread, thinking she meant the dream about the giant. Then she realized Rachel was talking about what happened in Hera's cabin.

"Something's wrong with the goddess," Piper said. "She told me to free her, like she's trapped. She mentioned the earth swallowing us, and a fiery one, and something about the solstice."

In the corner, Argus made a rumbling sound in his chest. His eyes all fluttered at once.

"Hera created Argus," Rachel explained. "He's actually very sensitive when it comes to her safety. We're trying to keep him from crying, because last time that happened ... well, it caused quite a flood."

Argus sniffled. He grabbed a fistful of Kleenex from the bedside table and started dabbing eyes all over his body.

"So ..." Piper tried not to stare as Argus wiped the tears from his elbows. "What's happened to Hera?"

"We're not sure," Rachel said. "Annabeth and Jason were here for you, by

the way. Jason didn't want to leave you, but Annabeth had an idea—something that might restore his memories.”

“That's ... that's great.”

Jason had been here for her? She wished she'd been conscious for that. But if he got his memories back, would that be a good thing? She was still holding out hope that they really did know each other. She didn't want their relationship to be just a trick of the Mist.

Get over yourself, she thought. If she was going to save her dad, it didn't matter whether Jason liked her or not. He would hate her eventually. Everyone here would.

She looked down at the ceremonial dagger strapped to her side. Annabeth had said it was a sign of power and status, but not normally used in battle. All show and no substance. A fake, just like Piper. And its name was Katoptris, looking glass. She didn't dare unsheathe it again, because she couldn't bear to see her own reflection.

“Don't worry.” Rachel squeezed her arm. “Jason seems like a good guy. He had a vision too, a lot like yours. Whatever's happening with Hera—I think you two are meant to work together.”

Rachel smiled like this was good news, but Piper's spirits plunged even further. She'd thought that this quest—whatever it was—would involve nameless people. Now Rachel was basically telling her: *Good news! Not only is your dad being held ransom by a cannibal giant, you also get to betray the guy you like! How awesome is that?*

“Hey,” Rachel said. “No need to cry. You'll figure it out.”

Piper wiped her eyes, trying to get control of herself. This wasn't like her. She was supposed to be tough—a hardened car thief, the scourge of L.A. private schools. Here she was, crying like a baby. “How can you know what I'm facing?”

Rachel shrugged. “I know it's a hard choice, and your options aren't great. Like I said, I get hunches sometimes.

But you're going to be claimed at the campfire. I'm almost sure. When you know who your godly parent is, things might be clearer.”

Clearer, Piper thought. Not necessarily better.

She sat up in bed. Her forehead ached like someone had driven a spike between her eyes. *There's no getting your mother back*, her dad had told her. But apparently, tonight, her mom might claim her. For the first time, Piper wasn't sure she wanted that.

“I hope it's Athena.” She looked up, afraid Rachel might make fun of her, but the oracle just smiled.

“Piper, I don’t blame you. Truthfully? I think Annabeth is hoping that too. You guys are a lot alike.”

The comparison made Piper feel even guiltier. “Another hunch? You don’t know anything about me.”

“You’d be surprised.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re an oracle, aren’t you? You’re supposed to sound all mysterious.”

Rachel laughed. “Don’t be giving away my secrets, Piper. And don’t worry. Things will work out—just maybe not the way you plan.”

“That’s not making me feel better.”

Somewhere in the distance, a conch horn blew. Argus grumbled and opened the door.

“Dinner?” Piper guessed.

“You slept through it,” Rachel said. “Time for the campfire. Let’s go find out who you are.”

PIPER

THE WHOLE CAMPFIRE IDEA FREAKED PIPER OUT. It made her think of that huge purple bonfire in the dreams, and her father tied to a stake.

What she got instead was almost as terrifying: a sing-along. The amphitheater steps were carved into the side of a hill, facing a stone-lined fire pit. Fifty or sixty kids filled the rows, clustered into groups under various banners.

Piper spotted Jason in the front next to Annabeth. Leo was nearby, sitting with a bunch of burly-looking campers under a steel gray banner emblazoned with a hammer. Standing in front of the fire, half a dozen campers with guitars and strange, old-fashioned harps—lyres?—were jumping around, leading a song about pieces of armor, something about how their grandma got dressed for war. Everybody was singing with them and making gestures for the pieces of armor and joking around. It was quite possibly the weirdest thing Piper had ever seen—one of those campfire songs that would've been completely embarrassing in daylight; but in the dark, with everybody participating, it was kind of corny and fun. As the energy level got higher, the flames did too, turning from red to orange to gold.

Finally the song ended with a lot of rowdy applause. A guy on a horse trotted up. At least in the flickering light, Piper *thought* it was a guy on a horse. Then she realized it was a centaur—his bottom half a white stallion, his top half a middle-aged guy with curly hair and a trimmed beard. He brandished a spear impaled with toasted marshmallows. “Very nice! And a special welcome to our new arrivals. I am Chiron, camp activities director, and I’m happy you have all arrived here alive and with most of your limbs attached. In a moment, I promise we’ll get to the s’mores, but first—”

“What about capture the flag?” somebody yelled. Grumbling broke out among some kids in armor, sitting under a red banner with the emblem of a boar’s head.

“Yes,” the centaur said. “I know the Ares cabin is anxious to return to the woods for our regular games.”

“And kill people!” one of them shouted.

“However,” Chiron said, “until the dragon is brought under control, that won’t be possible. Cabin Nine, anything to report on that?”

He turned to Leo’s group. Leo winked at Piper and shot her with a finger gun. The girl next to him stood uncomfortably. She wore an army jacket a lot like Leo’s, with her hair covered in a red bandanna. “We’re working on it.”

More grumbling.

“How, Nyssa?” an Ares kid demanded.

“Really hard,” the girl said.

Nyssa sat down to a lot of yelling and complaining, which caused the fire to sputter chaotically. Chiron stamped his hoof against the fire pit stones—*bang, bang, bang*—and the campers fell silent.

“We will have to be patient,” Chiron said. “In the meantime, we have more pressing matters to discuss.”

“Percy?” someone asked. The fire dimmed even further, but Piper didn’t need the mood flames to sense the crowd’s anxiety.

Chiron gestured to Annabeth. She took a deep breath and stood.

“I didn’t find Percy,” she announced. Her voice caught a little when she said his name. “He wasn’t at the Grand Canyon like I thought. But we’re not giving up. We’ve got teams everywhere. Grover, Tyson, Nico, the Hunters of Artemis—everyone’s out looking. We *will* find him. Chiron’s talking about something different. A new quest.”

“It’s the Great Prophecy, isn’t it?” a girl called out.

Everyone turned. The voice had come from a group in back, sitting under a rose-colored banner with a dove emblem. They’d been chatting among themselves and not paying much attention until their leader stood up: Drew.

Everyone else looked surprised. Apparently Drew didn’t address the crowd very often.

“Drew?” Annabeth said. “What do you mean?”

“Well, *come on*.” Drew spread her hands like the truth was obvious. “Olympus is closed. Percy’s disappeared. Hera sends you a vision and you come back with three new demigods in one day. I mean, something weird is going on. The Great Prophecy has started, right?”

Piper whispered to Rachel, “What’s she talking about—the Great Prophecy?”

Then she realized everyone else was looking at Rachel, too.

“Well?” Drew called down. “You’re the oracle. Has it started or not?”

Rachel’s eyes looked scary in the firelight. Piper was afraid she might clench up and start channeling a freaky peacock goddess again, but she stepped forward calmly and addressed the camp.

“Yes,” she said. “The Great Prophecy has begun.”

Pandemonium broke out.

Piper caught Jason’s eye. He mouthed, *You all right?* She nodded and managed a smile, but then looked away. It was too painful seeing him and not being with him.

When the talking finally subsided, Rachel took another step toward the audience, and fifty-plus demigods leaned away from her, as if one skinny redheaded mortal was more intimidating than all of them put together.

“For those of you who have not heard it,” Rachel said, “the Great Prophecy was my first prediction. It arrived in August. It goes like this:

“Seven half-bloods shall answer the call. To storm or fire the world must fall—”

Jason shot to his feet. His eyes looked wild, like he’d just been tasered.

Even Rachel seemed caught off guard. “J-Jason?” she said. “What’s—”

“*Ut cum spiritu postrema sacramentum dejuremus,*” he chanted. “*Et hostes ornamenta addent ad ianuam necem.*”

An uneasy silence settled on the group. Piper could see from their faces that several of them were trying to translate the lines. She could tell it was Latin, but she wasn’t sure why her hopefully future boyfriend was suddenly chanting like a Catholic priest.

“You just ... finished the prophecy,” Rachel stammered. “—*An oath to keep with a final breath/And foes bear arms to the Doors of Death.* How did you —”

“I know those lines.” Jason winced and put his hands to his temples. “I don’t know how, but I *know* that prophecy.”

“In Latin, no less,” Drew called out. “Handsome *and* smart.”

There was some giggling from the Aphrodite cabin. God, what a bunch of losers, Piper thought. But it didn’t do much to break the tension. The campfire was burning a chaotic, nervous shade of green.

Jason sat down, looking embarrassed, but Annabeth put a hand on his shoulder and muttered something reassuring. Piper felt a pang of jealousy. It should have been *her* next to him, comforting him.

Rachel Dare still looked a little shaken. She glanced back at Chiron for guidance, but the centaur stood grim and silent, as if he were watching a play he couldn’t interrupt—a tragedy that ended with a lot of people dead onstage.

“Well,” Rachel said, trying to regain her composure. “So, yeah, that’s the Great Prophecy. We hoped it might not happen for years, but I fear it’s starting

now. I can't give you proof. It's just a feeling. And like Drew said, some weird stuff is happening. The seven demigods, whoever they are, have not been gathered yet. I get the feeling some are here tonight. Some are not here."

The campers began to stir and mutter, looking at each other nervously, until a drowsy voice in the crowd called out, "I'm here! Oh ... were you calling roll?"

"Go back to sleep, Clovis," someone yelled, and a lot of people laughed.

"Anyway," Rachel continued, "we don't know what the Great Prophecy means. We don't know what challenge the demigods will face, but since the *first* Great Prophecy predicted the Titan War, we can guess the *second* Great Prophecy will predict something at least that bad."

"Or worse," Chiron murmured.

Maybe he didn't mean everyone to overhear, but they did. The campfire immediately turned dark purple, the same color as Piper's dream.

"What we *do* know," Rachel said, "is that the first phase has begun. A major problem has arisen, and we need a quest to solve it. Hera, the queen of the gods, has been taken."

Shocked silence. Then fifty demigods started talking at once.

Chiron pounded his hoof again, but Rachel still had to wait before she could get back their attention.

She told them about the incident on the Grand Canyon skywalk—how Gleeson Hedge had sacrificed himself when the storm spirits attacked, and the spirits had warned it was only the beginning. They apparently served some great mistress who would destroy all demigods.

Then Rachel told them about Piper passing out in Hera's cabin. Piper tried to keep a calm expression, even when she noticed Drew in the back row, pantomiming a faint, and her friends giggling. Finally Rachel told them about Jason's vision in the living room of the Big House. The message Hera had delivered there was so similar that Piper got a chill. The only difference: Hera had warned Piper not to betray her: *Bow to his will, and their king shall rise, dooming us all*. Hera *knew* about the giant's threat. But if that was true, why hadn't she warned Jason, and exposed Piper as an enemy agent?

"Jason," Rachel said. "Um ... do you remember your last name?"

He looked self-conscious, but he shook his head.

"We'll just call you Jason, then," Rachel said. "It's clear Hera herself has issued you a quest."

Rachel paused, as if giving Jason a chance to protest his destiny. Everyone's eyes were on him; there was so much pressure, Piper thought she would've buckled in his position. Yet he looked brave and determined. He set his jaw and nodded. "I agree."

“You must save Hera to prevent a great evil,” Rachel continued. “Some sort of king from rising. For reasons we don’t yet understand, it must happen by the winter solstice, only four days from now.”

“That’s the council day of the gods,” Annabeth said. “If the gods don’t *already* know Hera’s gone, they will definitely notice her absence by then. They’ll probably break out fighting, accusing each other of taking her. That’s what they usually do.”

“The winter solstice,” Chiron spoke up, “is also the time of greatest darkness. The gods gather that day, as mortals always have, because there is strength in numbers. The solstice is a day when evil magic is strong. *Ancient* magic, older than the gods. It is a day when things ... stir.”

The way he said it, stirring sounded absolutely sinister—like it should be a first-degree felony, not something you did to cookie dough.

“Okay,” Annabeth said, glaring at the centaur. “Thank you, Captain Sunshine. Whatever’s going on, I agree with Rachel. Jason has been chosen to lead this quest, so—”

“Why hasn’t he been claimed?” somebody yelled from the Ares cabin. “If he’s so important—”

“He has been claimed,” Chiron announced. “Long ago. Jason, give them a demonstration.”

At first, Jason didn’t seem to understand. He stepped forward nervously, but Piper couldn’t help thinking how amazing he looked with his blond hair glowing in the firelight, his regal features like a Roman statue’s. He glanced at Piper, and she nodded encouragingly. She mimicked flipping a coin.

Jason reached into his pocket. His coin flashed in the air, and when he caught it in his hand, he was holding a lance—a rod of gold about seven feet long, with a spear tip at one end.

The other demigods gasped. Rachel and Annabeth stepped back to avoid the point, which looked sharp as an ice pick.

“Wasn’t that ...” Annabeth hesitated. “I thought you had a sword.”

“Um, it came up tails, I think,” Jason said. “Same coin, long-range weapon form.”

“Dude, I want one!” yelled somebody from Ares cabin.

“Better than Clarisse’s electric spear, Lamer!” one of his brothers agreed.

“Electric,” Jason murmured, like that was a good idea. “Back away.”

Annabeth and Rachel got the message. Jason raised his javelin, and thunder broke open the sky. Every hair on Piper’s arms stood straight up. Lightning arced down through the golden spear point and hit the campfire with the force of an artillery shell.

When the smoke cleared, and the ringing in Piper's ears subsided, the entire camp sat frozen in shock, half blind, covered in ashes, staring at the place where the fire had been. Cinders rained down everywhere. A burning log had impaled itself a few inches from the sleeping kid Clovis, who hadn't even stirred.

Jason lowered his lance. "Um ... sorry."

Chiron brushed some burning coals out of his beard. He grimaced as if his worst fears had been confirmed. "A little overkill, perhaps, but you've made your point. And I believe we know who your father is."

"Jupiter," Jason said. "I mean Zeus. Lord of the Sky."

Piper couldn't help smiling. It made perfect sense. The most powerful god, the father of all the greatest heroes in the ancient myths—no one else could possibly be Jason's dad.

Apparently, the rest of the camp wasn't so sure. Everything broke into chaos, with dozens of people asking questions until Annabeth raised her arms.

"Hold it!" she said. "How can he be the son of Zeus? The Big Three ... their pact not to have mortal kids ... how could we not have known about him sooner?"

Chiron didn't answer, but Piper got the feeling he knew. And the truth was not good.

"The important thing," Rachel said, "is that Jason's here now. He has a quest to fulfill, which means he will need his own prophecy."

She closed her eyes and swooned. Two campers rushed forward and caught her. A third ran to the side of the amphitheater and grabbed a bronze three-legged stool, like they'd been trained for this duty. They eased Rachel onto the stool in front of the ruined hearth. Without the fire, the night was dark, but green mist started swirling around Rachel's feet. When she opened her eyes, they were glowing. Emerald smoke issued from her mouth. The voice that came out was raspy and ancient—the sound a snake would make if it could talk:

"Child of lightning, beware the earth, The giants' revenge the seven shall birth, The forge and dove shall break the cage, And death unleash through Hera's rage."

On the last word, Rachel collapsed, but her helpers were waiting to catch her. They carried her away from the hearth and laid her in the corner to rest.

"Is that normal?" Piper asked. Then she realized she'd spoken into the silence, and everyone was looking at her. "I mean... does she spew green smoke a lot?"

"Gods, you're dense!" Drew sneered. "She just issued a prophecy—Jason's

prophecy to save Hera! Why don't you just—"

"Drew," Annabeth snapped. "Piper asked a fair question. Something about that prophecy *definitely* isn't normal. If breaking Hera's cage unleashes her rage and causes a bunch of death ... why would we free her? It might be a trap, or— or maybe Hera will turn on her rescuers. She's never been kind to heroes."

Jason rose. "I don't have much choice. Hera took my memory. I need it back. Besides, we can't just *not* help the queen of the heavens if she's in trouble."

A girl from Hephaestus cabin stood up—Nyssa, the one with the red bandanna. "Maybe. But you should listen to Annabeth. Hera can be vengeful. She threw her own son—our dad—down a mountain just because he was ugly."

"*Real* ugly," snickered someone from Aphrodite.

"Shut up!" Nyssa growled. "Anyway, we've also got to think —why beware the earth? And what's the giants' revenge? What are we dealing with here that's powerful enough to kidnap the queen of the heavens?"

No one answered, but Piper noticed Annabeth and Chiron having a silent exchange. Piper thought it went something like:

Annabeth: *The giants' revenge ... no, it can't be.*

Chiron: *Don't speak of it here. Don't scare them.*

Annabeth: *You're kidding me! We can't be that unlucky.*

Chiron: *Later, child. If you told them everything, they would be too terrified to proceed.*

Piper knew it was crazy to think she could read their expressions so well—two people she barely knew. But she was absolutely positive she understood them, and it scared the jujubes out of her.

Annabeth took a deep breath. "It's Jason's quest," she announced, "so it's Jason's choice. Obviously, he's the child of lightning. According to tradition, he may choose any two companions."

Someone from the Hermes cabin yelled, "Well, you, obviously, Annabeth. You've got the most experience."

"No, Travis," Annabeth said. "First off, I'm *not* helping Hera. Every time I've tried, she's deceived me, or it's come back to bite me later. Forget it. No way. Secondly, I'm leaving first thing in the morning to find Percy."

"It's connected," Piper blurted out, not sure how she got the courage. "You know that's true, don't you? This whole business, your boyfriend's disappearance—it's all connected."

"How?" demanded Drew. "If you're so smart, how?"

Piper tried to form an answer, but she couldn't.

Annabeth saved her. "You may be right, Piper. If this is connected, I'll find

out from the other end—by searching for Percy. As I said, I’m not about to rush off to rescue Hera, even if her disappearance sets the rest of the Olympians fighting again. But there’s another reason I can’t go. The prophecy says otherwise.”

“It says who *I* pick,” Jason agreed. “*The forge and dove shall break the cage.* The forge is the symbol of Vul—Hephaestus.”

Under the Cabin Nine banner, Nyssa’s shoulders slumped, like she’d just been given a heavy anvil to carry. “If you have to beware the earth,” she said, “you should avoid traveling overland. You’ll need air transport.”

Piper was about to call out that Jason could fly. But then she thought better of it. That was for Jason to tell them, and he wasn’t volunteering the information. Maybe he figured he’d freaked them out enough for one night.

“The flying chariot’s broken,” Nyssa continued, “and the pegasi, we’re using them to search for Percy. But maybe Hephaestus cabin can help figure out something else to help. With Jake incapacitated, I’m senior camper. I can volunteer for the quest.”

She didn’t sound enthusiastic.

Then Leo stood up. He’d been so quiet, Piper had almost forgotten he was there, which was totally *not* like Leo.

“It’s me,” he said.

His cabinmates stirred. Several tried to pull him back to his seat, but Leo resisted.

“No, it’s me. I know it is. I’ve got an idea for the transportation problem. Let me try. I can fix this!”

Jason studied him for a moment. Piper was sure he was going to tell Leo no. Then he smiled. “We started this together, Leo. Seems only right you come along. You find us a ride, you’re in.”

“Yes!” Leo pumped his fist.

“It’ll be dangerous,” Nyssa warned him. “Hardship, monsters, terrible suffering. Possibly none of you will come back alive.”

“Oh.” Suddenly Leo didn’t look so excited. Then he remembered everyone was watching. “I mean ... Oh, cool! Suffering? I love suffering! Let’s do this.”

Annabeth nodded. “Then, Jason, you only need to choose the third quest member. The dove—”

“Oh, absolutely!” Drew was on her feet and flashing Jason a smile. “The dove is Aphrodite. Everybody knows that. I am *totally* yours.”

Piper’s hands clenched. She stepped forward. “No.”

Drew rolled her eyes. “Oh, please, Dumpster girl. Back off.”

“I had the vision of Hera; not you. I have to do this.”

“Anyone can have a vision,” Drew said. “You were just at the right place at the right time.” She turned to Jason. “Look, fighting is all fine, I suppose. And people who build things ...” She looked at Leo in disdain. “Well, I suppose someone has to get their hands dirty. But you need *charm* on your side. I can be very persuasive. I could help a lot.”

The campers started murmuring about how Drew *was* pretty persuasive. Piper could see Drew winning them over. Even Chiron was scratching his beard, like Drew’s participation suddenly made sense to him.

“Well ...” Annabeth said. “Given the wording of the prophecy—”

“No!” Piper’s own voice sounded strange in her ears—more insistent, richer in tone. “I’m supposed to go.”

Then the weirdest thing happened. Everyone started nodding, muttering that *hmm*, Piper’s point of view made sense too. Drew looked around, incredulous. Even some of her own campers were nodding.

“Get over it!” Drew snapped at the crowd. “What can Piper do?”

Piper tried to respond, but her confidence started to wane. What *could* she offer? She wasn’t a fighter, or a planner, or a fixer. She had no skills except getting into trouble and occasionally convincing people to do stupid things.

Plus, she was a liar. She needed to go on this quest for reasons that went way beyond Jason—and if she did go, she’d end up betraying everyone there. She heard that voice from the dream: *Do our bidding, and you may walk away alive*. How could she make a choice like that—between helping her father and helping Jason?

“Well,” Drew said smugly, “I guess that settles it.”

Suddenly there was collective gasp. Everyone stared at Piper like she’d just exploded. She wondered what she’d done wrong. Then she realized there was a reddish glow around her.

“What?” she demanded.

She looked above her, but there was no burning symbol like the one that appeared over Leo. Then she looked down and yelped.

Her clothes ... what in the world was she *wearing*? She despised dresses. She didn’t *own* a dress. But now she was adorned in a beautiful white sleeveless gown that went down to her ankles, with a V-neck so low it was totally embarrassing. Delicate gold armbands circled her biceps. An intricate necklace of amber, coral, and gold flowers glittered on her chest, and her hair ...

“Oh, god,” she said. “What’s happened?”

A stunned Annabeth pointed at Piper’s dagger, which was now oiled and gleaming, hanging at her side on a golden cord. Piper didn’t want to draw it. She

was afraid of what she would see. But her curiosity won out. She unsheathed Katoptris and stared at her reflection in the polished metal blade. Her hair was perfect: lush and long and chocolate brown, braided with gold ribbons down one side so it fell across her shoulder. She even wore makeup, better than Piper would ever know how to do herself—subtle touches that made her lips cherry red and brought out all the different colors in her eyes.

She was...she was...

“Beautiful,” Jason exclaimed. “Piper, you ... you’re a knockout.”

Under different circumstances, that would’ve been the happiest moment of her life. But now everyone was staring at her like she was a freak. Drew’s face was full of horror and revulsion. “No!” she cried. “Not possible!”

“This isn’t me,” Piper protested. “I—don’t understand.”

Chiron the centaur folded his front legs and bowed to her, and all the campers followed his example.

“Hail, Piper McLean,” Chiron announced gravely, as if he were speaking at her funeral. “Daughter of Aphrodite, lady of the doves, goddess of love.”

LEO

LEO DIDN'T STICK AROUND AFTER PIPER turned beautiful. Sure, it was amazing and all—*She's got makeup! It's a miracle!*—but Leo had problems to deal with. He ducked out of the amphitheater and ran into the darkness, wondering what he'd gotten himself into.

He'd stood up in front of a bunch of stronger, braver demigods and volunteered—*volunteered*—for a mission that would probably get him killed.

He hadn't mentioned seeing Tía Callida, his old babysitter, but as soon as he'd heard about Jason's vision—the lady in the black dress and shawl—Leo knew it was the same woman. Tía Callida was Hera. His evil babysitter was the queen of the gods. Stuff like that could really deep-fry your brain.

He trudged toward the woods and tried not to think about his childhood—all the messed-up things that had led to his mother's death. But he couldn't help it.

* * *

The first time Tía Callida tried to kill him, he must've been about two. Tía Callida was looking after him while his mother was at the machine shop. She wasn't really his aunt, of course—just one of the old women in the community, a generic *tía* who helped watch the kids. She smelled like a honey-baked ham, and always wore a widow's dress with a black shawl.

"Let's set you down for a nap," she said. "Let's see if you are my brave little hero, eh?"

Leo was sleepy. She nestled him into his blankets in a warm mound of red and yellow—pillows? The bed was like a cubbyhole in the wall, made of blackened bricks, with a metal slot over his head and a square hole far above, where he could see the stars. He remembered resting comfortably, grabbing at sparks like fireflies. He dozed, and dreamed of a boat made of fire, sailing through the cinders. He imagined himself on board, navigating the sky. Somewhere nearby, Tía Callida sat in her rocking chair—*creak, creak, creak*—and sang a lullaby. Even at two, Leo knew the difference between English and Spanish, and he remembered being puzzled because Tía Callida was singing in a language that was neither.

Everything was fine until his mother came home. She screamed and raced over to snatch him up, yelling at Tía Callida, “How could you?” But the old lady had disappeared.

Leo remembered looking over his mother’s shoulder at the flames curling around his blankets. Only years later had he realized he’d been sleeping in a blazing fireplace.

The weirdest thing? Tía Callida hadn’t been arrested or even banished from their house. She appeared again several times over the next few years. Once when Leo was three, she let him play with knives. “You must learn your blades early,” she insisted, “if you are to be my hero someday.” Leo managed not to kill himself, but he got the feeling Tía Callida wouldn’t have cared one way or the other.

When Leo was four, Tía found a rattlesnake for him in a nearby cow pasture. She gave him a stick and encouraged him to poke the animal. “Where is your bravery, little hero? Show me the Fates were right to choose you.” Leo stared down at those amber eyes, hearing the dry *shh-shh-ssh* of the snake’s rattle. He couldn’t bring himself to poke the snake. It didn’t seem fair. Apparently the snake felt the same way about biting a little kid. Leo could’ve sworn it looked at Tía Callida like, *Are you nuts, lady?* Then it disappeared into the tall grass.

The last time she babysat him, Leo was five. She brought him a pack of crayons and a pad of paper. They sat together at the picnic table in back of the apartment complex, under an old pecan tree. While Tía Callida sang her strange songs, Leo drew a picture of the boat he’d seen in the flames, with colorful sails and rows of oars, a curved stern, and an awesome masthead. When he was almost done, about to sign his name the way he’d learned in kindergarten, a wind snatched the picture away. It flew into the sky and disappeared.

Leo wanted to cry. He’d spent so much time on that picture—but Tía Callida just clucked with disappointment.

“It isn’t time yet, little hero. Someday, you’ll have your quest. You’ll find your destiny, and your hard journey will finally make sense. But first you must face many sorrows. I regret that, but heroes cannot be shaped any other way. Now, make me a fire, eh? Warm these old bones.”

A few minutes later, Leo’s mom came out and shrieked with horror. Tía Callida was gone, but Leo sat in the middle of a smoking fire. The pad of paper was reduced to ashes. Crayons had melted into a bubbling puddle of multicolored goo, and Leo’s hands were ablaze, slowly burning through the picnic table. For years afterward, people in the apartment complex would wonder how someone had seared the impressions of a five-year-old’s hands an

inch deep into solid wood.

Now Leo was sure that Tía Callida, his psychotic babysitter, had been Hera all along. That made her, what—his godly grandmother? His family was even more messed up than he realized.

He wondered if his mother had known the truth. Leo remembered after that last visit, his mom took him inside and had a long talk with him, but he only understood some of it.

“She can’t come back again.” His mom had a beautiful face with kind eyes, and curly dark hair, but she looked older than she was because of hard work. The lines around her eyes were deeply etched. Her hands were callused. She was the first person from their family to graduate from college. She had a degree in mechanical engineering and could design anything, fix anything, build anything.

No one would hire her. No company would take her seriously, so she ended up in the machine shop, trying to make enough money to support the two of them. She always smelled of machine oil, and when she talked with Leo, she switched from Spanish to English constantly—using them like complementary tools. It took Leo years to realize that not everyone spoke that way. She’d even taught him Morse code as a kind of game, so they could tap messages to each other when they were in different rooms: *I love you. You okay?* Simple things like that.

“I don’t care what Callida says,” his mom told him. “I don’t care about destiny and the Fates. You’re too young for that. You’re still my baby.”

She took his hands, looking for burn marks, but of course there weren’t any. “Leo, listen to me. Fire is a tool, like anything else, but it’s more dangerous than most. You don’t know your limits. Please, promise me—no more fire until you meet your father. Someday, *mijo*, you *will* meet him. He’ll explain everything.”

Leo had heard that since he could remember. Someday he would meet his dad. His mom wouldn’t answer any questions about him. Leo had never met him, never even seen pictures, but she talked like he’d just gone to the store for some milk and he’d be back any minute. Leo tried to believe her. Someday, everything would make sense.

For the next couple of years, they were happy. Leo almost forgot about Tía Callida. He still dreamed of the flying boat, but the other strange events seemed like a dream too.

It all came apart when he was eight. By then, he was spending every free hour at the shop with his mom. He knew how to use the machines. He could measure and do math better than most adults. He’d learned to think three-dimensionally, solving mechanical problems in his head the way his mom did.

One night, they stayed late because his mom was finishing a drill bit design she hoped to patent. If she could sell the prototype, it might change their lives. She'd finally get a break.

As she worked, Leo passed her supplies and told her corny jokes, trying to keep her spirits up. He loved it when he could make her laugh. She'd smile and say, "Your father would be proud of you, *mijo*. You'll meet him soon, I'm sure."

Mom's workspace was at the very back of the shop. It was kind of creepy at night, because they were the only ones there. Every sound echoed through the dark warehouse, but Leo didn't mind as long as he was with his mom. If he did wander the shop, they could always keep in touch with Morse code taps. Whenever they were ready to leave, they had to walk through the entire shop, through the break room, and out to the parking lot, locking the doors behind them.

That night after finishing up, they'd just gotten to the break room when his mom realized she didn't have her keys.

"That's funny." She frowned. "I know I had them. Wait here, *mijo*. I'll only be a minute."

She gave him one more smile—the last one he'd ever get—and she went back into the warehouse.

She'd only been gone a few heartbeats when the interior door slammed shut. Then the exterior door locked itself.

"Mom?" Leo's heart pounded. Something heavy crashed inside the warehouse. He ran to the door, but no matter how hard he pulled or kicked, it wouldn't open. "Mom!" Frantically, he tapped a message on the wall: *You okay?*

"She can't hear you," a voice said.

Leo turned and found himself facing a strange woman. At first he thought it was Tía Callida. She was wrapped in black robes, with a veil covering her face.

"Tía?" he said.

The woman chuckled, a slow gentle sound, as if she were half asleep. "I am not your guardian. Merely a family resemblance."

"What—what do you want? Where's my mom?"

"Ah ... loyal to your mother. How nice. But you see, I have children too ... and I understand you will fight them someday. When they try to wake me, you will prevent them. I cannot allow that."

"I don't know you. I don't want to fight anybody."

She muttered like a sleepwalker in a trance, "A wise choice."

With a chill, Leo realized the woman was, in fact, asleep. Behind the veil, her eyes were closed. But even stranger: her clothes were not made of cloth.

They were made of *earth*—dry black dirt, churning and shifting around her. Her pale, sleeping face was barely visible behind a curtain of dust, and he had the horrible sense that she'd had just risen from the grave. If the woman was asleep, Leo wanted her to stay that way. He knew that fully awake, she would be even more terrible.

“I cannot destroy you yet,” the woman murmured. “The Fates will not allow it. But they not do protect your mother, and they cannot stop me from breaking your spirit. Remember this night, little hero, when they ask you to oppose me.”

“Leave my mother alone!” Fear rose in his throat as the woman shuffled forward. She moved more like an avalanche than a person, a dark wall of earth shifting toward him.

“How will you stop me?” she whispered.

She walked straight through a table, the particles of her body reassembling on the other side.

She loomed over Leo, and he knew she would pass right through him, too. He was the only thing between her and his mother.

His hands caught fire.

A sleepy smile spread across the woman's face, as if she'd already won. Leo screamed with desperation. His vision turned red. Flames washed over the earthen woman, the walls, the locked doors. And Leo lost consciousness.

When he woke, he was in an ambulance.

The paramedic tried to be kind. She told him the warehouse had burned down. His mother hadn't made it out. The paramedic said she was sorry, but Leo felt hollow. He'd lost control, just like his mother had warned. Her death was his fault.

Soon the police came to get him, and they weren't as nice. The fire had started in the break room, they said, right where Leo was standing. He'd survived by some miracle, but what kind of child locked the doors of his mother's workplace, knowing she was inside, and started a fire?

Later, his neighbors at the apartment complex told the police what a strange boy he was. They talked about the burned handprints on the picnic table. They'd always known something was wrong with Esperanza Valdez's son.

His relatives wouldn't take him in. His Aunt Rosa called him a *diablo* and shouted at the social workers to take him away. So Leo went to his first foster home. A few days later, he ran away. Some foster homes lasted longer than others. He would joke around, make a few friends, pretend that nothing bothered him, but he always ended up running sooner or later. It was the only thing that made the pain better—feeling like he was moving, getting farther and farther

away from the ashes of that machine shop.

He'd promised himself he would never play with fire again. He hadn't thought about Tía Callida, or the sleeping woman wrapped in earthen robes, for a long time.

He was almost to the woods when he imagined Tía Callida's voice: *It wasn't your fault, little hero. Our enemy wakes. It's time to stop running.*

"Hera," Leo muttered, "you're not even here, are you? You're in a cage somewhere."

There was no answer.

But now, at least, Leo understood something. Hera had been watching him his entire life. Somehow, she'd known that one day she would need him. Maybe those Fates she mentioned could tell the future. Leo wasn't sure. But he knew he was *meant* to go on this quest. Jason's prophecy warned them to beware the earth, and Leo knew it had something to do with that sleeping woman in the shop, wrapped in robes of shifting dirt.

You'll find your destiny, Tía Callida had promised, and your hard journey will finally make sense.

Leo might find out what that flying boat in his dreams meant. He might meet his father, or even get to avenge his mother's death.

But first things first. He'd promised Jason a flying ride.

Not the boat from his dreams—not yet. There wasn't time to build something that complicated. He needed a quicker solution. He needed a dragon.

He hesitated at the edge of the woods, peering into absolute blackness. Owls hooted, and something far away hissed like a chorus of snakes.

Leo remembered what Will Solace had told him: No one should go in the woods alone, definitely not unarmed. Leo had nothing—no sword, no flashlight, no help.

He glanced back at the lights of the cabins. He could turn around now and tell everyone he'd been joking. *Psych!* Nyssa could go on the quest instead. He could stay at camp and learn to be part of the Hephaestus cabin, but he wondered how long it would be before he looked like his bunkmates—sad, dejected, convinced of his own bad luck.

They cannot stop me from breaking your spirit, the sleeping woman had said. Remember this night, little hero, when they ask you to oppose me.

"Believe me, lady," Leo muttered, "I remember. And whoever you are, I'm gonna face-plant you hard, Leo-style."

He took a deep breath and plunged into the forest.

LEO

THE WOODS WEREN'T LIKE ANYPLACE he'd been before. Leo had been raised in a north Houston apartment complex. The wildest things he'd ever seen were that rattlesnake in the cow pasture and his Aunt Rosa in her nightgown, until he was sent to Wilderness School.

Even there, the school had been in the desert. No trees with gnarled roots to trip over. No streams to fall into. No branches casting dark, creepy shadows and owls looking down at him with their big reflective eyes. This was the Twilight Zone.

He stumbled along until he was sure no one back at the cabins could possibly see him. Then he summoned fire. Flames danced along his fingertips, casting enough light to see. He hadn't tried to keep a sustained burn going since he was five, at that picnic table. Since his mom's death, he'd been too afraid to try anything. Even this tiny fire made him feel guilty.

He kept walking, looking for dragon-type clues—giant footprints, trampled trees, swaths of burning forest. Something that big couldn't exactly sneak around, right? But he saw *nada*. Once he glimpsed a large, furry shape like a wolf or a bear, but it stayed away from his fire, which was fine by Leo.

Then, at the bottom of a clearing, he saw the first trap—a hundred-foot-wide crater ringed with boulders.

Leo had to admit it was pretty ingenious. In the center of the depression, a metal vat the size of a hot tub had been filled with bubbly dark liquid—Tabasco sauce and motor oil. On a pedestal suspended over the vat, an electric fan rotated in a circle, spreading the fumes across the forest. Could metal dragons smell?

The vat seemed to be unguarded. But Leo looked closely, and in the dim light of the stars and his handheld fire, he could see the glint of metal beneath the dirt and leaves—a bronze net lining the entire crater. Or maybe *see* wasn't the right word—he could sense it there, as if the mechanism was emitting heat, revealing itself to him. Six large strips of bronze stretched out from the vat like the spokes of a wheel. They would be pressure sensitive, Leo guessed. As soon as the dragon stepped on one, the net would spring closed, and *voilà*—one gift-wrapped monster.

Leo edged closer. He put his foot on the nearest trigger strip. As he expected, nothing happened. They had to have set the net for something really heavy. Otherwise they could catch an animal, human, smaller monster, whatever. He doubted there was anything else as heavy as a metal dragon in these woods. At least, he hoped there wasn't.

He picked his way down the crater and approached the vat. The fumes were almost overpowering, and his eyes started watering. He remembered a time when Tía Callida (Hera, whatever) had made him chop jalapeños in the kitchen and he'd gotten the juice in his eyes. Serious pain. But of course she'd been like, "Endure it, little hero. The Aztecs of your mother's homeland used to punish bad children by holding them over a fire filled with chili peppers. They raised many heroes that way."

A total psycho, that lady. Leo was so glad he was on a quest to rescue her.

Tía Callida would've loved this vat, because it was way worse than jalapeño juice. Leo looked for a trigger—something that would disable the net. He didn't see anything.

He had a moment of panic. Nyssa had said there were several traps like this in the woods, and they were planning more. What if the dragon had already stepped into another one? How could Leo possibly find them all?

He continued to search, but he didn't see any release mechanism. No large button labeled off. It occurred to him that there might not *be* one. He started to despair—and then he heard the sound.

It was more of a tremor—the deep sort of rumbling you hear in your gut rather than your ears. It gave him the jitters, but he didn't look around for the source. He just kept examining the trap, thinking, *Must be a long way off. It's pounding its way through the woods. I gotta hurry.*

Then he heard a grinding snort, like steam forced out of a metal barrel.

His neck tingled. He turned slowly. At the edge of the pit, fifty feet away, two glowing red eyes were staring at him. The creature gleamed in the moonlight, and Leo couldn't believe something that huge had sneaked up on him so fast. Too late, he realized its gaze was fixed on the fire in his hand, and he extinguished the flames.

He could still see the dragon just fine. It was about sixty feet long, snout to tail, its body made of interlocking bronze plates. Its claws were the size of butcher knives, and its mouth was lined with hundreds of dagger-sharp metal teeth. Steam came out of its nostrils. It snarled like a chain saw cutting through a tree. It could've bitten Leo in half, easy, or stomped him flat. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, except for one problem that completely ruined Leo's plan.

“You don’t have wings,” Leo said.

The dragon’s snarl died. It tilted its head as if to say, *Why aren’t you running away in terror?*

“Hey, no offense,” Leo said. “You’re amazing! Good god, who *made* you? Are you hydraulic or nuclear-powered or what? But if it was me, I would’ve put wings on you. What kind of dragon doesn’t have wings? I guess maybe you’re too heavy to fly? I should’ve thought of that.”

The dragon snorted, more confused now. It was supposed to trample Leo. This conversation thing wasn’t part of the plan. It took a step forward, and Leo shouted, “No!”

The dragon snarled again.

“It’s a trap, bronze brain,” Leo said. “They’re trying to catch you.”

The dragon opened its mouth and blew fire. A column of white-hot flames billowed over Leo, more than he’d ever tried to endure before. He felt as if he were being hosed down with a powerful, very hot fire hose. It stung a little, but he stood his ground. When the flames died, he was perfectly fine. Even his clothes were okay, which Leo didn’t understand, but for which he was grateful. He liked his army jacket, and having his pants seared off would’ve been pretty embarrassing.

The dragon stared at Leo. Its face didn’t actually change, being made of metal and all, but Leo thought he could read its expression: *Why no crispy critter?* A spark flew out of its neck like it was about to short-circuit.

“You can’t burn me,” Leo said, trying to sound stern and calm. He’d never had a dog before, but he talked to the dragon the way he thought you’d talk to a dog. “Stay, boy. Don’t come any closer. I don’t want you to get caught. See, they think you’re broken and have to be scrapped. But I don’t believe that. I can fix you if you’ll let me—”

The dragon creaked, roared, and charged. The trap sprang. The floor of the crater erupted with a sound like a thousand trash can lids banging together. Dirt and leaves flew, metal net flashing. Leo was knocked off his feet, turned upside down, and doused in Tabasco sauce and oil. He found himself sandwiched between the vat and the dragon as it thrashed, trying to free itself from the net that had wrapped around them both.

The dragon blew flames in every direction, lighting up the sky and setting trees on fire. Oil and sauce burned all over them. It didn’t hurt Leo, but it left a nasty taste in his mouth.

“Will you stop that!” he yelled.

The dragon kept squirming. Leo realized he would get crushed if he didn’t move. It wasn’t easy, but he managed to wriggle out from between the dragon

and the vat. He squirmed his way through the net. Fortunately the holes were plenty big enough for a skinny kid.

He ran to the dragon's head. It tried to snap at him, but its teeth were tangled in the mesh. It blew fire again, but seemed to be running out of energy. This time the flames were only orange. They sputtered before they even reached Leo's face.

"Listen, man," Leo said, "you're just going to show them where you are. Then they'll come and break out the acid and the metal cutters. Is that what you want?"

The dragon's jaw made a creaking sound, like it was trying to talk.

"Okay, then," Leo said. "You'll have to trust me."

And Leo set to work.

It took him almost an hour to find the control panel. It was right behind the dragon's head, which made sense. He'd elected to keep the dragon in the net, because it was easier to work with the dragon constrained, but the dragon didn't like it.

"Hold still!" Leo scolded.

The dragon made another creaking sound that might've been a whimper.

Leo examined the wires inside the dragon's head. He was distracted by a sound in the woods, but when he looked up it was just a tree spirit—a dryad, Leo thought they were called—putting out the flames in her branches. Fortunately, the dragon hadn't started an all-out forest fire, but still the dryad wasn't too pleased. The girl's dress was smoking. She smothered the flames with a silky blanket, and when she saw Leo looking at her, she made a gesture that was probably very rude in Dryad. Then she disappeared in a green poof of mist.

Leo returned his attention to the wiring. It was ingenious, definitely, and it made sense to him. This was the motor control relay. This processed sensory input from the eyes. This disk ...

"Ha," he said. "Well, no wonder."

Creak? the dragon asked with its jaw.

"You've got a corroded control disk. Probably regulates your higher reasoning circuits, right? Rusty brain, man. No wonder you're a little ... confused." He almost said *crazy*, but he caught himself. "I wish I had a replacement disk, but ...this is a complicated piece of circuitry. I'm gonna have to take it out and clean it. Only be a minute." He pulled out the disk, and the dragon went absolutely still. The glow died in its eyes. Leo slid off its back and began polishing the disk. He mopped up some oil and Tabasco sauce with his sleeve, which helped cut through the grime, but the more he cleaned, the more

concerned he got. Some of the circuits were beyond repair. He could make it better, but not perfect. For that, he'd need a completely new disk, and he had no idea how to build one.

He tried to work quickly. He wasn't sure how long the dragon's control disk could be off without damaging it—maybe forever—but he didn't want to take chances. Once he'd done the best he could, he climbed back up to the dragon's head and started cleaning the wiring and gearboxes, getting himself filthy in the process.

"Clean hands, dirty equipment," he muttered, something his mother used to say. By the time he was through, his hands were black with grease and his clothes looked like he'd just lost a mud-wrestling contest, but the mechanisms looked a lot better. He slipped in the disk, connected the last wire, and sparks flew. The dragon shuddered. Its eyes began to glow.

"Better?" Leo asked.

The dragon made a sound like a high-speed drill. It opened its mouth and all its teeth rotated.

"I guess that's a yes. Hold on, I'll free you."

Another thirty minutes to find the release clamps for the net and untangle the dragon, but finally it stood and shook the last bit of netting off its back. It roared triumphantly and shot fire at the sky.

"Seriously," Leo said. "Could you not show off?"

Creak? the dragon asked.

"You need a name," Leo decided. "I'm calling you Festus."

The dragon whirred its teeth and grinned. At least Leo hoped it was a grin.

"Cool," Leo said. "But we still have a problem, because you don't have wings."

Festus tilted his head and snorted steam. Then he lowered his back in an unmistakable gesture. He wanted Leo to climb on.

"Where we going?" Leo asked.

But he was too excited to wait for an answer. He climbed onto the dragon's back, and Festus bounded off into the woods.

* * *

Leo lost track of time and all sense of direction. It seemed impossible the woods could be so deep and wild, but the dragon traveled until the trees were like skyscrapers and the canopy of leaves completely blotted out the stars. Even the fire in Leo's hand couldn't have lit the way, but the dragon's glowing red eyes acted like headlights.

Finally they crossed a stream and came to a dead end, a limestone cliff a hundred feet tall—a solid, sheer mass the dragon couldn't possibly climb.

Festus stopped at the base and lifted one leg like a dog pointing.

“What is it?” Leo slid to the ground. He walked up to the cliff—nothing but solid rock. The dragon kept pointing.

“It’s not going to move out of your way,” Leo told him.

The loose wire in the dragon’s neck sparked, but otherwise he stayed still. Leo put his hand on the cliff. Suddenly his fingers smoldered. Lines of fire spread from his fingertips like ignited gunpowder, sizzling across the limestone. The burning lines raced across the cliff face until they had outlined a glowing red door five times as tall as Leo. He backed up and the door swung open, disturbingly silently for such a big slab of rock.

“Perfectly balanced,” he muttered. “That’s some first-rate engineering.”

The dragon unfroze and marched inside, as if he were coming home.

Leo stepped through, and the door began to close. He had a moment of panic, remembering that night in the machine shop long ago, when he’d been locked in. What if he got stuck in here? But then lights flickered on—a combination of electric fluorescents and wall-mounted torches. When Leo saw the cavern, he forgot about leaving.

“Festus,” he muttered. “What is this place?”

The dragon stomped to the center of the room, leaving tracks in the thick dust, and curled up on a large circular platform.

The cave was the size of an airplane hangar, with endless worktables and storage cages, rows of garage-sized doors along either wall, and staircases that led up to a network of catwalks high above. Equipment was everywhere—hydraulic lifts, welding torches, hazard suits, air-spades, forklifts, plus something that looked suspiciously like a nuclear reaction chamber. Bulletin boards were covered with tattered, faded blueprints. And weapons, armor, shields—war supplies all over the place, a lot of them only partially finished.

Hanging from chains far above the dragon’s platform was an old tattered banner almost too faded to read. The letters were Greek, but Leo somehow knew what they said: bunker 9.

Did that mean nine as in the Hephaestus cabin, or nine as in there were eight others? Leo looked at Festus, still curled up on the platform, and it occurred to him that the dragon looked so content because it *was* home. It had probably been built on that pad.

“Do the other kids know ... ?” Leo’s question died as he asked it. Clearly, this place had been abandoned for decades. Cobwebs and dust covered everything. The floor revealed no footprints except for his, and the huge paw prints of the dragon. He was the first one in this bunker since ... since a long time ago. Bunker 9 had been abandoned with a lot of projects half finished on

the tables. Locked up and forgotten, but why?

Leo looked at a map on the wall—a battle map of camp, but the paper was as cracked and yellow as onionskin. A date at the bottom read, 1864.

“No way,” he muttered.

Then he spotted a blueprint on a nearby bulletin board, and his heart almost leaped out of his throat. He ran to the worktable and stared up at a white-line drawing almost faded beyond recognition: a Greek ship from several different angles. Faintly scrawled words underneath it read: prophecy? unclear. flight?

It was the ship he’d seen in his dreams—the flying ship. Someone had tried to build it here, or at least sketched out the idea. Then it was left, forgotten ... a prophecy yet to come. And weirdest of all, the ship’s masthead was exactly like the one Leo had drawn when he was five—the head of a dragon. “Looks like you, Festus,” he murmured. “That’s creepy.”

The masthead gave him an uneasy feeling, but Leo’s mind spun with too many other questions to think about it for long. He touched the blueprint, hoping he could take it down to study, but the paper crackled at his touch, so he left it alone. He looked around for other clues. No boats. No pieces that looked like parts of this project, but there were so many doors and storerooms to explore.

Festus snorted like he was trying to get Leo’s attention, reminding him they didn’t have all night. It was true. Leo figured it would be morning in a few hours, and he’d gotten completely sidetracked. He’d saved the dragon, but it wasn’t going to help him on the quest. He needed something that would fly.

Festus nudged something toward him—a leather tool belt that had been left next to his construction pad. Then the dragon switched on his glowing red eye beams and turned them toward the ceiling. Leo looked up to where the spotlights were pointing, and yelped when he recognized the shapes hanging above them in the darkness.

“Festus,” he said in a small voice. “We’ve got work to do.”

JASON

JASON DREAMED OF WOLVES.

He stood in a clearing in the middle of a redwood forest. In front of him rose the ruins of a stone mansion. Low gray clouds blended with the ground fog, and cold rain hung in the air. A pack of large gray beasts milled around him, brushing against his legs, snarling and baring their teeth. They gently nudged him toward the ruins.

Jason had no desire to become the world's largest dog biscuit, so he decided to do what they wanted.

The ground squelched under his boots as he walked. Stone spires of chimneys, no longer attached to anything, rose up like totem poles. The house must've been enormous once, multi-storied with massive log walls and a soaring gabled roof, but now nothing remained but its stone skeleton. Jason passed under a crumbling doorway and found himself in a kind of courtyard.

Before him was a drained reflecting pool, long and rectangular. Jason couldn't tell how deep it was, because the bottom was filled with mist. A dirt path led all the way around, and the house's uneven walls rose on either side. Wolves paced under the archways of rough red volcanic stone.

At the far end of the pool sat a giant she-wolf, several feet taller than Jason. Her eyes glowed silver in the fog, and her coat was the same color as the rocks—warm chocolaty red.

"I know this place," Jason said.

The wolf regarded him. She didn't exactly speak, but Jason could understand her. The movements of her ears and whiskers, the flash of her eyes, the way she curled her lips—all of these were part of her language.

Of course, the she-wolf said. *You began your journey here as a pup. Now you must find your way back. A new quest, a new start.*

"That isn't fair," Jason said. But as soon as he spoke, he knew there was no point complaining to the she-wolf.

Wolves didn't feel sympathy. They never expected fairness. The wolf said: *Conquer or die. This is always our way.*

Jason wanted to protest that he couldn't conquer if he didn't know who he

was, or where he was supposed to go. But he knew this wolf. Her name was simply Lupa, the Mother Wolf, the greatest of her kind. Long ago she'd found him in this place, protected him, nurtured him, *chosen* him, but if Jason showed weakness, she would tear him to shreds. Rather than being her pup, he would become her dinner. In the wolf pack, weakness was not an option.

"Can you guide me?" Jason asked.

Lupa made a rumbling noise deep in her throat, and the mist in the pool dissolved.

At first Jason wasn't sure what he was seeing. At opposite ends of the pool, two dark spires had erupted from the cement floor like the drill bits of some massive tunneling machines boring through the surface. Jason couldn't tell if the spires were made of rock or petrified vines, but they were formed of thick tendrils that came together in a point at the top. Each spire was about five feet tall, but they weren't identical. The one closest to Jason was darker and seemed like a solid mass, its tendrils fused together. As he watched, it pushed a little farther out of the earth and expanded a little wider.

On Lupa's end of the pool, the second spire's tendrils were more open, like the bars of a cage. Inside, Jason could vaguely see a misty figure struggling, shifting within its confines.

"Hera," Jason said.

The she-wolf growled in agreement. The other wolves circled the pool, their fur standing up on their backs as they snarled at the spires.

The enemy has chosen this place to awaken her most powerful son, the giant king, Lupa said. *Our sacred place, where demigods are claimed—the place of death or life. The burned house. The house of the wolf. It is an abomination. You must stop her.*

"Her?" Jason was confused. "You mean, Hera?"

The she-wolf gnashed her teeth impatiently. *Use your senses, pup. I care nothing for Juno, but if she falls, our enemy wakes. And that will be the end for all of us. You know this place. You can find it again. Cleanse our house. Stop this before it is too late.*

The dark spire grew slowly larger, like the bulb of some horrible flower. Jason sensed that if it ever opened, it would release something he did *not* want to meet.

"Who am I?" Jason asked the she-wolf. "At least tell me that."

Wolves don't have much of a sense of humor, but Jason could tell the question amused Lupa, as if Jason were a cub just trying out his claws, practicing to be the alpha male.

You are our saving grace, as always. The she-wolf curled her lip, as if she

had just made a clever joke. *Do not fail, son of Jupiter.*

JASON

JASON WOKE TO THE SOUND OF THUNDER. Then he remembered where he was. It was always thundering in Cabin One.

Above his cot, the domed ceiling was decorated with a blue-and-white mosaic like a cloudy sky. The cloud tiles shifted across the ceiling, changing from white to black. Thunder rumbled through the room, and gold tiles flashed like veins of lightning.

Except for the cot that the other campers had brought him, the cabin had no regular furniture—no chairs, tables, or dressers. As far as Jason could tell, it didn't even have a bathroom. The walls were carved with alcoves, each holding a bronze brazier or a golden eagle statue on a marble pedestal. In the center of the room, a twenty-foot-tall, full-color statue of Zeus in classic Greek robes stood with a shield at his side and a lightning bolt raised, ready to smite somebody.

Jason studied the statue, looking for anything he had in common with the Lord of the Sky. Black hair? Nope. Grumbly expression? Well, maybe. Beard? No thanks. In his robes and sandals, Zeus looked like a really buff, really angry hippie.

Yeah, Cabin One. A big honor, the other campers had told him. Sure, if you liked sleeping in a cold temple by yourself with Hippie Zeus frowning down at you all night.

Jason got up and rubbed his neck. His whole body was stiff from bad sleep and summoning lightning. That little trick last night hadn't been as easy as he had let on. It had almost made him pass out.

Next to the cot, new clothes were laid out for him: jeans, sneakers, and an orange Camp Half-Blood shirt. He definitely needed a change of clothes, but looking down at his tattered purple shirt, he was reluctant to change. It felt wrong somehow, putting on the camp shirt. He still couldn't believe he belonged here, despite everything they'd told him.

He thought about his dream, hoping more memories would come back to him about Lupa, or that ruined house in the redwoods. He knew he'd been there before. The wolf was real. But his head ached when he tried to remember. The

marks on his forearm seemed to burn.

If he could find those ruins, he could find his past. Whatever was growing inside that rock spire, Jason had to stop it.

He looked at Hippiie Zeus. “You’re welcome to help.”

The statue said nothing.

“Thanks, Pops,” Jason muttered.

He changed clothes and checked his reflection in Zeus’s shield. His face looked watery and strange in the metal, like he was dissolving in a pool of gold. Definitely he didn’t look as good as Piper had last night after she’d suddenly been transformed.

Jason still wasn’t sure how he felt about that. He’d acted like an idiot, announcing in front of everyone that she was a knockout. Not like there’d been anything wrong with her *before*. Sure, she looked great after Aphrodite zapped her, but she also didn’t look like herself, not comfortable with the attention.

Jason had felt bad for her. Maybe that was crazy, considering she’d just been claimed by a goddess and turned into the most gorgeous girl at camp. Everybody had started fawning over her, telling her how amazing she was and how obviously *she* should be the one who went on the quest—but that attention had nothing to do with who she was. New dress, new makeup, glowing pink aura, and *boom*: suddenly people liked her. Jason felt like he understood that.

Last night when he’d called down lightning, the other campers’ reactions had seemed familiar to him. He was pretty sure he’d been dealing with that for a long time—people looking at him in awe just because he was the son of Zeus, treating him special, but it didn’t have anything to do with *him*. Nobody cared about *him*, just his big scary daddy standing behind him with the doomsday bolt, as if to say, *Respect this kid or eat voltage!*

After the campfire, when people started heading back to their cabins, Jason had gone up to Piper and formally asked her to come with him on the quest.

She’d still been in a state of shock, but she nodded, rubbing her arms, which must’ve been cold in that sleeveless dress.

“Aphrodite took my snowboarding jacket,” she muttered. “Mugged by my own mom.”

In the first row of the amphitheater, Jason found a blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders. “We’ll get you a new jacket,” he promised.

She managed a smile. He wanted to wrap his arms around her, but he restrained himself. He didn’t want her to think he was as shallow as everyone else—trying to make a move on her because she’d turned all beautiful.

He was glad Piper was going with him on the quest. Jason had tried to act brave at the campfire, but it was just that—an act. The idea of going up against

an evil force powerful enough to kidnap Hera scared him witless, especially since he didn't even know his own past. He'd need help, and it felt right: Piper should be with him. But things were already complicated without figuring out how much he liked her, and why. He'd already messed with her head enough.

He slipped on his new shoes, ready to get out of that cold, empty cabin. Then he spotted something he hadn't noticed the night before. A brazier had been moved out of one of the alcoves to create a sleeping niche, with a bedroll, a backpack, even some pictures taped to the wall.

Jason walked over. Whoever had slept there, it had been a long time ago. The bedroll smelled musty. The backpack was covered with a thin film of dust. Some of the photos once taped to the wall had lost their stickiness and fallen to the floor.

One picture showed Annabeth—much younger, maybe eight, but Jason could tell it was she: same blond hair and gray eyes, same distracted look like she was thinking a million things at once. She stood next to a sandy-haired guy about fourteen or fifteen, with a mischievous smile and ragged leather armor over a T-shirt. He was pointing to an alley behind them, like he was telling the photographer, *Let's go meet things in a dark alley and kill them!* A second photo showed Annabeth and the same guy sitting at a campfire, laughing hysterically.

Finally Jason picked up one of the photos that had fallen. It was a strip of pictures like you'd take in a do-it-yourself photo booth: Annabeth and the sandy-haired guy, but with another girl between them. She was maybe fifteen, with black hair—choppy like Piper's—a black leather jacket, and silver jewelry, so she looked kind of goth; but she was caught mid-laugh, and it was clear she was with her two best friends.

"That's Thalia," someone said.

Jason turned.

Annabeth was peering over his shoulder. Her expression was sad, like the picture bought back hard memories. "She's the other child of Zeus who lived here—but not for long. Sorry, I should've knocked."

"It's fine," Jason said. "Not like I think of this place as home."

Annabeth was dressed for travel, with a winter coat over her camp clothes, her knife at her belt, and a backpack across her shoulder.

Jason said, "Don't suppose you've changed your mind about coming with us?"

She shook her head. "You got a good team already. I'm off to look for Percy."

Jason was a little disappointed. He would've appreciated having somebody on the trip who knew what they were doing, so he wouldn't feel like he was

leading Piper and Leo off a cliff.

“Hey, you’ll do fine,” Annabeth promised. “Something tells me this isn’t your first quest.”

Jason had a vague suspicion she was right, but that didn’t make him feel any better. Everyone seemed to think he was so brave and confident, but they didn’t see how lost he really felt. How could they trust him when he didn’t even know who he was?

He looked at the pictures of Annabeth smiling. He wondered how long it had been since she’d smiled. She must really like this Percy guy to search for him so hard, and that made Jason a little envious. Was anyone searching for *him* right now? What if somebody cared for *him* that much and was going out of her mind with worry, and he couldn’t even remember his old life?

“You know who I am,” he guessed. “Don’t you?”

Annabeth gripped the hilt of her dagger. She looked for a chair to sit on, but of course there weren’t any. “Honestly, Jason ... I’m not sure. My best guess, you’re a loner. It happens sometimes. For one reason or another, the camp never found you, but you survived anyway by constantly moving around. Trained yourself to fight. Handled the monsters on your own. You beat the odds.”

“The first thing Chiron said to me,” Jason remembered, “was *you should be dead.*”

“That could be why,” Annabeth said. “Most demigods would never make it on their own. And a child of Zeus—I mean, it doesn’t get any more dangerous than that. The chances of your reaching age fifteen without finding Camp Half-Blood or dying—microscopic. But like I said, it does happen. Thalia ran away when she was young. She survived on her own for years. Even took care of me for a while. So maybe you were a loner too.”

Jason held out his arm. “And these marks?”

Annabeth glanced at the tattoos. Clearly, they bothered her. “Well, the eagle is the symbol of Zeus, so that makes sense. The twelve lines—maybe they stand for years, if you’d been making them since you were three years old. SPQR—that’s the motto of the old Roman Empire: *Senatus Populusque Romanus*, the Senate and the People of Rome. Though why you would burn that on your own arm, I don’t know. Unless you had a *really* harsh Latin teacher ...”

Jason was pretty sure that wasn’t the reason. It also didn’t seem possible he’d been on his own his whole life. But what else made sense? Annabeth had been pretty clear—Camp Half-Blood was the only safe place in the world for demigods.

“I, um ... had a weird dream last night,” he said. It seemed like a stupid thing to confide, but Annabeth didn’t look surprised.

“Happens all the time to demigods,” she said. “What did you see?”

He told her about the wolves and the ruined house and the two rock spires. As he talked, Annabeth started pacing, looking more and more agitated.

“You don’t remember where this house is?” she asked.

Jason shook his head. “But I’m sure I’ve been there before.”

“Redwoods,” she mused. “Could be northern California. And the she-wolf ... I’ve studied goddesses, spirits, and monsters my whole life. I’ve never heard of Lupa.”

“She said the enemy was a ‘her.’ I thought maybe it was Hera, but—”

“I wouldn’t trust Hera, but I don’t think she’s the enemy. And that thing rising out of the earth—” Annabeth’s expression darkened. “You’ve got to stop it.”

“You know what it is, don’t you?” he asked. “Or at least, you’ve got a guess. I saw your face last night at the campfire. You looked at Chiron like it was suddenly dawning on you, but you didn’t want to scare us.”

Annabeth hesitated. “Jason, the thing about prophecies ...the more you know, the more you try to change them, and that can be disastrous. Chiron believes it’s better that you find your own path, find out things in your own time. If he’d told me everything he knew before my first quest with Percy... I’ve got to admit, I’m not sure I would’ve been able to go through with it. For your quest, it’s even more important.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Not if you succeed. At least ... I hope not.”

“But I don’t even know where to start. Where am I supposed to go?”

“Follow the monsters,” Annabeth suggested.

Jason thought about that. The storm spirit who’d attacked him at the Grand Canyon had said he was being recalled to his boss. If Jason could track the storm spirits, he might be able to find the person controlling them. And maybe that would lead him to Hera’s prison.

“Okay,” he said. “How do I find storm winds?”

“Personally, I’d ask a wind god,” Annabeth said. “Aeolus is the master of all the winds, but he’s a little ... unpredictable. No one finds him unless he wants to be found. I’d try one of the four seasonal wind gods that work for Aeolus. The nearest one, the one who has the most dealings with heroes, is Boreas, the North Wind.”

“So if I looked him up on Google maps—”

“Oh, he’s not hard to find,” Annabeth promised. “He settled in North America like all the other gods. So of course he picked the oldest northern

settlement, about as far north as you can go.”

“Maine?” Jason guessed.

“Farther.”

Jason tried to envision a map. What was farther north than Maine? The oldest northern settlement ...

“Canada,” he decided. “Quebec.”

Annabeth smiled. “I hope you speak French.”

Jason actually felt a spark of excitement. Quebec—at least now he had a goal. Find the North Wind, track down the storm spirits, find out who they worked for and where that ruined house was. Free Hera. All in four days. Cake.

“Thanks, Annabeth.” He looked at the photo booth pictures still in his hand. “So, um ... you said it was dangerous being a child of Zeus. What ever happened to Thalia?”

“Oh, she’s fine,” Annabeth said. “She became a Hunter of Artemis—one of the handmaidens of the goddess. They roam around the country killing monsters. We don’t see them at camp very often.”

Jason glanced over at the huge statue of Zeus. He understood why Thalia had slept in this alcove. It was the only place in the cabin not in Hippiie Zeus’s line of sight. And even that hadn’t been enough. She’d chosen to follow Artemis and be part of a group rather than stay in this cold drafty temple alone with her twenty-foot-tall dad—*Jason’s dad*—glowering down at her. *Eat voltage!* Jason didn’t have any trouble understanding Thalia’s feelings. He wondered if there was a Hunters group for guys.

“Who’s the other kid in the photo?” he asked. “The sandy-haired guy.”

Annabeth’s expression tightened. Touchy subject.

“That’s Luke,” she said. “He’s dead now.”

Jason decided it was best not to ask more, but the way Annabeth said Luke’s name, he wondered if maybe Percy Jackson wasn’t the only boy Annabeth had ever liked.

He focused again on Thalia’s face. He kept thinking this photo of her was important. He was missing something.

Jason felt a strange sense of connection to this other child of Zeus—someone who might understand his confusion, maybe even answer some questions. But another voice inside him, an insistent whisper, said: *Dangerous. Stay away.*

“How old is she now?” he asked.

“Hard to say. She was a tree for a while. Now she’s immortal.”

“What?”

His expression must’ve been pretty good, because Annabeth laughed.

“Don’t worry. It’s not something all children of Zeus go through. It’s a long story, but ... well, she was out of commission for a long time. If she’d aged regularly, she’d be in her twenties now, but she still looks the same as in that picture, like she’s about ... well, about your age. Fifteen or sixteen?”

Something the she-wolf had said in his dream nagged at Jason. He found himself asking, “What’s her last name?”

Annabeth looked uneasy. “She didn’t use a last name, really. If she had to, she’d use her mom’s, but they didn’t get along. Thalia ran away when she was pretty young.”

Jason waited.

“Grace,” Annabeth said. “Thalia Grace.”

Jason’s fingers went numb. The picture fluttered to the floor.

“You okay?” Annabeth asked.

A shred of memory had ignited—maybe a tiny piece that Hera had forgotten to steal. Or maybe she’d left it there on purpose—just enough for him to remember that name, and know that digging up his past was terribly, terribly dangerous.

You should be dead, Chiron had said. It wasn’t a comment about Jason beating the odds as a loner. Chiron knew something specific—something about Jason’s family.

The she-wolf’s words in his dream finally made sense to him, her clever joke at his expense. He could imagine Lupa growling a wolfish laugh.

“What is it?” Annabeth pressed.

Jason couldn’t keep this to himself. It would kill him, and he had to get Annabeth’s help. If she knew Thalia, maybe she could advise him.

“You have to swear not to tell anyone else,” he said.

“Jason—”

“Swear it,” he urged. “Until I figure out what’s going on, what this all means—” He rubbed the burned tattoos on his forearm. “You have to keep a secret.”

Annabeth hesitated, but her curiosity won out. “All right. Until you tell me it’s okay, I won’t share what you say with anyone else. I swear on the River Styx.”

Thunder rumbled, even louder than usual for the cabin. *You are our saving Grace*, the wolf had snarled. Jason picked up the photo from the floor. “My last name is Grace,” he said. “This is my sister.” Annabeth turned pale. Jason could see her wrestling with dismay, disbelief, anger. She thought he was lying. His claim was impossible. And part of him felt the same way, but as soon as he spoke the words, he knew they were true.

Then the doors of the cabin burst open. Half a dozen campers spilled in, led by the bald guy from Iris, Butch. “Hurry!” he said, and Jason couldn’t tell if his expression was excitement or fear. “The dragon is back.”

PIPER

PIPER WOKE UP AND IMMEDIATELY GRABBED a mirror. There were plenty of those in the Aphrodite cabin. She sat on her bunk, looked at her reflection and groaned.

She was *still* gorgeous.

Last night after the campfire, she'd tried everything. She messed up her hair, washed the makeup off her face, cried to make her eyes red. Nothing worked. Her hair popped back to perfection. The magic makeup reapplied itself. Her eyes refused to get puffy or bloodshot.

She would've changed clothes, but she had nothing to change into. The other Aphrodite campers offered her some (laughing behind her back, she was sure), but each outfit was even more fashionable and ridiculous than what she had on.

Now, after a horrible night's sleep, still no change. Piper normally looked like a zombie in the morning, but her hair was styled like a supermodel's and her skin was perfect. Even that horrible zit at the base of her nose, which she'd had for so many days she'd started to call it Bob, had disappeared.

She growled in frustration and raked her fingers through her hair. No use. The do just popped back into place. She looked like Cherokee Barbie.

From across the cabin, Drew called, "Oh, honey, it won't go away." Her voice dripped with false sympathy. "Mom's blessing will last *at least* another day. Maybe a week if you're lucky."

Piper gritted her teeth. "A week?"

The other Aphrodite kids—about dozen girls and five guys—smirked and snickered at her discomfort. Piper knew she should play cool, not let them get under her skin. She'd dealt with shallow, popular kids plenty of times. But this was different. These were her brothers and sisters, even if she had *nothing* in common with them, and how Aphrodite had managed to have so many kids so close in age ... Never mind. She didn't want to know.

"Don't worry, hon." Drew blotted her fluorescent lipstick. "You're thinking you don't belong here? We couldn't agree more. Isn't that right, *Mitchell*?"

One of the guys flinched. "Um, yeah. Sure."

“Mmm-hmm.” Drew took out her mascara and checked her lashes. Everyone else watched, not daring to speak. “So anyways, people, fifteen minutes until breakfast. The cabin’s not going to clean itself! And Mitchell, I think you’ve learned your lesson. Right, sweetie? So you’re on garbage patrol just for today, mm-kay? Show Piper how it’s done, ’cause I have a feeling she’ll have that job soon—if she survives her *quest*. Now, get to work, everybody! It’s my bathroom time!”

Everybody started rushing around, making beds and folding clothes, while Drew scooped up her makeup kit, hair dryer, and brush and marched into the bathroom.

Someone inside yelped, and a girl about eleven was kicked out, hastily wrapped in towels with shampoo still in her hair.

The door slammed shut, and the girl started to cry. A couple of older campers comforted her and wiped the bubbles out of her hair.

“Seriously?” Piper said to no one in particular. “You let Drew treat you like this?”

A few kids shot Piper nervous looks, like they might actually agree, but they said nothing.

The campers kept working, though Piper couldn’t see why the cabin needed much cleaning. It was a life-size dollhouse, with pink walls and white window trim. The lace curtains were pastel blue and green, which of course matched the sheets and feather comforters on all the beds.

The guys had one row of bunks separated by a curtain, but their section of the cabin was just as neat and orderly as the girls’. Something was *definitely* unnatural about that. Every camper had a wooden camp chest at the foot of their bunk with their name painted on it, and Piper guessed that the clothes in each chest were neatly folded and color coordinated. The only bit of individualism was how the campers decorated their private bunk spaces. Each had slightly different pictures tacked up of whatever celebrities they thought were hot. A few had personal photos, too, but most were actors or singers or whatever.

Piper hoped she might not see *The Poster*. It had been almost a year since the movie, and she thought by now surely everyone had torn down those old tattered advertisements and tacked up something newer. But no such luck. She spotted one on the wall by the storage closet, in the middle of a collage of famous heartthrobs.

The title was lurid red: *king of sparta*. Under that, the poster showed the leading man—a three-quarters shot of bare-chested bronze flesh, with ripped pectorals and six-pack abs. He was clad in only a Greek war kilt and a purple cape, sword in hand. He looked like he’d just been rubbed in oil, his short black

hair gleaming and rivulets of sweat pouring off his rugged face, those dark sad eyes facing the camera as if to say, *I will kill your men and steal your women!* *Ha-ha!*

It was the most ridiculous poster of all time. Piper and her dad had had a good laugh over it the first time they saw it. Then the movie made a bajillion dollars. The poster graphic popped up everywhere. Piper couldn't get away from it at school, walking down the street, even online. It became *The Poster*, the most embarrassing thing in her life. And yeah, it was a picture of her dad.

She turned away so no one would think she was staring at it. Maybe when everyone went to breakfast she could tear it down and they wouldn't notice.

She tried to look busy, but she didn't have any extra clothes to fold. She straightened her bed, then realized the top blanket was the one Jason had wrapped around her shoulders last night. She picked it up and pressed it to her face. It smelled of wood smoke, but unfortunately not of Jason. He was the *only* person who'd been genuinely nice to her after the claiming, like he cared about how she felt, not just about her stupid new clothes. God, she'd wanted to kiss him, but he'd seemed so uncomfortable, almost scared of her. She couldn't really blame him. She'd been glowing pink.

"Scuse me," said a voice by her feet. The garbage patrol guy, Mitchell, was crawling around on all fours, picking up chocolate wrappers and crumpled notes from under the bunk beds. Apparently the Aphrodite kids weren't one hundred percent neat freaks after all.

She moved out of his way. "What'd you do to make Drew mad?"

He glanced over at the bathroom door to make sure it was still closed. "Last night, after you were claimed, I said you might not be so bad."

It wasn't much of a compliment, but Piper was stunned. An Aphrodite kid had actually stood up for her?

"Thanks," she said.

Mitchell shrugged. "Yeah, well. See where it got me. But for what it's worth, welcome to Cabin Ten."

A girl with blond pigtails and braces raced up with a pile of clothes in her arms. She looked around furtively like she was delivering nuclear materials.

"I brought you these," she whispered.

"Piper, meet Lacy," Mitchell said, still crawling around on the floor.

"Hi," Lacy said breathlessly. "You *can* change clothes. The blessing won't stop you. This is just, you know, a backpack, some rations, ambrosia and nectar for emergencies, some jeans, a few extra shirts, and a warm jacket. The boots might be a little snug. But—well—we took up a collection. Good luck on your quest!"

Lacy dumped the things on the bed and started to hurry away, but Piper caught her arm. “Hold on. At least let me thank you! Why are you rushing off?”

Lacy looked like she might shake apart from nervousness. “Oh, well—”

“Drew might find out,” Mitchell explained.

“I might have to wear the shoes of shame!” Lacy gulped.

“The what?” Piper asked.

Lacy and Mitchell both pointed to a black shelf mounted in the corner of the room, like an altar. Displayed on it were a hideous pair of orthopedic nurse’s shoes, bright white with thick soles.

“I had to wear them for a week once,” Lacy whimpered. “They don’t go with *anything!*”

“And there’re worse punishments,” Mitchell warned. “Drew can charmspeak, see? Not many Aphrodite kids have that power; but if she tries hard enough, she can get you to do some pretty embarrassing things. Piper, you’re the first person I’ve seen in a long time who is able to resist her.”

“Charmspeak ...” Piper remembered last night, the way the crowd at the campfire had swayed back and forth between Drew’s opinion and hers. “You mean, like, you could talk someone into doing things. Or ... giving you things. Like a car?”

“Oh, don’t give Drew any ideas!” Lacy gasped.

“But yeah,” Mitchell said. “She could do that.”

“So that’s why she’s head counselor,” Piper said. “She convinced you all?”

Mitchell picked a nasty wad of gum from under Piper’s bed. “Nah, she inherited the post when Silena Beauregard died in the war. Drew was second oldest. Oldest camper automatically gets the post, unless somebody with more years or more completed quests wants to challenge, in which case there’s a duel, but that hardly ever happens. Anyway, we’ve been stuck with Drew in charge since August. She decided to make some, ah, *changes* in the way the cabin is run.”

“Yes, I did!” Suddenly Drew was there, leaning against the bunk. Lacy squeaked like a guinea pig and tried to run, but Drew put an arm out to stop her. She looked down at Mitchell. “I think you missed some trash, sweetie. You’d better make another pass.”

Piper glanced toward the bathroom and saw that Drew had dumped everything from the bathroom waste bin—some pretty *nasty* things—all over the floor.

Mitchell sat up on his haunches. He glared at Drew like he was about to attack (which Piper would’ve paid money to see), but finally he snapped, “Fine.”

Drew smiled. “See, Piper, hon, we’re a good cabin here. A good family!”

Silena Beauregard, though ... you could take a warning from her. She was secretly passing information to Kronos in the Titan War, helping the *enemy*.”

Drew smiled all sweet and innocent, with her glittery pink makeup and her blow-dried hair lush and smelling like nutmeg. She looked like any popular teenage girl from any high school. But her eyes were as cold as steel. Piper got the feeling Drew was looking straight into her soul, pulling out her secrets.

Helping the enemy.

“Oh, none of the other cabins talk about it,” Drew confided. “They act like Silena Beauregard was a hero.”

“She sacrificed her life to make things right,” Mitchell grumbled. “She was a hero.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Drew said. “Another day on garbage patrol, Mitchell. But *anyways*, Silena lost track of what this cabin is about. We match up cute couples at camp! Then we break them apart and start over! It’s the best fun ever. We don’t have any business getting involved in other stuff like wars and quests. *I* certainly haven’t been on any quests. They’re a waste of time!”

Lacy raised her hand nervously. “But last night you said you wanted to go on a—”

Drew glared at her, and Lacy’s voice died.

“Most of all,” Drew continued, “we certainly don’t need our image tarnished by spies, do we, *Piper*?”

Piper tried to answer, but she couldn’t. There was no way Drew could know about her dreams or her dad’s kidnapping, was there?

“It’s too bad you won’t be around,” Drew sighed. “But if you survive your little quest, don’t worry, I’ll find *somebody* to match up with you. Maybe one of those gross Hephaestus guys. Or Clovis? He’s pretty repulsive.” Drew looked her over with a mix of pity and disgust. “Honestly, I didn’t think it was *possible* for Aphrodite to have an ugly child, but ... who was your father? Was he some sort of mutant, or—”

“Tristan McLean,” Piper snapped.

As soon as she said it, she hated herself. She never, *ever* played the “famous dad” card. But Drew had driven her over the edge. “My dad’s Tristan McLean.”

The stunned silence was gratifying for a few seconds, but Piper felt ashamed of herself. Everybody turned and looked at *The Poster*, her dad flexing his muscles for the whole world to see.

“Oh my god!” half the girls screamed at once.

“Sweet!” a guy said. “The dude with the sword who killed that other dude in that movie?”

“He is so hot for an old guy,” a girl said, and then she blushed. “I mean I’m sorry. I know he’s your *dad*. That’s so weird!”

“It’s weird, all right,” Piper agreed.

“Do you think you could get me his autograph?” another girl asked.

Piper forced a smile. She couldn’t say, *If my dad survives....*

“Yeah, no problem,” she managed.

The girl squealed in excitement, and more kids surged forward, asking a dozen questions at once.

“Have you ever been on the set?”

“Do you live in a mansion?”

“Do you have lunch with movie stars?”

“Have you had your rite of passage?”

That one caught Piper off guard. “Rite of what?” she asked.

The girls and guys giggled and shoved each other around like this was an embarrassing topic.

“The rite of passage for an Aphrodite child,” one explained. “You get someone to fall in love with you. Then you break their heart. Dump them. Once you do that, you’ve proven yourself worthy of Aphrodite.”

Piper stared at the crowd to see if they were joking. “Break someone’s heart on purpose? That’s terrible!”

The others looked confused.

“Why?” a guy asked.

“Oh my god!” a girl said. “I bet Aphrodite broke your *dad*’s heart! I bet he never loved anyone again, did he? That’s so romantic! When you have your rite of passage, you can be just like Mom!”

“Forget it!” Piper yelled, a little louder than she’d intended. The other kids backed away. “I’m *not* breaking somebody’s heart just for a stupid rite of passage!”

Which of course gave Drew a chance to take back control. “Well, there you go!” she cut in. “Silena said the same thing. She broke the tradition, fell in love with that Beckendorf boy, and *stayed* in love. If you ask me, that’s why things ended tragically for her.”

“That’s not true!” Lacy squeaked, but Drew glared at her, and she immediately melted back into the crowd.

“Hardly matters,” Drew continued, “because, Piper, hon, you couldn’t break anyone’s heart anyway. And this nonsense about your dad being Tristan McLean—that’s so begging for attention.”

Several of the kids blinked uncertainly.

“You mean he’s *not* her dad?” one asked.

Drew rolled her eyes. “Please. Now, it’s time for breakfast, people, and Piper here has to start that little quest. So let’s get her packed and get her out of here!”

Drew broke up the crowd and got everyone moving. She called them “hon” and “dear,” but her tone made it clear she expected to be obeyed. Mitchell and Lacy helped Piper pack. They even guarded the bathroom while Piper went in and changed into a better traveling outfit. The hand-me-downs weren’t fancy—thank god—just well-worn jeans, a T-shirt, a comfortable winter coat, and hiking boots that fit perfectly. She strapped her dagger, Katoptris, to her belt.

When Piper came out, she felt almost normal again. The other campers were standing at their bunks while Drew came around and inspected. Piper turned to Mitchell and Lacy and mouthed, *Thank you*. Mitchell nodded grimly. Lacy flashed a full-braces smile. Piper doubted Drew had ever thanked them for anything. She also noticed that the *King of Sparta* poster had been wadded up and thrown in the trash. Drew’s orders, no doubt. Even though Piper had wanted to take the poster down herself, now she was totally steamed.

When Drew spotted her, she clapped in mock applause. “Very nice! Our little quest girl all dressed in Dumpster clothes again. Now, off you go! No need to eat breakfast with us. Good luck with ... whatever. Bye!”

Piper shouldered her bag. She could feel everyone else’s eyes on her as she walked to the door. She could just leave and forget about it. That would’ve been the easy thing. What did she care about this cabin, these shallow kids?

Except that some of them had tried to help her. Some of them had even stood up to Drew for her.

She turned at the door. “You know, you all don’t have to follow Drew’s orders.”

The other kids shifted. Several glanced at Drew, but she looked too stunned to respond.

“Umm,” one managed, “she’s our head counselor.”

“She’s a tyrant,” Piper corrected. “You can think for yourselves. There’s got to be more to Aphrodite than *this*.”

“More than this,” one kid echoed.

“Think for ourselves,” a second muttered.

“People!” Drew screeched. “Don’t be stupid! She’s charm-speaking you.”

“No,” Piper said. “I’m just telling the truth.”

At least, Piper thought that was the case. She didn’t understand exactly how this charmspeaking business worked, but she didn’t feel like she was putting any special power into her words. She didn’t want to win an argument by tricking people. That would make her no better than Drew. Piper simply meant what she

said. Besides, even if she tried charmspeaking, she had a feeling it wouldn't work very well on another charmspeaker like Drew.

Drew sneered at her. "You may have a little power, Miss Movie Star. But you don't know the first thing about Aphrodite. You have such great ideas? What do you think this cabin is about, then? Tell them. Then maybe I'll tell them a few things about *you*, huh?"

Piper wanted to make a withering retort, but her anger turned to panic. She was a spy for the enemy, just like Silena Beauregard. An Aphrodite traitor. Did Drew know about that, or was she bluffing? Under Drew's glare, her confidence began to crumble.

"Not this," Piper managed. "Aphrodite is not about this."

Then she turned and stormed out before the others could see her blushing.

Behind her, Drew started laughing. "*Not this?* Hear that, people? She doesn't have a clue!"

Piper promised herself she would never *ever* go back to that cabin. She blinked away her tears and stormed across the green, not sure where she was going—until she saw the dragon swooping down from the sky.

PIPER

“LEO?” SHE YELLED.

Sure enough, there he was, sitting atop a giant bronze death machine and grinning like a lunatic. Even before he landed, the camp alarm went up. A conch horn blew. All the satyrs started screaming, “Don’t kill me!” Half the camp ran outside in a mixture of pajamas and armor. The dragon set down right in the middle of the green, and Leo yelled, “It’s cool! Don’t shoot!”

Hesitantly, the archers lowered their bows. The warriors backed away, keeping their spears and swords ready. They made a loose wide ring around the metal monster. Other demigods hid behind their cabin doors or peeped out the windows. Nobody seemed anxious to get close.

Piper couldn’t blame them. The dragon was huge. It glistened in the morning sun like a living penny sculpture—different shades of copper and bronze—a sixty-foot-long serpent with steel talons and drill-bit teeth and glowing ruby eyes. It had bat-shaped wings twice its length that unfurled like metallic sails, making a sound like coins cascading out of a slot machine every time they flapped.

“It’s beautiful,” Piper muttered. The other demigods stared at her like she was insane.

The dragon reared its head and shot a column of fire into the sky. Campers scrambled away and hefted their weapons, but Leo slid calmly off the dragon’s back. He held up his hands like he was surrendering, except he still had that crazy grin on his face.

“People of Earth, I come in peace!” he shouted. He looked like he’d been rolling around in the campfire. His army coat and his face were smeared with soot. His hands were grease-stained, and he wore a new tool belt around his waist. His eyes were bloodshot. His curly hair was so oily it stuck up in porcupine quills, and he smelled strangely of Tabasco sauce. But he looked absolutely delighted. “Festus is just saying hello!”

“That thing is dangerous!” an Ares girl shouted, brandishing her spear. “Kill it now!”

“Stand down!” someone ordered.

To Piper's surprise, it was Jason. He pushed through the crowd, flanked by Annabeth and that girl from the Hephaestus cabin, Nyssa.

Jason gazed up at the dragon and shook his head in amazement. "Leo, what have you done?"

"Found a ride!" Leo beamed. "You said I could go on the quest if I got you a ride. Well, I got you a class-A metallic flying bad boy! Festus can take us anywhere!"

"It—has wings," Nyssa stammered. Her jaw looked like it might drop off her face.

"Yeah!" Leo said. "I found them and reattached them."

"But it never had wings. Where did you find them?"

Leo hesitated, and Piper could tell he was hiding something.

"In ... the woods," he said. "Repaired his circuits, too, mostly, so no more problems with him going haywire."

"Mostly?" Nyssa asked.

The dragon's head twitched. It tilted to one side and a stream of black liquid—maybe oil, *hopefully* just oil—poured out of its ear, all over Leo.

"Just a few kinks to work out," Leo said.

"But how did you survive ... ?" Nyssa was still staring at the creature in awe. "I mean, the fire breath ..."

"I'm quick," Leo said. "And lucky. Now, am I on this quest, or what?"

Jason scratched his head. "You named him Festus? You know that in Latin, 'festus' means 'happy'? You want us to ride off to save the world on Happy the Dragon?"

The dragon twitched and shuddered and flapped his wings.

"That's a yes, bro!" Leo said. "Now, um, I'd really suggest we get going, guys. I already picked up some supplies in the—um, in the woods. And all these people with weapons are making Festus nervous."

Jason frowned. "But we haven't planned anything yet. We can't just—"

"Go," Annabeth said. She was the only one who didn't look nervous at all. Her expression was sad and wistful, like this reminded her of better times. "Jason, you've only got three days until the solstice now, and you should never keep a nervous dragon waiting. This is certainly a good omen. Go!"

Jason nodded. Then he smiled at Piper. "You ready, partner?"

Piper looked at the bronze dragon wings shining against the sky, and those talons that could've shredded her to pieces.

"You bet," she said.

Flying on the dragon was the most amazing experience ever, Piper thought.

Up high, the air was freezing cold; but the dragon's metal hide generated so much heat, it was like they were flying in a protective bubble. Talk about seat warmers! And the grooves in the dragon's back were designed like high-tech saddles, so they weren't uncomfortable at all. Leo showed them how to hook their feet in the chinks of the armor, like in stirrups, and use the leather safety harnesses cleverly concealed under the exterior plating. They sat single file: Leo in front, then Piper, then Jason, and Piper was very aware of Jason right behind her. She wished he would hold on to her, maybe wrap his arms around her waist; but sadly, he didn't.

Leo used the reins to steer the dragon into the sky like he'd been doing it all his life. The metal wings worked perfectly, and soon the coast of Long Island was just a hazy line behind them. They shot over Connecticut and climbed into the gray winter clouds.

Leo grinned back at them. "Cool, right?"

"What if we get spotted?" Piper asked.

"The Mist," Jason said. "It keeps mortals from seeing magic things. If they spot us, they'll probably mistake us for a small plane or something."

Piper glanced over her shoulder. "You sure about that?"

"No," he admitted. Then Piper saw he was clutching a photo in his hand—a picture of a girl with dark hair.

She gave Jason a quizzical look, but he blushed and put the photo in his pocket. "We're making good time. Probably get there by tonight."

Piper wondered who the girl in the picture was, but she didn't want to ask; and if Jason didn't volunteer the information, that wasn't a good sign. Had he remembered something about his life before? Was that a photo of his real girlfriend?

Stop it, she thought. You'll just torture yourself.

She asked a safer question. "Where are we heading?"

"To find the god of the North Wind," Jason said. "And chase some storm spirits."

LEO

LEO WAS TOTALLY BUZZING.

The expression on everyone's faces when he flew the dragon into camp? Priceless! He thought his cabinmates were going to bust a lug nut.

Festus had been awesome too. He hadn't blowtorched a single cabin or eaten any satyrs, even if he did dribble a little oil from his ear. Okay, a *lot* of oil. Leo could work on that later.

So maybe Leo didn't seize the chance to tell everybody about Bunker 9 or the flying boat design. He needed some time to think about all that. He could tell them when he came back.

If I come back, part of him thought.

Nah, he'd come back. He'd scored a sweet magic tool belt from the bunker, plus a lot of cool supplies now safely stowed in his backpack. Besides, he had a fire-breathing, only slightly leaky dragon on his side. What could go wrong?

Well, the control disk could bust, the bad part of him suggested. Festus could eat you.

Okay, so the dragon wasn't *quite* as fixed as Leo might've let on. He'd worked all night attaching those wings, but he hadn't found an extra dragon brain anywhere in the bunker. Hey, they were under a time limit! Three days until the solstice. They had to get going. Besides, Leo had cleaned the disk pretty well. Most of the circuits were still good. It would just have to hold together.

His bad side started to think, *Yeah, but what if—*

"Shut up, me," Leo said aloud.

"What?" Piper asked.

"Nothing," he said. "Long night. I think I'm hallucinating. It's cool."

Sitting in front, Leo couldn't see their faces, but he assumed from their silence that his friends were not pleased to have a sleepless, hallucinating dragon driver.

"Just joking." Leo decided it might be good to change the subject. "So what's the plan, bro? You said something about catching wind, or breaking wind, or something?"

As they flew over New England, Jason laid out the game plan: First, find

some guy named Boreas and grill him for information—

“His name is *Boreas*?” Leo had to ask. “What is he, the God of Boring?”

Second, Jason continued, they had to find those *venti* that had attacked them at the Grand Canyon—

“Can we just call them storm spirits?” Leo asked. “*Venti* makes them sound like evil espresso drinks.”

And third, Jason finished, they had to find out who the storm spirits worked for, so they could find Hera and free her.

“So you want to look for Dylan, the nasty storm dude, *on purpose*,” Leo said. “The guy who threw me off the skywalk and sucked Coach Hedge into the clouds.”

“That’s about it,” Jason said. “Well ... there may be a wolf involved, too. But I think she’s friendly. She probably won’t eat us, unless we show weakness.”

Jason told them about his dream—the big nasty mother wolf and a burned-out house with stone spires growing out of the swimming pool.

“Uh-huh,” Leo said. “But you don’t know where this place is.”

“Nope,” Jason admitted.

“There’s also giants,” Piper added. “The prophecy said *the giants’ revenge*.”

“Hold on,” Leo said. “Giants—like more than one? Why can’t it be just one giant who wants revenge?”

“I don’t think so,” Piper said. “I remember in some of the old Greek stories, there was something about an army of giants.”

“Great,” Leo muttered. “Of course, with our luck, it’s an army. So you know anything else about these giants? Didn’t you do a bunch of myth research for that movie with your dad?”

“Your dad’s an actor?” Jason asked.

Leo laughed. “I keep forgetting about your amnesia. Heh. Forgetting about amnesia. That’s funny. But yeah, her dad’s Tristan McLean.”

“Uh—Sorry, what was he in?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Piper said quickly. “The giants—well, there were lots of giants in Greek mythology. But if I’m thinking of the right ones, they were bad news. Huge, almost impossible to kill. They could throw mountains and stuff. I think they were related to the Titans. They rose from the earth after Kronos lost the war—I mean the *first* Titan war, thousands of years ago—and they tried to destroy Olympus. If we’re talking about the same giants—”

“Chiron said it was happening again,” Jason remembered. “The last chapter. That’s what he meant. No wonder he didn’t want us to know all the

details.”

Leo whistled. “So ... giants who can throw mountains. Friendly wolves that will eat us if we show weakness. Evil espresso drinks. Gotcha. Maybe this isn’t the time to bring up my psycho babysitter.”

“Is that another joke?” Piper asked.

Leo told them about Tía Callida, who was really Hera, and how she’d appeared to him at camp. He didn’t tell them about his fire abilities. That was still a touchy subject, especially after Nyssa had told him fire demigods tended to destroy cities and stuff. Besides, then Leo would have to get into how he’d caused his mom’s death, and ... No. He wasn’t ready to go there. He did manage to tell about the night she died, not mentioning the fire, just saying the machine shop collapsed. It was easier without having to look at his friends, just keeping his eyes straight ahead as they flew.

And he told them about the strange woman in earthen robes who seemed to be asleep, and seemed to know the future.

Leo estimated the whole state of Massachusetts passed below them before his friends spoke.

“That’s ... disturbing,” Piper said.

“’Bout sums it up,” Leo agreed. “Thing is, everybody says don’t trust Hera. She hates demigods. And the prophecy said we’d cause death if we unleash her rage. So I’m wondering ... why are we doing this?”

“She chose us,” Jason said. “All three of us. We’re the first of the seven who have to gather for the Great Prophecy. This quest is the beginning of something much bigger.”

That didn’t make Leo feel any better, but he couldn’t argue with Jason’s point. It *did* feel like this was the start of something huge. He just wished that if there were four more demigods destined to help them, they’d show up quick. Leo didn’t want to hog all the terrifying life-threatening adventures.

“Besides,” Jason continued, “helping Hera is the only way I can get back my memory. And that dark spire in my dream seemed to be feeding on Hera’s energy. If that thing unleashes a king of the giants by destroying Hera—”

“Not a good trade-off,” Piper agreed. “At least Hera is on our side—mostly. Losing her would throw the gods into chaos. She’s the main one who keeps peace in the family. And a war with the giants could be even more destructive than the Titan War.”

Jason nodded. “Chiron also talked about worse forces stirring on the solstice, with it being a good time for dark magic, and all—something that could awaken if Hera were sacrificed on that day. And this mistress who’s controlling the storm spirits, the one who wants to kill all the demigods—”

“Might be that weird sleeping lady,” Leo finished. “Dirt Woman fully awake? Not something I want to see.”

“But who is she?” Jason asked. “And what does she have to do with giants?”

Good questions, but none of them had answers. They flew in silence while Leo wondered if he’d done the right thing, sharing so much. He’d never told anyone about that night at the warehouse. Even if he hadn’t give them the whole story, it still felt strange, like he’d opened up his chest and taken out all the gears that made him tick. His body was shaking, and not from the cold. He hoped Piper, sitting behind him, couldn’t tell.

The forge and dove shall break the cage. Wasn’t that the prophecy line? That meant Piper and he would have to figure out how to break into that magic rock prison, assuming they could find it. Then they’d unleash Hera’s rage, causing a lot of death. Well, that sounded fun! Leo had seen Tía Callida in action; she liked knives, snakes, and putting babies in roaring fires. Yeah, definitely let’s unleash her rage. Great idea.

Festus kept flying. The wind got colder, and below them snowy forests seemed to go on forever. Leo didn’t know exactly where Quebec was. He’d told Festus to take them to the palace of Boreas, and Festus kept going north. Hopefully, the dragon knew the way, and they wouldn’t end up at the North Pole.

“Why don’t you get some sleep?” Piper said in his ear. “You were up all night.”

Leo wanted to protest, but the word *sleep* sounded really good. “You won’t let me fall off?”

Piper patted his shoulder. “Trust me, Valdez. Beautiful people never lie.”

“Right,” he muttered. He leaned forward against the warm bronze of the dragon’s neck, and closed his eyes.

LEO

IT SEEMED HE SLEPT ONLY FOR SECONDS, but when Piper shook him awake, the daylight was fading.

“We’re here,” she said.

Leo rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. Below them, a city sat on a cliff overlooking a river. The plains around it were dusted with snow, but the city itself glowed warmly in the winter sunset. Buildings crowded together inside high walls like a medieval town, way older than any place Leo had seen before. In the center was an actual castle—at least Leo assumed it was a castle—with massive red brick walls and a square tower with a peaked, green gabled roof.

“Tell me that’s Quebec and not Santa’s workshop,” Leo said.

“Yeah, Quebec City,” Piper confirmed. “One of the oldest cities in North America. Founded around sixteen hundred or so?”

Leo raised an eyebrow. “Your dad do a movie about that too?”

She made a face at him, which Leo was used to, but it didn’t quite work with her new glamorous makeup. “I *read* sometimes, okay? Just because Aphrodite claimed me, doesn’t mean I have to be an airhead.”

“Feisty!” Leo said. “So you know so much, what’s that castle?”

“A hotel, I think.”

Leo laughed. “No way.”

But as they got closer, Leo saw she was right. The grand entrance was bustling with doormen, valets, and porters taking bags. Sleek black luxury cars idled in the drive. People in elegant suits and winter cloaks hurried to get out of the cold.

“The North Wind is staying in a hotel?” Leo said. “That can’t be—”

“Heads up, guys,” Jason interrupted. “We got company!”

Leo looked below and saw what Jason meant. Rising from the top of the tower were two winged figures—angry angels, with nasty-looking swords.

Festus didn’t like the angel guys. He swooped to a halt in midair, wings beating and talons bared, and made a rumbling sound in his throat that Leo recognized. He was getting ready to blow fire.

“Steady, boy,” Leo muttered. Something told him the angels would not take kindly to getting torched.

“I don’t like this,” Jason said. “They look like storm spirits.”

At first Leo thought he was right, but as the angels got closer, he could see they were much more solid than *venti*. They looked like regular teenagers except for their icy white hair and feathery purple wings. Their bronze swords were jagged, like icicles. Their faces looked similar enough that they might’ve been brothers, but they definitely weren’t twins.

One was the size of an ox, with a bright red hockey jersey, baggy sweatpants, and black leather cleats. The guy clearly had been in too many fights, because both his eyes were black, and when he bared his teeth, several of them were missing.

The other guy looked like he’d just stepped off one of Leo’s mom’s 1980s rock album covers—Journey, maybe, or Hall & Oates, or something even lamer. His ice-white hair was long and feathered into a mullet. He wore pointy-toed leather shoes, designer pants that were way too tight, and a god-awful silk shirt with the top three buttons open. Maybe he thought he looked like a groovy love god, but the guy couldn’t have weighed more than ninety pounds, and he had a bad case of acne.

The angels pulled up in front of the dragon and hovered there, swords at the ready.

The hockey ox grunted. “No clearance.”

“’Scuse me?” Leo said.

“You have no flight plan on file,” explained the groovy love god. On top of his other problems, he had a French accent so bad Leo was sure it was fake. “This is restricted airspace.”

“Destroy them?” The ox showed off his gap-toothed grin.

The dragon began to hiss steam, ready to defend them. Jason summoned his golden sword, but Leo cried, “Hold on!”

Let’s have some manners here, boys. Can I at least find out who has the honor of destroying me?”

“I am Cal!” the ox grunted. He looked very proud of himself, like he’d taken a long time to memorize that sentence.

“That’s short for Calais,” the love god said. “Sadly, my brother cannot say words with more than two syllables—”

“Pizza! Hockey! Destroy!” Cal offered.

“—which includes his own name,” the love god finished.

“I am Cal,” Cal repeated. “And this is Zethes! My brother!”

“Wow,” Leo said. “That was almost three sentences, man! Way to go.”

Cal grunted, obviously pleased with himself.

“Stupid buffoon,” his brother grumbled. “They make fun of you. But no matter. I am Zethes, which is short for Zethes. And the lady there—” He winked at Piper, but the wink was more like a facial seizure. “She can call me anything she likes. Perhaps she would like to have dinner with a famous demigod before we must destroy you?”

Piper made a sound like gagging on a cough drop. “That’s ... a truly horrifying offer.”

“It is no problem.” Zethes wiggled his eyebrows. “We are a very romantic people, we Boreads.”

“Boreads?” Jason cut in. “Do you mean, like, the sons of Boreas?”

“Ah, so you’ve heard of us!” Zethes looked pleased. “We are our father’s gatekeepers. So you understand, we cannot have unauthorized people flying in his airspace on creaky dragons, scaring the silly mortal peoples.”

He pointed below, and Leo saw that the mortals were starting to take notice. Several were pointing up—not with alarm, yet—more with confusion and annoyance, like the dragon was a traffic helicopter flying too low.

“Which is sadly why, unless this is an emergency landing,” Zethes said, brushing his hair out of his acne-covered face, “we will have to destroy you painfully.”

“Destroy!” Cal agreed, with a little more enthusiasm than Leo thought necessary.

“Wait!” Piper said. “This is an emergency landing.”

“Awww!” Cal looked so disappointed, Leo almost felt sorry for him.

Zethes studied Piper, which of course he’d already been doing. “How does the pretty girl decide this is an emergency, then?”

“We have to see Boreas. It’s totally urgent! Please?” She forced a smile, which Leo figured must’ve been killing her; but she still had that blessing of Aphrodite thing going on, and she looked great. Something about her voice, too—Leo found himself believing every word. Jason was nodding, looking absolutely convinced.

Zethes picked at his silk shirt, probably making sure it was still open wide enough. “Well ... I hate to disappoint a lovely lady, but you see, my sister, she would have an avalanche if we allowed you—”

“And our dragon is malfunctioning!” Piper added. “It could crash any minute!”

Festus shuddered helpfully, then turned his head and spilled gunk out of his ear, splattering a black Mercedes in the parking lot below.

“No destroy?” Cal whimpered.

Zethes pondered the problem. Then he gave Piper another spasmodic wink. “Well, you are pretty. I mean, you’re *right*. A malfunctioning dragon—this could be an emergency.”

“Destroy them later?” Cal offered, which was probably as close to friendly as he ever got.

“It will take some explaining,” Zethes decided. “Father has not been kind to visitors lately. But, yes. Come, faulty dragon people. Follow us.”

The Boreads sheathed their swords and pulled smaller weapons from their belts—or at least Leo thought they were weapons. Then the Boreads switched them on, and Leo realized they were flashlights with orange cones, like the ones traffic controller guys use on a runway. Cal and Zethes turned and swooped toward the hotel’s tower.

Leo turned to his friends. “I love these guys. Follow them?”

Jason and Piper didn’t look eager.

“I guess,” Jason decided. “We’re here now. But I wonder why Boreas hasn’t been kind to visitors.”

“Pfft, he just hasn’t met us.” Leo whistled. “Festus, after those flashlights!”

As they got closer, Leo worried they’d crash into the tower. The Boreads made right for the green gabled peak and didn’t slow down. Then a section of the slanted roof slid open, revealing an entrance easily wide enough for Festus. The top and bottom were lined with icicles like jagged teeth.

“This cannot be good,” Jason muttered, but Leo spurred the dragon downward, and they swooped in after the Boreads.

They landed in what must have been the penthouse suite; but the place had been hit by a flash freeze. The entry hall had vaulted ceilings forty feet high, huge draped windows, and lush oriental carpets. A staircase at the back of the room led up to another equally massive hall, and more corridors branched off to the left and right. But the ice made the room’s beauty a little frightening. When Leo slid off the dragon, the carpet crunched under his feet. A fine layer of frost covered the furniture. The curtains didn’t budge because they were frozen solid, and the ice-coated windows let in weird watery light from the sunset. Even the ceiling was furry with icicles. As for the stairs, Leo was sure he’d slip and break his neck if he tried to climb them.

“Guys,” Leo said, “fix the thermostat in here, and I would totally move in.”

“Not me.” Jason looked uneasily at the staircase. “Something feels wrong. Something up there ...”

Festus shuddered and snorted flames. Frost started to form on his scales.

“No, no, no.” Zethes marched over, though how he could walk in those

pointy leather shoes, Leo had no idea. “The dragon must be deactivated. We can’t have fire in here. The heat ruins my hair.”

Festus growled and spun his drill-bit teeth.

“S’okay, boy.” Leo turned to Zethes. “The dragon’s a little touchy about the whole *deactivation* concept. But I’ve got a better solution.”

“Destroy?” Cal suggested.

“No, man. You gotta stop with the *destroy* talk. Just wait.”

“Leo,” Piper said nervously, “what are you—”

“Watch and learn, beauty queen. When I was repairing Festus last night, I found all kinds of buttons. Some, you do *not* want to know what they do. But others ... Ah, here we go.”

Leo hooked his fingers behind the dragon’s left foreleg. He pulled a switch, and the dragon shuddered from head to toe. Everyone backed away as Festus folded like origami. His bronze plating stacked together. His neck and tail contracted into his body. His wings collapsed and his trunk compacted until he was a rectangular metal wedge the size of a suitcase.

Leo tried to lift it, but the thing weighed about six billion pounds. “Um ... yeah. Hold on. I think—aha.”

He pushed another button. A handle flipped up on the top, and wheels clicked out on the bottom.

“Ta-da!” he announced. “The world’s heaviest carry-on bag!”

“That’s impossible,” Jason said. “Something that big couldn’t—”

“Stop!” Zethes ordered. He and Cal both drew their swords and glared at Leo.

Leo raised his hands. “Okay ... what’d I do? Stay calm, guys. If it bothers you that much, I don’t *have* to take the dragon as carry-on—”

“Who are you?” Zethes shoved the point of his sword against Leo’s chest. “A child of the South Wind, spying on us?”

“What? No!” Leo said. “Son of Hephaestus. Friendly blacksmith, no harm to anyone!”

Cal growled. He put his face up to Leo’s, and he definitely wasn’t any prettier at point-blank, with his bruised eyes and bashed-in mouth. “Smell fire,” he said. “Fire is bad.”

“Oh.” Leo’s heart raced. “Yeah, well ... my clothes are kind of singed, and I’ve been working with oil, and—”

“No!” Zethes pushed Leo back at sword point. “We can *smell* fire, demigod. We assumed it was from the creaky dragon, but now the dragon is a suitcase. And I still smell fire ... on *you*.”

If it hadn’t been like three degrees in the penthouse, Leo would’ve started

sweating. “Hey ... look ... I don’t know—” He glanced at his friends desperately. “Guys, a little help?”

Jason already had his gold coin in his hand. He stepped forward, his eyes on Zethes. “Look, there’s been a mistake. Leo isn’t a fire guy. Tell them, Leo. Tell them you’re not a fire guy.”

“Um ...”

“Zethes?” Piper tried her dazzling smile again, though she looked a little too nervous and cold to pull it off. “We’re all friends here. Put down your swords and let’s talk.”

“The girl is pretty,” Zethes admitted, “and of course she cannot help being attracted to my amazingness; but sadly, I cannot romance her at this time.” He poked his sword point farther into Leo’s chest, and Leo could feel the frost spreading across his shirt, turning his skin numb.

He wished he could reactivate Festus. He needed some backup. But it would’ve taken several minutes, even if he could reach the button, with two purple-winged crazy guys in his path.

“Destroy him now?” Cal asked his brother.

Zethes nodded. “Sadly, I think—”

“No,” Jason insisted. He sounded calm enough, but Leo figured he was about two seconds away from flipping that coin and going into full gladiator mode. “Leo’s just a son of Hephaestus. He’s no threat. Piper here is a daughter of Aphrodite. I’m the son of Zeus. We’re on a peaceful ...”

Jason’s voice faltered, because both Boreads had suddenly turned on him.

“What did you say?” Zethes demanded. “You are the son of Zeus?”

“Um ... yeah,” Jason said. “That’s a good thing, right? My name is Jason.”

Cal looked so surprised, he almost dropped his sword. “Can’t be Jason,” he said. “Doesn’t look the same.”

Zethes stepped forward and squinted at Jason’s face. “No, he is not *our* Jason. Our Jason was more stylish. Not as much as me—but stylish. Besides, our Jason died millennia ago.”

“Wait,” Jason said. “*Your* Jason ... you mean the original Jason? The Golden Fleece guy?”

“Of course,” Zethes said. “We were his crewmates aboard his ship, the *Argo*, in the old times, when we were mortal demigods. Then we accepted immortality to serve our father, so I could look this good for all time, and my silly brother could enjoy pizza and hockey.”

“Hockey!” Cal agreed.

“But Jason—*our* Jason—he died a mortal death,” Zethes said. “You can’t be him.”

“I’m not,” Jason agreed.

“So, destroy?” Cal asked. Clearly the conversation was giving his two brain cells a serious workout.

“No,” Zethes said regretfully. “If he is a son of Zeus, he could be the one we’ve been watching for.”

“Watching for?” Leo asked. “You mean like in a good way: you’ll shower him with fabulous prizes? Or watching for like in a *bad* way: he’s in trouble?”

A girl’s voice said, “That depends on my father’s will.”

Leo looked up the staircase. His heart nearly stopped. At the top stood a girl in a white silk dress. Her skin was unnaturally pale, the color of snow, but her hair was a lush mane of black, and her eyes were coffee brown. She focused on Leo with no expression, no smile, no friendliness. But it didn’t matter. Leo was in love. She was the most dazzling girl he’d ever seen.

Then she looked at Jason and Piper, and seemed to understand the situation immediately.

“Father will want to see the one called Jason,” the girl said.

“Then it *is* him?” Zethes asked excitedly.

“We’ll see,” the girl said. “Zethes, bring our guests.”

Leo grabbed the handle of his bronze dragon suitcase. He wasn’t sure how he’d lug it up the stairs, but he *had* to get next to that girl and ask her some important questions—like her e-mail address and phone number.

Before he could take a step, she froze him with a look. Not *literally* froze, but she might as well have.

“Not you, Leo Valdez,” she said.

In the back of his mind, Leo wondered how she knew his name; but mostly he was just concentrating on how crushed he felt.

“Why not?” He probably sounded like a whiny kindergartner, but he couldn’t help it.

“You cannot be in the presence of my father,” the girl said. “Fire and ice—it would not be wise.”

“We’re going together,” Jason insisted, putting his hand on Leo’s shoulder, “or not at all.”

The girl tilted her head, like she wasn’t used to people refusing her orders. “He will not be harmed, Jason Grace, unless you make trouble. Calais, keep Leo Valdez here. Guard him, but do not kill him.”

Cal pouted. “Just a little?”

“No,” the girl insisted. “And take care of his interesting suitcase, until Father passes judgment.”

Jason and Piper looked at Leo, their expressions asking him a silent

question: *How do you want to play this?*

Leo felt a surge of gratitude. They were ready to fight for him. They wouldn't leave him alone with the hockey ox. Part of him wanted to go for it, bust out his new tool belt and see what he could do, maybe even summon a fireball or two and warm this place up. But the Boread guys scared him. And that gorgeous girl scared him more, even if he still wanted her number.

"It's fine, guys," he said. "No sense causing trouble if we don't have to. You go ahead."

"Listen to your friend," the pale girl said. "Leo Valdez will be perfectly safe. I wish I could say the same for you, son of Zeus. Now come, King Boreas is waiting."

JASON

JASON DIDN'T WANT TO LEAVE LEO, but he was starting to think that hanging out with Cal the hockey jock might be the *least* dangerous option in this place.

As they climbed the icy staircase, Zethes stayed behind them, his blade drawn. The guy might've looked like a disco-era reject, but there was nothing funny about his sword. Jason figured one hit from that thing would probably turn him into a Popsicle.

Then there was the ice princess. Every once in a while she'd turn and give Jason a smile, but there was no warmth in her expression. She regarded Jason like he was an especially interesting science specimen—one she couldn't wait to dissect.

If these were Boreas's kids, Jason wasn't sure he wanted to meet Daddy. Annabeth had told him Boreas was the friendliest of the wind gods. Apparently that meant he didn't kill heroes quite as fast as the others did.

Jason worried that he'd led his friends into a trap. If things went bad, he wasn't sure he could get them out alive. Without thinking about it, he took Piper's hand for reassurance.

She raised her eyebrows, but she didn't let go.

"It'll be fine," she promised. "Just a talk, right?"

At the top of the stairs, the ice princess looked back and noticed them holding hands. Her smile faded. Suddenly Jason's hand in Piper's turned ice cold—*burning* cold. He let go, and his fingers were smoking with frost. So were Piper's.

"Warmth is not a good idea here," the princess advised, "especially when *I* am your best chance of staying alive. Please, this way."

Piper gave him a nervous frown like, *What was that about?*

Jason didn't have an answer. Zethes poked him in the back with his icicle sword, and they followed the princess down a massive hallway decked in frosty tapestries.

Freezing winds blew back and forth, and Jason's thoughts moved almost as fast. He'd had a lot of time to think while they rode the dragon north, but he felt as confused as ever.

Thalia's picture was still in his pocket, though he didn't need to look at it anymore. Her image had burned itself into his mind. It was bad enough not remembering his past, but to know he had a sister out there somewhere who might have answers and to have no way of finding her—that just drove him up the wall.

In the picture, Thalia looked nothing like him. They both had blue eyes, but that was it. Her hair was black. Her complexion was more Mediterranean. Her facial features were sharper—like a hawk's.

Still, Thalia looked so familiar. Hera had left him just enough memory that he could be certain Thalia was his sister. But Annabeth had acted completely surprised when he'd told her, like she'd never heard of Thalia's having a brother. Did Thalia even know about him? How had they been separated?

Hera had taken those memories. She'd stolen everything from Jason's past, plopped him into a new life, and now she expected him to save her from some prison just so he could get back what she'd taken. It made Jason so angry, he wanted to walk away, let Hera rot in that cage: but he couldn't. He was hooked. He had to know more, and that made him even more resentful.

"Hey." Piper touched his arm. "You still with me?"

"Yeah ... yeah, sorry."

He was grateful for Piper. He needed a friend, and he was glad she'd started losing the Aphrodite blessing. The makeup was fading. Her hair was slowly going back to its old choppy style with the little braids down the sides. It made her look more real, and as far as Jason was concerned, more beautiful.

He was sure now that they'd never known each other before the Grand Canyon. Their relationship was just a trick of the Mist in Piper's mind. But the longer he spent with her, the more he wished it had been real.

Stop that, he told himself. It wasn't fair to Piper, thinking that way. Jason had no idea what was waiting for him back in his old life—or *who* might be waiting. But he was pretty sure his past wouldn't mix with Camp Half-Blood. After this quest, who knew what would happen? Assuming they even survived.

At the end of the hallway they found themselves in front of a set of oaken doors carved with a map of the world. In each corner was a man's bearded face, blowing wind. Jason was pretty sure he'd seen maps like this before. But in this version, all the wind guys were Winter, blowing ice and snow from every corner of the world.

The princess turned. Her brown eyes glittered, and Jason felt like he was a Christmas present she was hoping to open.

"This is the throne room," she said. "Be on your best behavior, Jason Grace. My father can be ... chilly. I will translate for you, and try to encourage

him to hear you out. I do hope he spares you. We could have such fun.”

Jason guessed this girl’s definition of fun was not the same as his.

“Um, okay,” he managed. “But really, we’re just here for a little talk. We’ll be leaving right afterward.”

The girl smiled. “I love heroes. So blissfully ignorant.”

Piper rested her hand on her dagger. “Well, how about you enlighten us? You say you’re going to translate for us, and we don’t even know who you are. What’s your name?”

The girl sniffed with distaste. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised you don’t recognize me. Even in the ancient times the Greeks did not know me well. Their island homes were too warm, too far from my domain. I am Khione, daughter of Boreas, goddess of snow.”

She stirred the air with her finger, and a miniature blizzard swirled around her—big, fluffy flakes as soft as cotton.

“Now, come,” Khione said. The oaken doors blew open, and cold blue light spilled out of the room. “Hopefully you will survive your little talk.”

JASON

IF THE ENTRY HALL HAD BEEN COLD, the throne room was like a meat locker.

Mist hung in the air. Jason shivered, and his breath steamed. Along the walls, purple tapestries showed scenes of snowy forests, barren mountains, and glaciers. High above, ribbons of colored light—the aurora borealis—pulsed along the ceiling. A layer of snow covered the floor, so Jason had to step carefully. All around the room stood life-size ice sculpture warriors—some in Greek armor, some medieval, some in modern camouflage—all frozen in various attack positions, swords raised, guns locked and loaded.

At least Jason *thought* they were sculptures. Then he tried to step between two Greek spearmen, and they moved with surprising speed, their joints cracking and spraying ice crystals as they crossed their javelins to block Jason's path.

From the far end of the hall, a man's voice rang out in a language that sounded like French. The room was so long and misty, Jason couldn't see the other end; but whatever the man said, the ice guards uncrossed their javelins.

"It's fine," Khione said. "My father has ordered them not to kill you just yet."

"Super," Jason said.

Zethes prodded him in the back with his sword. "Keep moving, Jason Junior."

"Please don't call me that."

"My father is not a patient man," Zethes warned, "and the beautiful Piper, sadly, is losing her magic hairdo very fast. Later, perhaps, I can lend her something from my wide assortment of hair products."

"Thanks," Piper grumbled.

They kept walking, and the mist parted to reveal a man on an ice throne. He was sturdily built, dressed in a stylish white suit that seemed woven from snow, with dark purple wings that spread out to either side. His long hair and shaggy beard were encrusted with icicles, so Jason couldn't tell if his hair was gray or just white with frost. His arched eyebrows made him look angry, but his eyes twinkled more warmly than his daughter's—as if he might have a sense of humor buried somewhere under that permafrost. Jason hoped so.

“*Bienvenu,*” the king said. “*Je suis Boreas le Roi. Et vous?*”

Khione the snow goddess was about to speak, but Piper stepped forward and curtsied.

“*Votre Majesté,*” she said, “*je suis Piper McLean. Et c’est Jason, fils de Zeus.*”

The king smiled with pleasant surprise. “*Vous parlez français? Très bien!*”

“Piper, you speak French?” Jason asked. Piper frowned. “No. Why?” “You just spoke French.” Piper blinked. “I did?” The king said something else, and Piper nodded. “*Oui,*

Votre Majesté.”

The king laughed and clapped his hands, obviously delighted. He said a few more sentences then swept his hand toward his daughter as if shooing her away.

Khione looked miffed. “The king says—”

“He says I’m a daughter of Aphrodite,” Piper interrupted, “so naturally I can speak French, which is the language of love. I had no idea. His Majesty says Khione won’t have to translate now.”

Behind them, Zethes snorted, and Khione shot him a murderous look. She bowed stiffly to her father and took a step back.

The king sized up Jason, and Jason decided it would be a good idea to bow. “Your Majesty, I’m Jason Grace. Thank you for, um, not killing us. May I ask ... why does a Greek god speak French?”

Piper had another exchange with the king.

“He speaks the language of his host country,” Piper translated. “He says all gods do this. Most Greek gods speak English, as they now reside in the United States, but Boreas was never welcomed in their realm. His domain was always far to the north. These days he likes Quebec, so he speaks French.”

The king said something else, and Piper turned pale.

“The king says ...” She faltered. “He says—”

“Oh, allow me,” Khione said. “My father says he has orders to kill you. Did I not mention that earlier?”

Jason tensed. The king was still smiling amiably, like he’d just delivered great news.

“Kill us?” Jason said. “Why?”

“Because,” the king said, in heavily accented English, “my lord Aeolus has commanded it.”

Boreas rose. He stepped down from his throne and furled his wings against his back. As he approached, Khione and Zethes bowed. Jason and Piper followed their example.

“I shall deign to speak your language,” Boreas said, “as Piper McLean has

honored me in mine. *Toujours*, I have had a fondness for the children of Aphrodite. As for you, Jason Grace, my master Aeolus would not expect me to kill a son of Lord Zeus ... without first hearing you out.”

Jason’s gold coin seemed to grow heavy in his pocket. If he were forced to fight, he didn’t like his chances. Two seconds at least to summon his blade. Then he’d be facing a god, two of his children, and an army of freeze-dried warriors.

“Aeolus is the master of the winds, right?” Jason asked. “Why would he want us dead?”

“You are demigods,” Boreas said, as if this explained everything. “Aeolus’s job is to contain the winds, and demigods have always caused him many headaches. They ask him for favors. They unleash winds and cause chaos. But the final insult was the battle with Typhon last summer...”

Boreas waved his hand, and a sheet of ice like a flat-screen TV appeared in the air. Images of a battle flickered across the surface—a giant wrapped in storm clouds, wading across a river toward the Manhattan skyline. Tiny, glowing figures—the gods, Jason guessed—swarmed around him like angry wasps, pounding the monster with lightning and fire. Finally the river erupted in a massive whirlpool, and the smoky form sank beneath the waves and disappeared.

“The storm giant, Typhon,” Boreas explained. “The first time the gods defeated him, eons ago, he did not die quietly. His death released a host of storm spirits—wild winds that answered to no one. It was Aeolus’s job to track them all down and imprison them in his fortress. The other gods—they did not help. They did not even apologize for the inconvenience. It took Aeolus centuries to track down all the storm spirits, and naturally this irritated him. Then, last summer, Typhon was defeated again—”

“And his death released another wave of *venti*,” Jason guessed. “Which made Aeolus even angrier.”

“*C’est vrai*,” Boreas agreed.

“But, Your Majesty,” Piper said, “the gods had no choice but to battle Typhon. He was going to destroy Olympus! Besides, why punish demigods for that?”

The king shrugged. “Aeolus cannot take out his anger on the gods. They are his bosses, and very powerful. So he gets even with the demigods who helped them in the war. He issued orders to us: demigods who come to us for aid are no longer to be tolerated. We are to crush your little mortal faces.”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

“That sounds ... extreme,” Jason ventured. “But you’re not going to crush our faces yet, right? You’re going to listen to us first, ’cause once you hear about

our quest—”

“Yes, yes,” the king agreed. “You see, Aeolus also said that a son of Zeus might seek my aid, and if this happened, I should listen to you before destroying you, as you might—how did he put it?—make all our lives very interesting. I am only obligated to *listen*, however. After that, I am free to pass judgment as I see fit. But I *will* listen first. Khione wishes this also. It may be that we will not kill you.”

Jason felt like he could almost breathe again. “Great. Thanks.”

“Do not thank me.” Boreas smiled. “There are many ways you could make our lives interesting. Sometimes we keep demigods for our amusement, as you can see.”

He gestured around the room to the various ice statues.

Piper made a strangled noise. “You mean—they’re all demigods? Frozen demigods? They’re alive?”

“An interesting question,” Boreas conceded, as if it had never occurred to him before. “They do not move unless they are obeying my orders. The rest of the time, they are merely frozen. Unless they were to melt, I suppose, which would be very messy.”

Khione stepped behind Jason and put her cold fingers on his neck. “My father gives me such lovely presents,” she murmured in his ear. “Join our court. Perhaps I’ll let your friends go.”

“What?” Zethes broke in. “If Khione gets this one, then I deserve the girl. Khione always gets more presents!”

“Now, children,” Boreas said sternly. “Our guests will think you are spoiled! Besides, you moved too fast. We have not even heard the demigod’s story yet. Then we will decide what to do with them. Please, Jason Grace, entertain us.”

Jason felt his brain shutting down. He didn’t look at Piper for fear he’d completely lose it. He’d gotten them into this, and now they were going die—or worse, they’d be amusements for Boreas’s children and end up frozen forever in this throne room, slowly corroding from freezer burn.

Khione purred and stroked his neck. Jason didn’t plan it, but electricity sparked along his skin. There was loud *pop*, and Khione flew backward, skidding across the floor.

Zethes laughed. “That is good! I’m glad you did that, even though I have to kill you now.”

For a moment, Khione was too stunned to react. Then the air around her began to swirl with a micro-blizzard. “You dare—”

“Stop,” Jason ordered, with as much force as he could muster. “You’re not

going to kill us. And you're not going to keep us. We're on a quest for the queen of the gods herself, so unless you want Hera busting down your doors, you're going to let us go."

He sounded a lot more confident than he felt, but it got their attention. Khione's blizzard swirled to a stop. Zethes lowered his sword. They both looked uncertainly at their father.

"Hmm," Boreas said. His eyes twinkled, but Jason couldn't tell if it was with anger or amusement. "A son of Zeus, favored by Hera? This is definitely a first. Tell us your story."

Jason would've botched it right there. He hadn't been expecting to get the chance to talk, and now that he could, his voice abandoned him.

Piper saved him. "Your Majesty." She curtsied again with incredible poise, considering her life was on the line. She told Boreas the whole story, from the Grand Canyon to the prophecy, much better and faster than Jason could have.

"All we ask for is guidance," Piper concluded. "These storm spirits attacked us, and they're working for some evil mistress. If we find them, maybe we can find Hera."

The king stroked the icicles in his beard. Out the windows, night had fallen, and the only light came from the aurora borealis overhead, washing everything in red and blue.

"I know of these storm spirits," Boreas said. "I know where they are kept, and of the prisoner they took."

"You mean Coach Hedge?" Jason asked. "He's alive?"

Boreas waved aside the question. "For now. But the one who controls these storm winds ... It would be madness to oppose her. You would be better staying here as frozen statues."

"Hera's in trouble," Jason said. "In three days she's going to be—I don't know—consumed, destroyed, something. And a giant is going to rise."

"Yes," Boreas agreed. Was it Jason's imagination, or did he shoot Khione an angry look? "Many horrible things are waking. Even my children do not tell me all the news they should. The Great Stirring of monsters that began with Kronos—your father Zeus foolishly believed it would end when the Titans were defeated. But just as it was before, so it is now. The final battle is yet to come, and the one who will wake is more terrible than any Titan. Storm spirits—these are only beginning. The earth has many more horrors to yield up. When monsters no longer stay in Tartarus, and souls are no longer confined to Hades ... Olympus has good reason to fear."

Jason wasn't sure what all this meant, but he didn't like the way Khione was smiling—like *this* was her definition of fun.

“So you’ll help us?” Jason asked the king.

Boreas scowled. “I did not say that.”

“Please, Your Majesty,” Piper said.

Everyone’s eyes turned toward her. She had to be scared out of her mind, but she looked beautiful and confident—and it had nothing to do with the blessing of Aphrodite. She looked herself again, in day-old traveling clothes with choppy hair and no makeup. But she almost glowed with warmth in that cold throne room. “If you tell us where the storm spirits are, we can capture them and bring them to Aeolus. You’d look good in front of your boss. Aeolus might pardon us and the other demigods. We could even rescue Gleeson Hedge. Everyone wins.”

“She’s pretty,” Zethes mumbled. “I mean, she’s right.”

“Father, don’t listen to her,” Khione said. “She’s a child of Aphrodite. She dares to charmspeak a god? Freeze her now!”

Boreas considered this. Jason slipped his hand in his pocket and got ready to bring out the gold coin. If things went wrong, he’d have to move fast.

The movement caught Boreas’s eye. “What is that on your forearm, demigod?”

Jason hadn’t realized his coat sleeve had gotten pushed up, revealing the edge of his tattoo. Reluctantly, he showed Boreas his marks.

The god’s eyes widened. Khione actually hissed and stepped away.

Then Boreas did something unexpected. He laughed so loudly, an icicle cracked from the ceiling and crashed next to his throne. The god’s form began to flicker. His beard disappeared. He grew taller and thinner, and his clothes changed into a Roman toga, lined with purple. His head was crowned with a frosty laurel wreath, and a gladius—a Roman sword like Jason’s—hung at his side.

“Aquilon,” Jason said, though where he got the god’s Roman name from, he had no idea.

The god inclined his head. “You recognize me better in this form, yes? And yet you said you came from Camp Half-Blood?”

Jason shifted his feet. “Uh ... yes, Your Majesty.”

“And Hera sent you there...” The winter god’s eyes were full of mirth. “I understand now. Oh, she plays a dangerous game. Bold, but dangerous! No wonder Olympus is closed. They must be trembling at the gamble she has taken.”

“Jason,” Piper said nervously, “why did Boreas change shape? The toga, the wreath. What’s going on?”

“It’s his Roman form,” Jason said. “But what’s going on—I don’t know.”

The god laughed. “No, I’m sure you don’t. This should be very interesting to watch.”

“Does that mean you’ll let us go?” Piper asked.

“My dear,” Boreas said, “there is no reason for me to kill you. If Hera’s plan fails, which I think it will, you will tear each other apart. Aeolus will never have to worry about demigods again.”

Jason felt as if Khione’s cold fingers were on his neck again, but it wasn’t her—it was just the feeling that Boreas was right. That sense of wrongness which had bothered Jason since he got to Camp Half-Blood, and Chiron’s comment about his arrival being disastrous—Boreas knew what they meant.

“I don’t suppose you could explain?” Jason asked.

“Oh, perish the thought! It is not for me to interfere in Hera’s plan. No wonder she took your memory.” Boreas chuckled, apparently still having a great time imagining demigods tearing each other apart. “You know, I have a reputation as a helpful wind god. Unlike my brethren, I’ve been known to fall in love with mortals. Why, my sons Zethes and Calais started as demigods—”

“Which explains why they are idiots,” Khione growled.

“Stop it!” Zethes snapped back. “Just because you were born a full goddess —”

“Both of you, freeze,” Boreas ordered. Apparently, that word carried a lot of weight in the household, because the two siblings went absolutely still. “Now, as I was saying, I have a good reputation, but it is rare that Boreas plays an important role in the affairs of gods. I sit here in my palace, at the edge of civilization, and so rarely have amusements. Why, even that fool Notus, the South Wind, gets spring break in Cancún. What do I get? A winter festival with naked Québécois rolling around in the snow!”

“I like the winter festival,” Zethes muttered.

“My point,” Boreas snapped, “is that I now have a chance to be the center. Oh, yes, I will let you go on this quest. You will find your storm spirits in the windy city, of course. Chicago—”

“Father!” Khione protested.

Boreas ignored his daughter. “If you can capture the winds, you may be able to gain safe entrance to the court of Aeolus. If by some miracle you succeed, be sure to tell him you captured the winds on my orders.”

“Okay, sure,” Jason said. “So Chicago is where we’ll find this lady who’s controlling the winds? She’s the one who’s trapped Hera?”

“Ah.” Boreas grinned. “Those are two different questions, son of Jupiter.”

Jupiter, Jason noticed. Before, he called me son of Zeus.

“The one who controls the winds,” Boreas continued, “yes, you will find

her in Chicago. But *she* is only a servant—a servant who is very likely to destroy you. If you succeed against her and take the winds, then you may go to Aeolus. Only he has knowledge of all the winds on the earth. All secrets come to his fortress eventually. If anyone can tell you where Hera is imprisoned, it is Aeolus. As for who you will meet when you finally find Hera’s cage—truly, if I told you that, you would beg me to freeze you.”

“Father,” Khione protested, “you can’t simply let them—”

“I can do what I like,” he said, his voice hardening. “I am still master here, am I not?”

The way Boreas glared at his daughter, it was obvious they had some ongoing argument. Khione’s eyes flashed with anger, but she clenched her teeth. “As you wish, Father.”

“Now go, demigods,” Boreas said, “before I change my mind. Zethes, escort them out safely.”

They all bowed, and the god of the North Wind dissolved into mist.

Back in the entry hall, Cal and Leo were waiting for them. Leo looked cold but unharmed. He’d even gotten cleaned up, and his clothes looked newly washed, like he’d used the hotel’s valet service. Festus the dragon was back in normal form, snorting fire over his scales to keep himself defrosted.

As Khione led them down the stairs, Jason noticed that Leo’s eyes followed her. Leo started combing his hair back with his hands. Uh-oh, Jason thought. He made a mental note to warn Leo about the snow goddess later. She was not someone to get a crush on.

At the bottom step, Khione turned to Piper. “You have fooled my father, girl. But you have not fooled me. We are not done. And you, Jason Grace, I will see you as a statue in the throne room soon enough.”

“Boreas is right,” Jason said. “You’re a spoiled kid. See you around, ice princess.”

Khione’s eyes flared pure white. For once, she seemed at a loss for words. She stormed back up the stairs—literally. Halfway up, she turned into a blizzard and disappeared.

“Be careful,” Zethes warned. “She never forgets an insult.”

Cal grunted in agreement. “Bad sister.”

“She’s the goddess of snow,” Jason said. “What’s she going to do, throw snowballs at us?” But as he said it, Jason had a feeling Khione could do a whole lot worse.

Leo looked devastated. “What happened up there? You made her mad? Is she mad at me too? Guys, that was my prom date!”

“We’ll explain later,” Piper promised, but when she glanced at Jason, he realized she expected *him* to explain.

What *had* happened up there? Jason wasn’t sure. Boreas had turned into Aquilon, his Roman form, as if Jason’s presence caused him to go schizophrenic.

The idea that Jason had been sent to Camp Half-Blood seemed to amuse the god, but Boreas/Aquilon hadn’t let them go out of kindness. Cruel excitement had danced in his eyes, as if he’d just placed a bet on a dogfight.

You will tear each other apart, he’d said with delight. *Aeolus will never have to worry about demigods again.*

Jason looked away from Piper, trying not to show how unnerved he was. “Yeah,” he agreed, “we’ll explain later.”

“Be careful, pretty girl,” Zethes said. “The winds between here and Chicago are bad-tempered. Many other evil things are stirring. I am sorry you will not be staying. You would make a lovely ice statue, in which I could check my reflection.”

“Thanks,” Piper said. “But I’d sooner play hockey with Cal.”

“Hockey?” Cal’s eyes lit up.

“Joking,” Piper said. “And the storm winds aren’t our worst problem, are they?”

“Oh, no,” Zethes agreed. “Something else. Something worse.”

“Worse,” Cal echoed.

“Can you tell me?” Piper gave them a smile.

This time, the charm didn’t work. The purple-winged Boreads shook their heads in unison. The hangar doors opened onto a freezing starry night, and Festus the dragon stomped his feet, anxious to fly.

“Ask Aeolus what is worse,” Zethes said darkly. “He knows. Good luck.”

He almost sounded like he cared what happened to them, even though a few minutes ago he’d wanted to make Piper into an ice sculpture.

Cal patted Leo on the shoulder. “Don’t get destroyed,” he said, which was probably the longest sentence he’d ever attempted. “Next time—hockey. Pizza.”

“Come on, guys.” Jason stared out at the dark. He was anxious to get out of that cold penthouse, but he had a feeling it was the most hospitable place they’d see for a while. “Let’s go to Chicago and try not to get destroyed.”

PIPER

PIPER DIDN'T RELAX UNTIL THE GLOW OF Quebec City faded behind them.

"You were amazing," Jason told her.

The compliment should've made her day. But all she could think about was the trouble ahead. *Evil things are stirring*, Zethes had warned them. She knew that firsthand. The closer they got to the solstice, the less time Piper had to make her decision.

She told Jason in French: "If you knew the truth about me, you wouldn't think I was so amazing."

"What'd you say?" he asked.

"I said I only talked to Boreas. It wasn't so amazing."

She didn't turn to look, but she imagined him smiling.

"Hey," he said, "you saved me from joining Khione's subzero hero collection. I owe you one."

That was definitely the easy part, she thought. There was no way Piper would've let that ice witch keep Jason. What bothered Piper more was the way Boreas had changed form, and why he'd let them go. It had something to do with Jason's past, those tattoos on his arm. Boreas assumed Jason was some sort of Roman, and Romans didn't mix with Greeks. She kept waiting for Jason to offer an explanation, but he clearly didn't want to talk about it.

Until now, Piper had been able to dismiss Jason's feeling that he didn't belong at Camp Half-Blood. Obviously he was a demigod. Of course he belonged. But now ... what if he was something else? What if he really was an enemy? She couldn't stand that idea any more than she could stand Khione.

Leo passed them some sandwiches from his pack. He'd been quiet ever since they'd told him what happened in the throne room. "I still can't believe Khione," he said. "She looked so nice."

"Trust me, man," Jason said. "Snow may be pretty, but up close it's cold and nasty. We'll find you a better prom date."

Piper smiled, but Leo didn't look pleased. He hadn't said much about his time in the palace, or why the Boreads had singled him out for smelling like fire. Piper got the feeling he was hiding something. Whatever it was, his mood

seemed to be affecting Festus, who grumbled and steamed as he tried to keep himself warm in the cold Canadian air. Happy the Dragon was not so happy.

They ate their sandwiches as they flew. Piper had no idea how Leo had stocked up on supplies, but he'd even remembered to bring veggie rations for her. The cheese and avocado sandwich was awesome.

Nobody talked. Whatever they might find in Chicago, they all knew Boreas had only let them go because he figured they were already on a suicide mission.

The moon rose and stars turned overhead. Piper's eyes started to feel heavy. The encounter with Boreas and his children had scared her more than she wanted to admit. Now that she had a full stomach, her adrenaline was fading.

Suck it up, cupcake! Coach Hedge would've yelled at her. *Don't be a wimp!*

Piper had been thinking about the coach ever since Boreas mentioned he was still alive. She'd never liked Hedge, but he'd leaped off a cliff to save Leo, and he'd sacrificed himself to protect them on the skywalk. She now realized that all the times at school the coach had pushed her, yelled at her to run faster or do more push-ups, or even when he'd turned his back and let her fight her own battles with the mean girls, the old goat man had been trying to help her in his own irritating way—trying to prepare her for life as a demigod.

On the skywalk, Dylan the storm spirit had said something about the coach, too: how he'd been retired to Wilderness School because he was getting too old, like it was some sort of punishment. Piper wondered what that was about, and if it explained why the coach was always so grumpy. Whatever the truth, now that Piper knew Hedge was alive, she had a strong compulsion to save him.

Don't get ahead of yourself, she chided. You've got bigger problems. This trip won't have a happy ending.

She was a traitor, just like Silena Beauregard. It was only a matter of time before her friends found out.

She looked up at the stars and thought about a night long ago when she and her dad had camped out in front of Grandpa Tom's house. Grandpa Tom had died years before, but Dad had kept his house in Oklahoma because it was where he grew up.

They'd gone back for a few days, with the idea of getting the place fixed up to sell, although Piper wasn't sure who'd want to buy a run-down cabin with shutters instead of windows and two tiny rooms that smelled like cigars. The first night had been so stifling hot—no air conditioning in the middle of August—that Dad suggested they sleep outside.

They'd spread their sleeping bags and listened to the cicadas buzzing in the trees. Piper pointed out the constellations she'd been reading about—Hercules, Apollo's lyre, Sagittarius the centaur.

Her dad crossed his arms behind his head. In his old T-shirt and jeans he looked like just another guy from Tahlequah, Oklahoma, a Cherokee who might've never left tribal lands. "Your grandpa would say those Greek patterns are a bunch of bull. He told me the stars were creatures with glowing fur, like magic hedgehogs. Once, long ago, some hunters even captured a few in the forest. They didn't know what they'd done until nighttime, when the star creatures began to glow. Golden sparks flew from their fur, so the Cherokee released them back into the sky."

"You believe in magic hedgehogs?" Piper asked.

Her dad laughed. "I think Grandpa Tom was full of bull, too, just like the Greeks. But it's a big sky. I suppose there's room for Hercules and hedgehogs."

They sat for a while, until Piper got the nerve to ask a question that had been bugging her. "Dad, why don't you ever play Native American parts?"

The week before, he'd turned down several million dollars to play Tonto in a remake of *The Lone Ranger*. Piper was still trying to figure out why. He'd played all kinds of roles—a Latino teacher in a tough L.A. school, a dashing Israeli spy in an action-adventure blockbuster, even a Syrian terrorist in a James Bond movie. And, of course, he would always be known as the King of Sparta. But if the part was Native American—it didn't matter what *kind* of role it was—Dad turned it down.

He winked at her. "Too close to home, Pipes. Easier to pretend I'm something I'm not."

"Doesn't that get old? Aren't you ever tempted, like, if you found the perfect part that could change people's opinions?"

"If there's a part like that, Pipes," he said sadly, "I haven't found it."

She looked at the stars, trying to imagine them as glowing hedgehogs. All she saw were the stick figures she knew—Hercules running across the sky, on his way to kill monsters. Dad was probably right. The Greeks and the Cherokee were equally crazy. The stars were just balls of fire.

"Dad," she said, "if you don't like being close to home, why are we sleeping in Grandpa Tom's yard?"

His laughter echoed in the quiet Oklahoma night. "I think you know me too well, Pipes."

"You're not really going to sell this place, are you?"

"Nope," he sighed. "I'm probably not."

Piper blinked, shaking herself out of the memory. She realized she'd been falling asleep on the dragon's back. How could her dad pretend to be so many things he wasn't? She was trying to do that now, and it was tearing her apart.

Maybe she could pretend for a little while longer. She could dream of

finding a way to save her father without betraying her friends—even if right now a happy ending seemed about as likely as magic hedgehogs.

She leaned back against Jason’s warm chest. He didn’t complain. As soon she closed her eyes, she drifted off to sleep.

In her dream, she was back on the mountaintop. The ghostly purple bonfire cast shadows across the trees. Piper’s eyes stung from smoke, and the ground was so warm, the soles of her boots felt sticky.

A voice from the dark rumbled, “You forget your duty.”

Piper couldn’t see him, but it was definitely her least favorite giant—the one who called himself Enceladus. She looked around for any sign of her father, but the pole where he’d been chained was no longer there.

“Where is he?” she demanded. “What’ve you done with him?”

The giant’s laugh was like lava hissing down a volcano. “His body is safe enough, though I fear the poor man’s mind can’t take much more of my company. For some reason he finds me—disturbing. You must hurry, girl, or I fear there will be little left of him to save.”

“Let him go!” she screamed. “Take me instead. He’s just a mortal!”

“But, my dear,” the giant rumbled, “we must prove our love for our parents. That’s what *I’m* doing. Show me you value your father’s life by doing what I ask. Who’s more important—your father, or a deceitful goddess who used you, toyed with your emotions, manipulated your memories, eh? What is Hera to you?”

Piper began to tremble. So much anger and fear boiled inside her, she could hardly talk. “You’re asking me to betray my friends.”

“Sadly, my dear, your friends are destined to die. Their quest is impossible. Even if you succeeded, you heard the prophecy: unleashing Hera’s rage would mean your destruction. The only question now—will you die with your friends, or live with your father?”

The bonfire roared. Piper tried to step back, but her feet were heavy. She realized the ground was pulling her down, clinging to her boots like wet sand. When she looked up, a shower of purple sparks had spread across the sky, and the sun was rising in the east. A patchwork of cities glowed in the valley below, and far to the west, over a line of rolling hills, she saw a familiar landmark rising from a sea of fog.

“Why are you showing me this?” Piper asked. “You’re revealing where you are.”

“Yes, you know this place,” the giant said. “Lead your friends here instead of their true destination, and I will deal with them. Or even better, arrange their

deaths before you arrive. I don't care which. Just be at the summit by noon on the solstice, and you may collect your father and go in peace."

"I can't," Piper said. "You can't ask me—"

"To betray that foolish boy Valdez, who always irritated you and is now hiding secrets from you? To give up a boyfriend you never really had? Is that more important than your own father?"

"I'll find a way to defeat you," Piper said. "I'll save my father *and* my friends."

The giant growled in the shadows. "I was once proud too. I thought the gods could never defeat me. Then they hurled a mountain on top of me, crushed me into the ground, where I struggled for eons, half-conscious in pain. That taught me patience, girl. It taught me not to act rashly. Now I've clawed my way back with the help of the waking earth. I am only the first. My brethren will follow. We will not be denied our vengeance—not this time. And you, Piper McLean, need a lesson in humility. I'll show you how easily your rebellious spirit can be brought to earth."

The dream dissolved. And Piper woke up screaming, free-falling through the air.

PIPER

PIPER THUMBLED THROUGH THE SKY. Far below she saw city lights glimmering in the early dawn, and several hundred yards away the body of the bronze dragon spinning out of control, its wings limp, fire flickering in its mouth like a badly wired lightbulb.

A body shot past her—Leo, screaming and frantically grabbing at the clouds. “Not coooooool!”

She tried to call to him, but he was already too far below.

Somewhere above her, Jason yelled, “Piper, level out! Extend your arms and legs!”

It was hard to control her fear, but she did what he said and regained some balance. She fell spread-eagle like a skydiver, the wind underneath her like a solid block of ice. Then Jason was there, wrapping his arms around her waist.

Thank god, Piper thought. But part of her also thought: Great. Second time this week he’s hugged me, and both times it’s because I’m plummeting to my death.

“We have to get Leo!” she shouted.

Their fall slowed as Jason controlled the winds, but they still lurched up and down like the winds didn’t want to cooperate.

“Gonna get rough,” Jason warned. “Hold on!”

Piper locked her arms around him, and Jason shot toward the ground. Piper probably screamed, but the sound was ripped from her mouth. Her vision blurred.

And then, *thump!* They slammed into another warm body—Leo, still wriggling and cursing.

“Stop fighting!” Jason said. “It’s me!”

“My dragon!” Leo yelled. “You gotta save Festus!”

Jason was already struggling to keep the three of them aloft, and Piper knew there was no way he could help a fifty-ton metal dragon. But before she could try to reason with Leo, she heard an explosion below them. A fireball rolled into the sky from behind a warehouse complex, and Leo sobbed, “Festus!”

Jason’s face reddened with strain as he tried to maintain an air cushion

beneath them, but intermittent slow-downs were the best he could manage. Rather than free-falling, it felt like they were bouncing down a giant staircase, a hundred feet at a time, which wasn't doing Piper's stomach any favors.

As they wobbled and zigzagged, Piper could make out details of the factory complex below—warehouses, smokestacks, barbed-wire fences, and parking lots lined with snow-covered vehicles. They were still high enough so that hitting the ground would flatten them into roadkill—or skykill—when Jason groaned, “I can't—”

And they dropped like stones.

They hit the roof of the largest warehouse and crashed through into darkness.

Unfortunately, Piper tried to land on her feet. Her feet didn't like that. Pain flared in her left ankle as she crumpled against a cold metal surface.

For a few seconds she wasn't conscious of anything but pain—pain so bad that her ears rang and her vision went red.

Then she heard Jason's voice somewhere below, echoing through the building. “Piper! Where's Piper?”

“Ow, bro!” Leo groaned. “That's my back! I'm not a sofa! Piper, where'd you go?”

“Here,” she managed, her voice a whimper.

She heard shuffling and grunting, then feet pounding on metal steps.

Her vision began to clear. She was on a metal catwalk that ringed the warehouse interior. Leo and Jason had landed on ground level, and were now coming up the stairs toward her. She looked at her foot, and wave of nausea swept over her. Her toes weren't supposed to point that way, were they?

Oh, god. She forced herself to look away before she threw up. Focus on something else. Anything else.

The hole they'd made in the roof was a ragged starburst twenty feet above. How they'd even survived that drop, she had no idea. Hanging from the ceiling, a few electric bulbs flickered dimly, but they didn't do much to light the enormous space. Next to Piper, the corrugated metal wall was emblazoned with a company logo, but it was almost completely spray-painted over with graffiti. Down in the shadowy warehouse, she could make out huge machines, robotic arms, half-finished trucks on an assembly line. The place looked like it had been abandoned for years.

Jason and Leo reached her side.

Leo started to ask, “You okay ... ?” Then he saw her foot. “Oh no, you're not.”

“Thanks for the reassurance,” Piper groaned.

“You’ll be fine,” Jason said, though Piper could hear the worry in his voice. “Leo, you got any first aid supplies?”

“Yeah—yeah, sure.” He dug around in his tool belt and pulled out a wad of gauze and a roll of duct tape—both of which seemed too big for the belt’s pockets. Piper had noticed the tool belt yesterday morning, but she hadn’t thought to ask Leo about it. It didn’t look like anything special—just one of those wraparound leather aprons with a bunch of pockets, like a blacksmith or a carpenter might wear. And it seemed to be empty.

“How did you—” Piper tried to sit up, and winced. “How did pull that stuff from an empty belt?”

“Magic,” Leo said. “Haven’t figure it out completely, but I can summon just about any regular tool out of the pockets, plus some other helpful stuff.” He reached into another pocket and pulled out a little tin box. “Breath mint?”

Jason snatched away the mints. “That’s great, Leo. Now, can you fix her foot?”

“I’m a mechanic, man. Maybe if she was a car ...” He snapped his fingers. “Wait, what was that godly healing stuff they fed you at camp—Rambo food?”

“Ambrosia, dummy,” Piper said through gritted teeth. “There should be some in my bag, if it’s not crushed.”

Jason carefully pulled her backpack off her shoulders. He rummaged through the supplies the Aphrodite kids had packed for her, and found a Ziploc full of smashed pastry squares like lemon bars. He broke off a piece and fed it to her.

The taste was nothing like she expected. It reminded her of Dad’s black bean soup from when she was a little girl. He used to feed it to her whenever she got sick. The memory relaxed her, though it made her sad. The pain in her ankle subsided.

“More,” she said.

Jason frowned. “Piper, we shouldn’t risk it. They said too much could burn you up. I think I should try to set your foot.”

Piper’s stomach fluttered. “Have you ever done that before?”

“Yeah ... I think so.”

Leo found an old piece of wood and broke it in half for a splint. Then he got the gauze and duct tape ready.

“Hold her leg still,” Jason told him. “Piper, this is going to hurt.”

When Jason set the foot, Piper flinched so hard she punched Leo in the arm, and he yelled almost as much as she did. When her vision cleared and she could breathe normally again, she found that her foot was pointing the right way, her ankle splinted with plywood, gauze, and duct tape.

“Ow,” she said.

“Jeez, beauty queen!” Leo rubbed his arm. “Glad my face wasn’t there.”

“Sorry,” she said. “And don’t call me ‘beauty queen,’ or I’ll punch you again.”

“You both did great.” Jason found a canteen in Piper’s pack and gave her some water. After a few minutes, her stomach began to calm down.

Once she wasn’t screaming in pain, she could hear the wind howling outside. Snowflakes fluttered through the hole in the roof, and after their meeting with Khione, snow was the last thing Piper wanted to see.

“What happened to the dragon?” she asked. “Where are we?”

Leo’s expression turned sullen. “I don’t know with Festus. He just jerked sideways like he hit an invisible wall and started to fall.”

Piper remembered Enceladus’s warning: *I’ll show you how easily your rebellious spirit can be brought to earth.* Had he managed to strike them down from so far away? It seemed impossible. If he were that powerful, why would he need her to betray her friends when he could just kill them himself? And how could the giant be keeping an eye on her in a snowstorm thousands of miles away?

Leo pointed to the logo on the wall. “As far as where we are ...” It was hard to see through the graffiti, but Piper could make out a large red eye with the stenciled words: monocle motors, assembly plant 1.

“Closed car plant,” Leo said. “I’m guessing we crash-landed in Detroit.”

Piper had heard about closed car plants in Detroit, so that made sense. But it seemed like a pretty depressing place to land. “How far is that from Chicago?”

Jason handed her the canteen. “Maybe three-fourths of the way from Quebec? The thing is, without the dragon, we’re stuck traveling overland.”

“No way,” Leo said. “It isn’t safe.”

Piper thought about the way the ground had pulled at her feet in the dream, and what King Boreas had said about the earth yielding up more horrors. “He’s right. Besides, I don’t know if I can walk. And three people—Jason, you can’t fly that many across country by yourself.”

“No way,” Jason said. “Leo, are you sure the dragon didn’t malfunction? I mean, Festus is old, and—”

“And I might not have repaired him right?”

“I didn’t say that,” Jason protested. “It’s just—maybe you could fix it.”

“I don’t know.” Leo sounded crestfallen. He pulled a few screws out of his pockets and started fiddling with them. “I’d have to find where he landed, if he’s even in one piece.”

“It was my fault.” Piper said without thinking. She just couldn’t stand it

anymore. The secret about her father was heating up inside her like too much ambrosia. If she kept lying to her friends, she felt like she'd burn to ashes.

"Piper," Jason said gently, "you were asleep when Festus conked out. It couldn't be your fault."

"Yeah, you're just shaken up," Leo agreed. He didn't even try to make a joke at her expense. "You're in pain. Just rest."

She wanted to tell them everything, but the words stuck in her throat. They were both being so kind to her. Yet if Enceladus was watching her somehow, saying the wrong thing could get her father killed.

Leo stood. "Look, um, Jason, why don't you stay with her, bro? I'll scout around for Festus. I think he fell outside the warehouse somewhere. If I can find him, maybe I can figure out what happened and fix him."

"It's too dangerous," Jason said. "You shouldn't go by yourself."

"Ah, I got duct tape and breath mints. I'll be fine," Leo said, a little too quickly, and Piper realized he was a lot more shaken up than he was letting on. "You guys just don't run off without me."

Leo reached into his magic tool belt, pulled out a flashlight, and headed down the stairs, leaving Piper and Jason alone.

Jason gave her a smile, though he looked kind of nervous. It was the exact expression he'd had on his face after he'd kissed her the first time, up on the Wilderness School dorm roof—that cute little scar on his lip curving into a crescent. The memory gave her a warm feeling. Then she remembered that the kiss had never really happened.

"You look better," Jason offered.

Piper wasn't sure if he meant her foot, or the fact that she wasn't magically beautified anymore. Her jeans were tattered from the fall through the roof. Her boots were splattered with melted dirty snow. She didn't know what her face looked like, but probably horrible.

Why did it matter? She'd never cared about things like that before. She wondered if it was her stupid mother, the goddess of love, messing with her thoughts. If Piper started getting urges to read fashion magazines, she was going to have to find Aphrodite and smack her.

She decided to focus on her ankle instead. As long as she didn't move it, the pain wasn't bad. "You did a good job," she told Jason. "Where'd you learn first aid?"

He shrugged. "Same answer as always. I don't know."

"But you're starting to have some memories, aren't you? Like that prophecy in Latin back at camp, or that dream about the wolf."

"It's fuzzy," he said. "Like déjà vu. Ever forgotten a word or a name, and

you know it should be on the tip of your tongue, but it isn't? It's like that—only with my whole life.”

Piper sort of knew what he meant. The last three months—a life she thought she'd had, a relationship with Jason—had turned out to be Mist.

A boyfriend you never really had, Enceladus had said. *Is that more important than your own father?*

She should've kept her mouth shut, but she voiced the question that had been on her mind since yesterday.

“That photo in your pocket,” she said. “Is that someone from your past?”

Jason pulled back.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “None of my business. Forget it.”

“No—it's okay.” His features relaxed. “Just, I'm trying to figure things out. Her name's Thalia. She's my sister. I don't remember any details. I'm not even sure how I know, but—um, why are you smiling?”

“Nothing.” Piper tried to kill the smile. *Not* an old girlfriend. She felt ridiculously happy. “Um, it's just—that's great you remembered. Annabeth told me she became a Hunter of Artemis, right?”

Jason nodded. “I get the feeling I'm supposed to find her. Hera left me that memory for a reason. It's got something to do with this quest. But ... I also have the feeling it could be dangerous. I'm not sure I *want* to find out the truth. Is that crazy?”

“No,” Piper said. “Not at all.”

She stared at the logo on the wall: monocle motors, the single red eye. Something about that logo bothered her.

Maybe it was the idea Enceladus was watching her, holding her father for leverage. She had to save him, but how could she betray her friends?

“Jason,” she said. “Speaking of the truth, I need to tell you something—something about my dad—”

She didn't get the chance. Somewhere below, metal clanged against metal, like a door slamming shut. The sound echoed through the warehouse.

Jason stood. He took out his coin and flipped it, snatching his golden sword out of the air. He peered over the railing. “Leo?” he called.

No answer.

He crouched next to Piper. “I don't like this.”

“He could be in trouble,” Piper said. “Go check.”

“I can't leave you alone.”

“I'll be fine.” She felt terrified, but she wasn't about to admit it. She drew her dagger Katoptris and tried to look confident. “Anyone gets close, I'll skewer them.”

Jason hesitated. “I’ll leave you the pack. If I’m not back in five minutes—”
“Panic?” she suggested.

He managed a smile. “Glad you’re back to normal. The makeup and the dress were a lot more intimidating than the dagger.”

“Get going, Sparky, before I skewer *you*.”

“Sparky?”

Even offended, Jason looked hot. It wasn’t fair. Then he made his way to the stairs and disappeared into the dark.

Piper counted her breaths, trying to gauge how much time had passed. She lost track at around forty-three. Then something in the warehouse went *bang!*

The echo died. Piper’s heart pounded, but she didn’t call out. Her instincts told her it might not be a good idea.

She stared at her splinted ankle. *It’s not like I can run.* Then she looked up again at the Monocle Motors sign. A little voice in her head pestered her, warning of danger. Something from Greek mythology ...

Her hand went to her backpack. She took out the ambrosia squares. Too much would burn her up, but would a little more fix her ankle?

Boom. The sound was closer this time, directly below her. She dug out a whole square of ambrosia and stuffed it in her mouth. Her heart raced faster. Her skin felt feverish.

Hesitantly, she flexed her ankle against the splint. No pain, no stiffness at all. She cut through the duct tape with her dagger and heard heavy steps on the stairs—like metal boots.

Had it been five minutes? Longer? The steps didn’t sound like Jason, but maybe he was carrying Leo. Finally she couldn’t stand it. Gripping her dagger, she called out, “Jason?”

“Yeah,” he said from the darkness. “On my way up.”

Definitely Jason’s voice. So why did all her instincts say *Run?*

With effort, she got to her feet.

The steps came closer.

“It’s okay,” Jason’s voice promised.

At the top of the stairs, a face appeared out of the darkness—a hideous black grin, a smashed nose, and a single bloodshot eye in the middle of his forehead.

“It’s fine,” the Cyclops said, in a perfect imitation of Jason’s voice. “You’re just in time for dinner.”

LEO

LEO WISHED THE DRAGON HADN'T LANDED on the toilets.

Of all the places to crash, a line of Porta-Potties would not have been his first choice. A dozen of the blue plastic boxes had been set up in the factory yard, and Festus had flattened them all. Fortunately, they hadn't been used in a long time, and the fireball from the crash incinerated most of the contents; but still, there were some pretty gross chemicals leaking out of the wreckage. Leo had to pick his way through and try not to breathe through his nose. Heavy snow was coming down, but the dragon's hide was still steaming hot. Of course, that didn't bother Leo.

After a few minutes climbing over Festus's inanimate body, Leo started to get irritated. The dragon looked perfectly fine. Yes, it had fallen out of the sky and landed with a big *ka-boom*, but its body wasn't even dented. The fireball had apparently come from built up gasses inside the toilet units, not from the dragon itself. Festus's wings were intact. Nothing seemed broken. There was no reason it should have stopped.

"Not my fault," he muttered. "Festus, you're making me look bad."

Then he opened the control panel on the dragon's head, and Leo's heart sank. "Oh, Festus, what the heck?"

The wiring had frozen over. Leo knew it had been okay yesterday. He'd worked so hard to repair the corroded lines, but something had caused a flash freeze inside the dragon's skull, where it should've been too hot for ice to form. The ice had caused the wiring to overload and char the control disk. Leo couldn't see any reason that would've happened. Sure, the dragon was old, but still, it didn't make sense.

He could replace the wires. That wasn't the problem. But the charred control disk was not good. The Greek letters and pictures carved around the edges, which probably held all kinds of magic, were blurred and blackened.

The one piece of hardware Leo couldn't replace—and it was damaged. *Again.*

He imagined his mom's voice: *Most problems look worse than they are, mijo. Nothing is unfixable.*

His mom could repair just about anything, but Leo was pretty sure she'd never worked on a fifty-year-old magic metal dragon.

He clenched his teeth and decided he had to try. He wasn't walking from Detroit to Chicago in a snowstorm, and he wasn't going to be responsible for stranding his friends.

"Right," he muttered, brushing the snow off his shoulders.

"Gimme a nylon bristle detail brush, some nitrile gloves, and maybe a can of that aerosol cleaning solvent."

The tool belt obliged. Leo couldn't help smiling as he pulled out the supplies. The belt's pockets did have limits. They wouldn't give him anything magic, like Jason's sword, or anything huge, like a chain saw. He'd tried asking for both. And if he asked for too many things at once, the belt needed a cooldown time before it could work again. The more complicated the request, the longer the cooldown. But anything small and simple like you might find around a workshop—all Leo had to do was ask.

He began cleaning off the control disk. While he worked, snow collected on the cooling dragon. Leo had to stop from time to time to summon fire and melt it away, but mostly he went into autopilot mode, his hands working by themselves as his thoughts wandered.

Leo couldn't believe how stupid he'd acted back at Boreas's palace. He should've figured a family of winter gods would hate him on sight. Son of the fire god flying a fire-breathing dragon into an ice penthouse—yeah, maybe not the best move. Still, he hated feeling like a reject. Jason and Piper got to visit the throne room. Leo got to wait in the lobby with Cal, the demigod of hockey and major head injuries.

Fire is bad, Cal had told him.

That pretty much summed it up. Leo knew he couldn't keep the truth from his friends much longer. Ever since Camp Half-Blood, one line of that Great Prophecy kept coming back to him: *To storm or fire the world must fall*.

And Leo was the fire guy, the first one since 1666 when London had burned down. If he told his friends what he could really do—*Hey, guess what, guys? I might destroy the world!*—why would anyone welcome him back at camp? Leo would have to go on the run again. Even though he knew that drill, the idea depressed him.

Then there was Khione. Dang, that girl was fine. Leo knew he'd acted like a total fool, but he couldn't help himself. He'd had his clothes cleaned with the one-hour valet service—which had been totally sweet, by the way. He'd combed his hair—never an easy job—and even discovered the tool bag could make breath mints, all in hopes that he could get close to her. Naturally, no such

luck.

Getting frozen out—story of his life—by his relatives, foster homes, you name it. Even at Wilderness School, Leo had spent the last few weeks feeling like a third wheel as Jason and Piper, his only friends, became a couple. He was happy for them and all, but still it made him feel like they didn't need him anymore.

When he'd found out that Jason's whole time at school had been an illusion—a kind of a memory burp—Leo had been secretly excited. It was a chance for a reset. Now Jason and Piper were heading toward being a couple again—that was obvious from the way they'd acted in the warehouse just now, like they wanted to talk in private without Leo around. What had he expected? He'd wind up the odd man out again. Khione had just given him the cold shoulder a little quicker than most.

“Enough, Valdez,” he scolded himself. “Nobody's going to play any violins for you just because you're not important. Fix the stupid dragon.”

He got so involved with his work, he wasn't sure how much time had passed before he heard the voice.

You're wrong, Leo, it said.

He fumbled his brush and dropped it into the dragon's head. He stood, but he couldn't see who'd spoken. Then he looked at the ground. Snow and chemical sludge from the toilets, even the asphalt itself was shifting like it was turning to liquid. A ten-foot-wide area formed eyes, a nose, and a mouth—the giant face of a sleeping woman.

She didn't exactly speak. Her lips didn't move. But Leo could hear her voice in his head, as if the vibrations were coming through the ground, straight into his feet and resonating up his skeleton.

They need you desperately, she said. *In some ways, you are the most important of the seven—like the control disk in the dragon's brain. Without you, the power of the others means nothing. They will never reach me, never stop me. And I will fully wake.*

“You.” Leo was shaking so badly he wasn't sure he'd spoken aloud. He hadn't heard that voice since he was eight, but it was her: the earthen woman from the machine shop. “You killed my mom.”

The face shifted. The mouth formed a sleepy smile like it was having a pleasant dream. *Ah, but Leo. I am your mother too—the First Mother. Do not oppose me. Walk away now. Let my son Porphyrion rise and become king, and I will ease your burdens. You will tread lightly on the earth.*

Leo grabbed the nearest thing he could find—a Porta-Potty seat—and threw it at the face. “Leave me alone!”

The toilet seat sank into the liquid earth. Snow and sludge rippled, and the face dissolved.

Leo stared at the ground, waiting for the face to reappear. But it didn't. Leo wanted to think he'd imagined it.

Then from the direction of the factory, he heard a crash—like two dump trucks slamming together. Metal crumpled and groaned, and the noise echoed across the yard. Instantly Leo knew that Jason and Piper were in trouble.

Walk away now, the voice had urged.

“Not likely,” Leo growled. “Gimme the biggest hammer you got.”

He reached into his tool belt and pulled out a three-pound club hammer with a double-faced head the size of a baked potato. Then he jumped off the dragon's back and ran toward the warehouse.

LEO

LEO STOPPED AT THE DOORS AND TRIED to control his breathing. The voice of the earth woman still rang in his ears, reminding him of his mother's death. The last thing he wanted to do was plunge into another dark warehouse. Suddenly he felt eight years old again, alone and helpless as someone he cared about was trapped and in trouble.

Stop it, he told himself. That's how she wants you to feel.

But that didn't make him any less scared. He took a deep breath and peered inside. Nothing looked different. Gray morning light filtered through the hole in the roof. A few lightbulbs flickered, but most of the factory floor was still lost in shadows. He could make out the catwalk above, the dim shapes of heavy machinery along the assembly line, but no movement. No sign of his friends.

He almost called out, but something stopped him—a sense he couldn't identify. Then he realized it was *smell*. Something smelled wrong—like burning motor oil and sour breath.

Something not human was inside the factory. Leo was certain. His body shifted into high gear, all his nerves tingling.

Somewhere on the factory floor, Piper's voice cried out: "Leo, help!"

But Leo held his tongue. How could Piper have gotten off the catwalk with her broken ankle?

He slipped inside and ducked behind a cargo container. Slowly, gripping his hammer, he worked his way toward the center of the room, hiding behind boxes and hollow truck chassis. Finally he reached the assembly line. He crouched behind the nearest piece of machinery—a crane with a robotic arm.

Piper's voice called out again: "Leo?" Less certain this time, but very close.

Leo peeked around the machinery. Hanging directly above the assembly line, suspended by a chain from a crane on the opposite side, was a massive truck engine—just dangling thirty feet up, as if it had been left there when the factory was abandoned. Below it on the conveyor belt sat a truck chassis, and clustered around it were three dark shapes the size of forklifts. Nearby, dangling from chains on two other robotic arms, were two smaller shapes—maybe more engines, but one of them was twisting around as if it were alive.

Then one of the forklift shapes rose, and Leo realized it was a humanoid of massive size. “Told you it was nothing,” the thing rumbled. Its voice was too deep and feral to be human.

One of the other forklift-sized lumps shifted, and called out in Piper’s voice: “Leo, help me! Help—” Then the voice changed, becoming a masculine snarl. “Bah, there’s nobody out there. No demigod could be that quiet, eh?”

The first monster chuckled. “Probably ran away, if he knows what’s good for him. Or the girl was lying about a third demigod. Let’s get cooking.”

Snap. A bright orange light sizzled to life—an emergency flare—and Leo was temporarily blinded. He ducked behind the crane until the spots cleared from his eyes. Then he took another peep and saw a nightmare scene even Tía Callida couldn’t have dreamed up.

The two smaller things dangling from crane arms weren’t engines. They were Jason and Piper. Both hung upside down, tied by their ankles and cocooned with chains up to their necks. Piper was flailing around, trying to free herself. Her mouth was gagged, but at least she was alive. Jason didn’t look so good. He hung limply, his eyes rolled up in his head. A red welt the size of an apple had swollen over his left eyebrow.

On the conveyor belt, the bed of the unfinished pickup truck was being used as a fire pit. The emergency flare had ignited a mixture of tires and wood, which, from the smell of it, had been doused in kerosene. A big metal pole was suspended over the flames—a spit, Leo realized, which meant this was a cooking fire.

But most terrifying of all were the cooks.

Monocle Motors: that single red eye logo. Why hadn’t Leo realized?

Three massive humanoids gathered around the fire. Two were standing, stoking the flames. The largest one crouched with his back to Leo. The two facing him were each ten feet tall, with hairy muscular bodies and skin that glowed red in the firelight. One of the monsters wore a chain mail loincloth that looked really uncomfortable. The other wore a ragged fuzzy toga made of fiberglass insulation, which also would not have made Leo’s top ten wardrobe ideas. Other than that, the two monsters could’ve been twins. Each had a brutish face with a single eye in the center of his forehead. The cooks were Cyclopes.

Leo’s legs started quaking. He’d seen some weird things so far—storm spirits and winged gods and a metal dragon that liked Tabasco sauce. But this was different. These were actual, flesh-and-blood, ten-foot-tall living monsters who wanted to eat his friends for dinner.

He was so terrified he could hardly think. If only he had Festus. He could use a fire-breathing sixty-foot-long tank about now. But all he had was a tool

belt and a backpack. His three-pound club hammer looked awfully small compared to those Cyclopes.

This is what the sleeping earth lady had been talking about. She wanted Leo to walk away and leave his friends to die.

That decided it. No way was Leo going to let that earth lady make him feel powerless—never again. Leo slipped off his backpack and quietly started to unzip it.

The Cyclops in the chain mail loincloth walked over to Piper, who squirmed and tried to head-butt him in the eye. “Can I take her gag off now? I like it when they scream.”

The question was directed at the third Cyclops, apparently the leader. The crouching figure grunted, and Loincloth ripped the gag off Piper’s mouth.

She didn’t scream. She took a shaky breath like she was trying to keep herself calm.

Meanwhile, Leo found what he wanted in the pack: a stack of tiny remote control units he’d picked up in Bunker 9. At least he *hoped* that’s what they were. The robotic crane’s maintenance panel was easy to find. He slipped a screwdriver from his tool belt and went to work, but he had to go slowly. The leader Cyclops was only twenty feet in front of him. The monsters obviously had excellent senses. Pulling off his plan without making noise seemed impossible, but he didn’t have much choice.

The Cyclops in the toga poked at the fire, which was now blazing away and billowing noxious black smoke toward the ceiling. His buddy Loincloth glowered at Piper, waiting for her to do something entertaining. “Scream, girl! I like funny screaming!”

When Piper finally spoke, her tone was calm and reasonable, like she was correcting a naughty puppy. “Oh, Mr. Cyclops, you don’t want to kill us. It would be much better if you let us go.”

Loincloth scratched his ugly head. He turned to his friend in the fiberglass toga. “She’s kind of pretty, Torque. Maybe I should let her go.”

Torque, the dude in the toga, growled. “I saw her first, Sump. *I’ll* let her go!” Sump and Torque started to argue, but the third Cyclops rose and shouted, “Fools!”

Leo almost dropped his screwdriver. The third Cyclops was a *female*. She was several feet taller than Torque or Sump, and even beefier. She wore a tent of chain mail cut like one of those sack dresses Leo’s mean Aunt Rosa used to wear. What’d they call that—a muumuu? Yeah, the Cyclops lady had a chain mail muumuu. Her greasy black hair was matted in pigtails, woven with copper wires and metal washers. Her nose and mouth were thick and smashed together,

like she spent her free time ramming her face into walls; but her single red eye glittered with evil intelligence.

The woman Cyclops stalked over to Sump and pushed him aside, knocking him over the conveyor belt. Torque backed up quickly.

“The girl is Venus spawn,” the lady Cyclops snarled. “She’s using charmspeak on you.”

Piper started to say, “Please, ma’am—”

“Rarr!” The lady Cyclops grabbed Piper around the waist. “Don’t try your pretty talk on me, girl! I’m Ma Gasket! I’ve eaten heroes tougher than you for lunch!”

Leo feared Piper would get crushed, but Ma Gasket just dropped her and let her dangle from her chain. Then she started yelling at Sump about how stupid he was.

Leo’s hands worked furiously. He twisted wires and turned switches, hardly thinking about what he was doing. He finished attaching the remote. Then he crept over to the next robotic arm while the Cyclopes were talking.

“—eat her last, Ma?” Sump was saying.

“Idiot!” Ma Gasket yelled, and Leo realized Sump and Torque must be her sons. If so, ugly definitely ran in the family. “I should’ve thrown you out on the streets when you were babies, like *proper* Cyclops children. You might have learned some useful skills. Curse my soft heart that I kept you!”

“Soft heart?” Torque muttered.

“What was that, you ingrate?”

“Nothing, Ma. I said you got a soft heart. We get to work for you, feed you, file your toenails—”

“And you should be grateful!” Ma Gasket bellowed. “Now, stoke the fire, Torque! And Sump, you idiot, my case of salsa is in the other warehouse. Don’t tell me you expect me to eat these demigods without salsa!”

“Yes, Ma,” Sump said. “I mean no, Ma. I mean—”

“Go get it!” Ma Gasket picked up a nearby truck chassis and slammed it over Sump’s head. Sump crumpled to his knees. Leo was sure a hit like that would kill him, but Sump apparently got hit by trucks a lot. He managed to push the chassis off his head. Then he staggered to his feet and ran off to fetch the salsa.

Now’s the time, Leo thought. While they’re separated.

He finished wiring the second machine and moved toward a third. As he dashed between robotic arms, the Cyclopes didn’t see him, but Piper did. Her expression turned from terror to disbelief, and she gasped.

Ma Gasket turned to her. “What’s the matter, girl? So fragile I broke you?”

Thankfully, Piper was a quick thinker. She looked away from Leo and said, “I think it’s my ribs, ma’am. If I’m busted up inside, I’ll taste terrible.”

Ma Gasket bellowed with laughter. “Good one. The last hero we ate—remember him, Torque? Son of Mercury, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, Ma,” Torque said. “Tasty. Little bit stringy.”

“He tried a trick like that. Said he was on medication. But he tasted fine!”

“Tasted like mutton,” Torque recalled. “Purple shirt. Talked in Latin. Yes, a bit stringy, but good.”

Leo’s fingers froze on the maintenance panel. Apparently, Piper was having the same thought he was, because she asked, “Purple shirt? Latin?”

“Good eating,” Ma Gasket said fondly. “Point is, girl, we’re not as dumb as people think! We’re not falling for those stupid tricks and riddles, not us northern Cyclopes.”

Leo forced himself back to work, but his mind was racing. A kid who spoke Latin had been caught here—in a purple shirt like Jason’s? He didn’t know what that meant, but he had to leave the interrogation to Piper. If he was going to have any chance of defeating these monsters, he had to move fast before Sump came back with the salsa.

He looked up at the engine block suspended right above the Cyclopes’ campsite. He wished he could use that—it would make a great weapon. But the crane holding it was on the opposite side of the conveyor belt. There was no way Leo could get over there without being seen, and besides, he was running short on time.

The last part of his plan was the trickiest. From his tool belt he summoned some wires, a radio adapter, and a smaller screwdriver and started to build a universal remote. For the first time, he said a silent thank-you to his dad—Hephaestus—for the magic tool belt. *Get me out of here*, he prayed, *and maybe you’re not such a jerk*.

Piper kept talking, laying on the praise. “Oh, I’ve heard about the northern Cyclopes!” Which Leo figured was bull, but she sounded convincing. “I never knew you were so big and clever!”

“Flattery won’t work either,” Ma Gasket said, though she sounded pleased. “It’s true, you’ll be breakfast for the best Cyclopes around.”

“But aren’t Cyclopes good?” Piper asked. “I thought you made weapons for the gods.”

“Bah! I’m very good. Good at eating people. Good at smashing. And good at building things, yes, but not for the gods. Our cousins, the elder Cyclopes, they do this, yes. Thinking they’re so high and mighty ’cause they’re a few thousand years older. Then there’s our southern cousins, living on islands and

tending sheep. Morons! But we Hyperborean Cyclopes, the northern clan, we're the best! Founded Monocle Motors in this old factory—the best weapons, armor, chariots, fuel-efficient SUVs! And yet—bah! Forced to shut down. Laid off most of our tribe. The war was too quick. Titans lost. No good! No more need for Cyclops weapons.”

“Oh, no,” Piper sympathized. “I’m sure you made some amazing weapons.”

Torque grinned. “Squeaky war hammer!” He picked up a large pole with an accordion-looking metal box on the end.

He slammed it against the floor and the cement cracked, but there was also a sound like the world’s largest rubber ducky getting stomped.

“Terrifying,” Piper said.

Torque looked pleased. “Not as good as the exploding ax, but this one can be used more than once.”

“Can I see it?” Piper asked. “If you could just free my hands—”

Torque stepped forward eagerly, but Ma Gasket said, “Stupid! She’s tricking you again. Enough talk! Slay the boy first before he dies on his own. I like my meat fresh.”

No! Leo’s fingers flew, connecting the wires for the remote. *Just a few more minutes!*

“Hey, wait,” Piper said, trying to get the Cyclopes’ attention. “Hey, can I just ask—”

The wires sparked in Leo’s hand. The Cyclopes froze and turned in his direction. Then Torque picked up a truck and threw it at him.

Leo rolled as the truck steamrolled over the machinery. If he’d been a half-second slower, he would’ve been smashed.

He got to his feet, and Ma Gasket spotted him. She yelled, “Torque, you pathetic excuse for a Cyclops, get him!”

Torque barreled toward him. Leo frantically gunned the toggle on his makeshift remote.

Torque was fifty feet away. Twenty feet.

Then the first robotic arm whirred to life. A three-ton yellow metal claw slammed the Cyclops in the back so hard, he landed flat on his face. Before Torque could recover, the robotic hand grabbed him by one leg and hurled him straight up.

“AHHHHH!” Torque rocketed into the gloom. The ceiling was too dark and too high up to see exactly what happened, but judging from the harsh metal *clang*, Leo guessed the Cyclops had hit one of the support girders.

Torque never came down. Instead, yellow dust rained to the floor. Torque

had disintegrated.

Ma Gasket stared at Leo in shock. “My son ... You ... You ...”

As if on cue, Sump lumbered into the firelight with a case of salsa. “Ma, I got the extra-spicy—”

He never finished his sentence. Leo spun the remote’s toggle, and the second robotic arm whacked Sump in the chest. The salsa case exploded like a piñata and Sump flew backward, right into the base of Leo’s third machine. Sump may have been immune to getting hit with truck chasses, but he wasn’t immune to robotic arms that could deliver ten thousand pounds of force. The third crane arm slammed him against the floor so hard, he exploded into dust like a broken flour sack.

Two Cyclopes down. Leo was beginning to feel like Commander Tool Belt when Ma Gasket locked her eye on him. She grabbed the nearest crane arm and ripped it off its pedestal with a savage roar. “You busted my boys! Only *I* get to bust my boys!”

Leo punched a button, and the two remaining arms swung into action. Ma Gasket caught the first one and tore it in half. The second arm smacked her in the head, but that only seemed to make her mad. She grabbed it by the clamps, ripped it free, and swung it like a baseball bat. It missed Piper and Jason by an inch. Then Ma Gasket let it go—spinning it toward Leo. He yelped and rolled to one side as it demolished the machine next to him.

Leo started to realize that an angry Cyclops mother was not something you wanted to fight with a universal remote and a screwdriver. The future for Commander Tool Belt was not looking so hot.

She stood about twenty feet from him now, next to the cooking fire. Her fists were clenched, her teeth bared. She looked ridiculous in her chain mail muumuu and her greasy pigtails—but given the murderous glare in her huge red eye and the fact that she was twelve feet tall, Leo wasn’t laughing.

“Any more tricks, demigod?” Ma Gasket demanded.

Leo glanced up. The engine block suspended on the chain—if only he’d had time to rig it. If only he could get Ma Gasket to take one step forward. The chain itself ... that one link ... Leo shouldn’t have been able to see it, especially from so far down, but his senses told him there was metal fatigue.

“Heck, yeah, I got tricks!” Leo raised his remote control. “Take one more step, and I’ll destroy you with fire!”

Ma Gasket laughed. “Would you? Cyclopes are immune to fire, you idiot. But if you wish to play with flames, let me help!”

She scooped red-hot coals into her bare hands and flung them at Leo. They landed all around his feet.

“You missed,” he said incredulously. Then Ma Gasket grinned and picked up a barrel next to the truck. Leo just had time to read the stenciled word on the side—kerosene—before Ma Gasket threw it. The barrel split on the floor in front of him, spilling lighter fluid everywhere.

Coals sparked. Leo closed his eyes, and Piper screamed, “No!”

A firestorm erupted around him. When Leo opened his eyes he was bathed in flames swirling twenty feet into the air.

Ma Gasket shrieked with delight, but Leo didn’t offer the fire any good fuel. The kerosene burned off, dying down to small fiery patches on the floor.

Piper gasped. “Leo?”

Ma Gasket looked astonished. “You live?” Then she took that extra step forward, which put her right where Leo wanted. “What are you?”

“The son of Hephaestus,” Leo said. “And I warned you I’d destroy you with fire.”

He pointed one finger in the air and summoned all his will. He’d never tried to do anything so focused and intense—but he shot a bolt of white-hot flames at the chain suspending the engine block above the Cyclops’s head—aiming for the link that looked weaker than rest.

The flames died. Nothing happened. Ma Gasket laughed. “An impressive try, son of Hephaestus. It’s been many centuries since I saw a fire user. You’ll make a spicy appetizer!”

The chain snapped—that single link heated beyond its tolerance point—and the engine block fell, deadly and silent.

“I don’t think so,” Leo said.

Ma Gasket didn’t even have time to look up.

Smash! No more Cyclops—just a pile of dust under a five-ton engine block.

“Not immune to engines, huh?” Leo said. “Boo-yah!”

Then he fell to his knees, his head buzzing. After a few minutes he realized Piper was calling his name.

“Leo! Are you all right? Can you move?”

He stumbled to his feet. He’d never tried to summon such an intense fire before, and it had left him completely drained.

It took him a long time to get Piper down from her chains. Then together they lowered Jason, who was still unconscious. Piper managed to trickle a little nectar into his mouth, and he groaned. The welt on his head started to shrink. His color came back a little.

“Yeah, he’s got a nice thick skull,” Leo said. “I think he’s gonna be fine.”

“Thank god,” Piper sighed. Then she looked at Leo with something like fear. “How did you—the fire—have you always ... ?”

Leo looked down. “Always,” he said. “I’m a freaking menace. Sorry, I should’ve told you guys sooner but—”

“Sorry?” Piper punched his arm. When he looked up, she was grinning. “That was amazing, Valdez! You saved our lives. What are you sorry about?”

Leo blinked. He started to smile, but his sense of relief was ruined when he noticed something next to Piper’s foot.

Yellow dust—the powdered remains of one of the Cyclopes, maybe Torque—was shifting across the floor like an invisible wind was pushing it back together.

“They’re forming again,” Leo said. “Look.”

Piper stepped away from the dust. “That’s not possible. Annabeth told me monsters dissipate when they’re killed. They go back to Tartarus and can’t return for a long time.”

“Well, nobody told the dust that.” Leo watched as it collected into a pile, then very slowly spread out, forming a shape with arms and legs.

“Oh, god.” Piper turned pale. “Boreas said something about this—the earth yielding up horrors. ‘When monsters no longer stay in Tartarus, and souls are no longer confined to Hades.’ How long do you think we have?”

Leo thought about the face that had formed in the ground outside—the sleeping woman who was *definitely* a horror from the earth.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But we need to get out of here.”

JASON

JASON DREAMED HE WAS WRAPPED in chains, hanging upside down like a hunk of meat. Everything hurt—his arms, his legs, his chest, his head. Especially his head. It felt like an overinflated water balloon.

“If I’m dead,” he murmured, “why does it hurt so much?”

“You’re not dead, my hero,” said a woman’s voice. “It is not your time. Come, speak with me.”

Jason’s thoughts floated away from his body. He heard monsters yelling, his friends screaming, fiery explosions, but it all seemed to be happening on another plane of existence—getting farther and farther away.

He found himself standing in an earthen cage. Tendrils of tree roots and stone whirled together, confining him. Outside the bars, he could see the floor of a dry reflecting pool, another earthen spire growing at the far end, and above them, the ruined red stones of a burned-out house.

Next to him in the cage, a woman sat cross-legged in black robes, her head covered by a shroud. She pushed aside her veil, revealing a face that was proud and beautiful—but also hardened with suffering.

“Hera,” Jason said.

“Welcome to my prison,” said the goddess. “You will not die today, Jason. Your friends will see you through—for now.”

“For now?” he asked.

Hera gestured at the tendrils of her cage. “There are worse trials to come. The very earth stirs against us.”

“You’re a goddess,” Jason said. “Why can’t you just escape?”

Hera smiled sadly. Her form began to glow, until her brilliance filled the cage with painful light. The air hummed with power, molecules splitting apart like a nuclear explosion. Jason suspected if he were actually there in the flesh, he would’ve been vaporized.

The cage should’ve been blasted to rubble. The ground should’ve split and the ruined house should’ve been leveled. But when the glow died, the cage hadn’t budged. Nothing outside the bars had changed. Only Hera looked different—a little more stooped and tired.

“Some powers are even greater than the gods,” she said. “I am not easily contained. I can be in many places at once. But when the greater part of my essence is caught, it is like a foot in a bear trap, you might say. I can’t escape, and I am concealed from the eyes of the other gods. Only you can find me, and I grow weaker by the day.”

“Then why did you come here?” Jason asked. “How were you caught?”

The goddess sighed. “I could not stay idle. Your father Jupiter believes he can withdraw from the world, and thus lull our enemies back to sleep. He believes we Olympians have become too involved in the affairs of mortals, in the fates of our demigod children, especially since we agreed to claim them all after the war. He believes this is what has caused our enemies to stir. That is why he closed Olympus.”

“But you don’t agree.”

“No,” she said. “Often I do not understand my husband’s moods or his decisions, but even for Zeus, this seemed paranoid. I cannot fathom why he was so insistent and so convinced. It was ... unlike him. As Hera, I might have been content to follow my lord’s wishes. But I am also Juno.” Her image flickered, and Jason saw armor under her simple black robes, a goatskin cloak—the symbol of a Roman warrior—across her bronze mantle. “Juno Moneta they once called me—Juno, the One Who Warns. I was guardian of the state, patron of Eternal Rome. I could not sit by while the descendants of my people were attacked. I sensed danger at this sacred spot. A voice—” She hesitated. “A voice told me I should come here. Gods do not have what you might call a conscience, nor do we have dreams; but the voice was like that—soft and persistent, warning me to come here. And so the same day Zeus closed Olympus, I slipped away without telling him my plans, so he could not stop me. And I came here to investigate.”

“It was a trap,” Jason guessed.

The goddess nodded. “Only too late did I realize how quickly the earth was stirring. I was even more foolish than Jupiter—a slave to my own impulses. This is exactly how it happened the first time. I was taken captive by the giants, and my imprisonment started a war. Now our enemies rise again. The gods can only defeat them with the help of the greatest living heroes. And the one whom the giants serve ...*she* cannot be defeated at all—only kept asleep.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will soon,” Hera said.

The cage began to constrict, the tendrils spiraling tighter. Hera’s form shivered like a candle flame in the breeze. Outside the cage, Jason could see shapes gathering at the edge of the pool—lumbering humanoids with hunched

backs and bald heads. Unless Jason's eyes were tricking him—they had more than one set of arms. He heard wolves too, but not the wolves he'd seen with Lupa. He could tell from their howls this was a different pack—hungrier, more aggressive, out for blood.

"Hurry, Jason," Hera said. "My keepers approach, and you begin to wake. I will not be strong enough to appear to you again, even in dreams."

"Wait," he said. "Boreas told us you'd made a dangerous gamble. What did he mean?"

Hera's eyes looked wild, and Jason wondered if she really *had* done something crazy.

"An exchange," she said. "The only way to bring peace. The enemy counts on our divisions, and if we are divided, we *will* be destroyed. You are my peace offering, Jason—a bridge to overcome millennia of hatred."

"What? I don't—"

"I cannot tell you more," Hera said. "You have only lived this long because I have taken your memory. Find this place.

Return to your starting point. Your sister will help."

"Thalia?"

The scene began to dissolve. "Good-bye, Jason. Beware Chicago. Your most dangerous mortal enemy waits there. If you are to die, it will be by her hand."

"Who?" he demanded.

But Hera's image faded, and Jason awoke.

His eyes snapped open. "Cyclops!"

"Whoa, sleepyhead." Piper sat behind him on the bronze dragon, holding his waist to keep him balanced. Leo sat in front, driving. They flew peacefully through the winter sky as if nothing had happened.

"D-Detroit," Jason stammered. "Didn't we crash-land? I thought—"

"It's okay," Leo said. "We got away, but you got a nasty concussion. How you feeling?"

Jason's head throbbed. He remembered the factory, then walking down the catwalk, then a creature looming over him—a face with one eye, a massive fist—and everything went black.

"How did you—the Cyclops—"

"Leo ripped them apart," Piper said. "He was amazing. He can summon fire —"

"It was nothing," Leo said quickly.

Piper laughed. "Shut up, Valdez. I'm going to tell him. Get over it."

And she did—how Leo single-handedly defeated the Cyclopes family; how they freed Jason, then noticed the Cyclopes starting to re-form; how Leo had replaced the dragon's wiring and gotten them back in the air just as they'd started to hear the Cyclopes roaring for vengeance inside the factory.

Jason was impressed. Taking out three Cyclopes with nothing but a tool kit? Not bad. It didn't exactly scare him to hear how close he'd come to death, but it did make him feel horrible. He'd stepped right into an ambush and spent the whole fight knocked out while his friends fended for themselves. What kind of quest leader was he?

When Piper told him about the other kid the Cyclopes claimed to have eaten, the one in the purple shirt who spoke Latin, Jason felt like his head was going to explode. A son of Mercury ... Jason felt like he should know that kid, but the name was missing from his mind.

"I'm not alone, then," he said. "There are others like me."

"Jason," Piper said, "you were never alone. You've got us."

"I—I know ... but something Hera said. I was having a dream..."

He told them what he'd seen, and what the goddess had said inside her cage.

"An exchange?" Piper asked. "What does that mean?"

Jason shook his head. "But Hera's gamble is *me*. Just by sending me to Camp Half-Blood, I have a feeling she broke some kind of rule, something that could blow up in a big way—"

"Or save us," Piper said hopefully. "That bit about the sleeping enemy—that sounds like the lady Leo told us about."

Leo cleared his throat. "About that ... she kind of appeared to me back in Detroit, in a pool of Porta-Potty sludge."

Jason wasn't sure he'd heard that right. "Did you say ... Porta-Potty?"

Leo told them about the big face in the factory yard. "I don't know if she's completely unkillable," he said, "but she cannot be defeated by toilet seats. I can vouch for that. She wanted me to betray you guys, and I was like, 'Pfft, right, I'm gonna listen to a face in the potty sludge.'"

"She's trying to divide us." Piper slipped her arms from around Jason's waist. He could sense her tension without even looking at her.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I just ... Why are they toying with us? Who is this lady, and how is she connected to Enceladus?"

"Enceladus?" Jason didn't think he'd heard that name before.

"I mean ..." Piper's voice quavered. "That's one of the giants. Just one of

the names I could remember.”

Jason got the feeling there was a lot more bothering her, but he decided he not to press her. She’d had a rough morning.

Leo scratched his head. “Well, I dunno about Enchiladas—”

“Enceladus,” Piper corrected.

“Whatever. But Old Potty Face mentioned another name. Porpoise Fear, or something?”

“Porphyrion?” Piper asked. “He was the giant king, I think.”

Jason envisioned that dark spire in the old reflecting pool—growing larger as Hera got weaker. “I’m going to take wild guess,” he said. “In the old stories, Porphyrion kidnapped Hera. That was the first shot in the war between the giants and the gods.”

“I think so,” Piper agreed. “But those myths are really garbled and conflicted. It’s almost like nobody wanted that story to survive. I just remember there was a war, and the giants were almost impossible to kill.”

“Heroes and gods had to work together,” Jason said. “That’s what Hera told me.”

“Kind of hard to do,” Leo grumbled, “if the gods won’t even talk to us.”

They flew west, and Jason became lost in his thoughts—all of them bad. He wasn’t sure how much time passed before the dragon dove through a break in the clouds, and below them, glittering in the winter sun, was a city at the edge of a massive lake. A crescent of skyscrapers lined the shore. Behind them, stretching out to the western horizon, was a vast grid of snow-covered neighborhoods and roads.

“Chicago,” Jason said.

He thought about what Hera had said in his dream. His worst mortal enemy would be waiting here. If he was going to die, it would be by her hand.

“One problem down,” Leo said. “We got here alive. Now, how do we find the storm spirits?”

Jason saw a flash of movement below them. At first he thought it was a small plane, but it was too small, too dark and fast. The thing spiraled toward the skyscrapers, weaving and changing shape—and, just for a moment it became the smoky figure of a horse.

“How about we follow that one,” Jason suggested, “and see where it goes?”

JASON

JASON WAS AFRAID THEY'D LOSE THEIR TARGET. The *ventus* moved like ... well, like the wind.

"Speed up!" he urged.

"Bro," Leo said, "if I get any closer, he'll spot us. Bronze dragon ain't exactly a stealth plane."

"Slow down!" Piper yelled.

The storm spirit dove into the grid of downtown streets. Festus tried to follow, but his wingspan was way too wide. His left wing clipped the edge of a building, slicing off a stone gargoyle before Leo pulled up.

"Get above the buildings," Jason suggested. "We'll track him from there."

"You want to drive this thing?" Leo grumbled, but he did what Jason asked.

After a few minutes, Jason spotted the storm spirit again, zipping through the streets with no apparent purpose—blowing over pedestrians, ruffling flags, making cars swerve.

"Oh great," Piper said. "There're two."

She was right. A second *ventus* blasted around the corner of the Renaissance Hotel and linked up with the first. They wove together in a chaotic dance, shooting to the top of a skyscraper, bending a radio tower, and diving back down toward the street.

"Those guys do *not* need any more caffeine," Leo said.

"I guess Chicago's a good place to hang out," Piper said. "Nobody's going to question a couple more evil winds."

"More than a couple," Jason said. "Look."

The dragon circled over a wide avenue next to a lake-side park. Storm spirits were converging—at least a dozen of them, whirling around a big public art installation.

"Which one do you think is Dylan?" Leo asked. "I wanna throw something at him."

But Jason focused on the art installation. The closer they got to it, the faster his heart beat. It was just a public fountain, but it was unpleasantly familiar. Two five-story monoliths rose from either end of a long granite reflecting pool. The

monoliths seemed to be built of video screens, flashing the combined image of a giant face that spewed water into the pool.

Maybe it was just a coincidence, but it looked like a high-tech, super-size version of that ruined reflecting pool he'd seen in his dreams, with those two dark masses jutting from either end. As Jason watched, the image on the screens changed to a woman's face with her eyes closed.

"Leo ..." he said nervously.

"I see her," Leo said. "I don't like her, but I see her."

Then the screens went dark. The *venti* swirled together into a single funnel cloud and skittered across the fountain, kicking up a waterspout almost as high as the monoliths. They got to its center, popped off a drain cover, and disappeared underground.

"Did they just go down a drain?" Piper asked. "How are we supposed to follow them?"

"Maybe we shouldn't," Leo said. "That fountain thing is giving me seriously bad vibes. And aren't we supposed to, like, beware the earth?"

Jason felt the same way, but they had to follow. It was their only way forward. They had to find Hera, and they now had only two days until the solstice.

"Put us down in that park," he suggested. "We'll check it out on foot."

Festus landed in an open area between the lake and the skyline. The signs said Grant Park, and Jason imagined it would've been a nice place in the summer; but now it was a field of ice, snow, and salted walkways. The dragon's hot metal feet hissed as they touched down. Festus flapped his wings unhappily and shot fire into the sky, but there was no one around to notice. The wind coming off the lake was bitter cold. Anyone with sense would be inside. Jason's eyes stung so badly, he could barely see.

They dismounted, and Festus the dragon stomped his feet. One of his ruby eyes flickered, so it looked like he was blinking.

"Is that normal?" Jason asked.

Leo pulled a rubber mallet from his tool bag. He whacked the dragon's bad eye, and the light went back to normal. "Yes," Leo said. "Festus can't hang around here, though, in the middle of the park. They'll arrest him for loitering. Maybe if I had a dog whistle ..."

He rummaged in his tool belt, but came up with nothing.

"Too specialized?" he guessed. "Okay, give me a safety whistle. They got that in lots of machine shops."

This time, Leo pulled out a big plastic orange whistle. "Coach Hedge would

be jealous! Okay, Festus, listen.” Leo blew the whistle. The shrill sound probably rolled all the way across Lake Michigan. “You hear that, come find me, okay? Until then, you fly wherever you want. Just try not to barbecue any pedestrians.”

The dragon snorted—hopefully in agreement. Then he spread his wings and launched into the air.

Piper took one step and winced. “Ah!”

“Your ankle?” Jason felt bad he’d forgotten about her injury back in the Cyclops factory. “That nectar we gave you might be wearing off.”

“It’s fine.” She shivered, and Jason remembered his promise to get her a new snowboarding coat. He hoped he lived long enough to find her one. She took a few more steps with only a slight limp, but Jason could tell she was trying not to grimace.

“Let’s get out of the wind,” he suggested.

“Down a drain?” Piper shuddered. “Sounds cozy.”

They wrapped themselves up as best they could and headed toward the fountain.

* * *

According to the plaque, it was called Crown Fountain. All the water had emptied out except for a few patches that were starting to freeze. It didn’t seem right to Jason that the fountain would have water in it in the winter anyway. Then again, those big monitors had flashed the face of their mysterious enemy Dirt Woman. Nothing about this place was right.

They stepped to the center of the pool. No spirits tried to stop them. The giant monitor walls stayed dark. The drain hole was easily big enough for a person, and a maintenance ladder led down into the gloom.

Jason went first. As he climbed, he braced himself for horrible sewer smells, but it wasn’t that bad. The ladder dropped into a brickwork tunnel running north to south. The air was warm and dry, with only a trickle of water on the floor.

Piper and Leo climbed down after him.

“Are all sewers this nice?” Piper wondered.

“No,” Leo said. “Trust me.”

Jason frowned. “How do you know—”

“Hey, man, I ran away six times. I’ve slept in some weird places, okay? Now, which way do we go?”

Jason tilted his head, listening, then pointed south. “That way.”

“How can you be sure?” Piper asked.

“There’s a draft blowing south,” Jason said. “Maybe the *venti* went with the

flow.”

It wasn't much of a lead, but nobody offered anything better.

Unfortunately, as soon as they started walking, Piper stumbled. Jason had to catch her.

“Stupid ankle,” she cursed.

“Let's rest,” Jason decided. “We could all use it. We've been going nonstop for over a day. Leo, can you pull any food from that tool belt besides breath mints?”

“Thought you'd never ask. Chef Leo is on it!”

Piper and Jason sat on a brick ledge while Leo shuffled through his pack.

Jason was glad to rest. He was still tired and dizzy, and hungry, too. But mostly, he wasn't eager to face whatever lay ahead. He turned his gold coin in his fingers.

If you are to die, Hera had warned, it will be by her hand.

Whoever “her” was. After Khione, the Cyclops mother, and the weird sleeping lady, the last thing Jason needed was another psycho villainess in his life.

“It wasn't your fault,” Piper said.

He looked at her blankly. “What?”

“Getting jumped by the Cyclopes,” she said. “It wasn't your fault.”

He looked down at the coin in his palm. “I was stupid. I left you alone and walked into a trap. I should've known...”

He didn't finish. There were too many things he should have known—who he was, how to fight monsters, how Cyclopes lured their victims by mimicking voices and hiding in shadows and a hundred other tricks. All that information was supposed to be in his head. He could feel the places it should be—like empty pockets. If Hera wanted him to succeed, why had she stolen the memories that could help him? She claimed his amnesia had kept him alive, but that made no sense. He was starting to understand why Annabeth had wanted to leave the goddess in her cage.

“Hey.” Piper nudged his arm. “Cut yourself some slack. Just because you're the son of Zeus doesn't mean you're a one-man army.”

A few feet away, Leo lit a small cooking fire. He hummed as he pulled supplies out of his pack and his tool belt.

In the firelight, Piper's eyes seemed to dance. Jason had been studying them for days now, and he still couldn't decide what color they were.

“I know this must suck for you,” he said. “Not just the quest, I mean. The way I appeared on the bus, the Mist messing with your mind, and making you think I was ...you know.”

She dropped her gaze. “Yeah, well. None of us asked for this. It’s not your fault.”

She tugged at the little braids on each side of her head. Again, Jason thought how glad he was that she’d lost the Aphrodite blessing. With the makeup and the dress and the perfect hair, she’d looked about twenty-five, glamorous, and completely out of his league. He’d never thought of beauty as a form of power, but that’s the way Piper had seemed—*powerful*.

He liked regular Piper better—someone he could hang out with. But the weird thing was, he couldn’t quite get that other image out of his head. It hadn’t been an illusion. That side of Piper was there too. She just did her best to hide it.

“Back in the factory,” Jason said, “you were you going to say something about your dad.”

She traced her finger over the bricks, almost like she was writing out a scream she didn’t want to vocalize. “Was I?”

“Piper,” he said, “he’s in some kind of trouble, isn’t it?”

Over at the fire, Leo stirred some sizzling bell peppers and meat in a pan. “Yeah, baby! Almost there.”

Piper looked on the verge of tears. “Jason ... I can’t talk about it.”

“We’re your friends. Let us help.”

That seemed to make her feel worse. She took a shaky breath. “I wish I could, but—”

“And bingo!” Leo announced.

He came over with three plates stacked on his arms like a waiter. Jason had no idea where he’d gotten all the food, or how he’d put it together so fast, but it looked amazing: pepper and beef tacos with chips and salsa.

“Leo,” Piper said in amazement. “How did you—?”

“Chef Leo’s Taco Garage is fixing you up!” he said proudly. “And by the way, it’s tofu, not beef, beauty queen, so don’t freak. Just dig in!”

Jason wasn’t sure about tofu, but the tacos tasted as good as they smelled. While they ate, Leo tried to lighten the mood and joke around. Jason was grateful Leo was with them. It made being with Piper a little less intense and uncomfortable. At the same time, he kind of wished he *was* alone with her; but he chided himself for feeling that way.

After Piper ate, Jason encouraged her to get some sleep. Without another word, she curled up and put her head in his lap. In two seconds she was snoring.

Jason looked up at Leo, who was obviously trying not to laugh.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, drinking lemonade Leo had made from canteen water and powdered mix.

“Good, huh?” Leo grinned.

“You should start a stand,” Jason said. “Make some serious coin.”

But as he stared at the embers of the fire, something began to bother him. “Leo ... about this fire stuff you can do ... is it true?”

Leo’s smile faltered. “Yeah, well ...” He opened his hand. A small ball of flame burst to life, dancing across his palm.

“That is so cool,” Jason said. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Leo closed his hand and the fire went out. “Didn’t want to look like a freak.”

“I have lightning and wind powers,” Jason reminded him. “Piper can turn beautiful and charm people into giving her BMWs. You’re no more a freak than we are. And, hey, maybe you can fly, too. Like jump off a building and yell, ‘Flame on!’”

Leo snorted. “If I did that, you would see a flaming kid falling to his death, and I would be yelling something a little stronger than ‘Flame on!’ Trust me, Hephaestus cabin doesn’t see fire powers as cool. Nyssa told me they’re super rare. When a demigod like me comes around, bad things happen. *Really* bad.”

“Maybe it’s the other way around,” Jason suggested. “Maybe people with special gifts show up when bad things are happening because that’s when they’re needed most.”

Leo cleared away the plates. “Maybe. But I’m telling you ... it’s not always a gift.”

Jason fell silent. “You’re talking about your mom, aren’t you? The night she died.”

Leo didn’t answer. He didn’t have to. The fact that he was quiet, not joking around—that told Jason enough.

“Leo, her death wasn’t your fault. Whatever happened that night—it wasn’t because you could summon fire. This Dirt Woman, whoever she is, has been trying to ruin you for years, mess up your confidence, take away everything you care about. She’s trying to make you feel like a failure. You’re not. You’re important.”

“That’s what she said.” Leo looked up, his eyes full of pain. “She said I was meant to do something important—something that would make or break that big prophecy about the seven demigods. That’s what scares me. I don’t know if I’m up to it.”

Jason wanted to tell him everything would be all right, but it would’ve sounded fake. Jason didn’t know *what* would happen. They were demigods, which meant sometimes things didn’t end okay. Sometimes you got eaten by the Cyclops.

If you asked most kids, “Hey, you want to summon fire or lightning or magical makeup?” they’d think it sounded pretty cool. But those powers went along with hard stuff, like sitting in a sewer in the middle of winter, running from monsters, losing your memory, watching your friends almost get cooked, and having dreams that warned you of your own death.

Leo poked at the remnants of his fire, turning over red-hot coals with his bare hand. “You ever wonder about the other four demigods? I mean ... if we’re three of the ones from the Great Prophecy, who are the others? Where are they?”

Jason had thought about it, all right, but he tried to push it out of his mind. He had a horrible suspicion that *he* would be expected to lead those other demigods, and he was afraid he would fail.

You’ll tear each other apart, Boreas had promised.

Jason had been trained never to show fear. He was sure of that from his dream with the wolves. He was supposed to act confident, even if he didn’t feel it. But Leo and Piper were depending on him, and he was terrified of failing them. If he had to lead a group of six—six who might not get along—that would be even worse.

“I don’t know,” he said at last. “I guess the other four will show up when the time is right. Who knows? Maybe they’re on some other quest right now.”

Leo grunted. “I bet their sewer is nicer than ours.”

The draft picked up, blowing toward the south end of the tunnel.

“Get some rest, Leo,” Jason said. “I’ll take first watch.”

It was hard to measure time, but Jason figured his friends slept about four hours. Jason didn’t mind. Now that he was resting, he didn’t really feel the need for more sleep. He’d been conked out long enough on the dragon. Plus, he needed time to think about the quest, his sister Thalia, and Hera’s warnings. He also didn’t mind Piper’s using him for a pillow. She had a cute way of breathing when she slept—inhaling through the nose, exhaling with a little puff through the mouth. He was almost disappointed when she woke up.

Finally they broke camp and started down the tunnel.

It twisted and turned and seemed to go on forever. Jason wasn’t sure what to expect at the end—a dungeon, a mad scientist’s lab, or maybe a sewer reservoir where all Porta-Potty sludge ends up, forming an evil toilet face large enough to swallow the world.

Instead, they found polished steel elevator doors, each one engraved with a cursive letter *M*. Next to the elevator was a directory, like for a department store.

“M for Macy’s?” Piper guessed. “I think they have one in downtown Chicago.”

“Or Monocle Motors still?” Leo said. “Guys, read the directory. It’s messed up.”

Parking, Kennels, Main Entrance: Sewer Level
Furnishings and Café M: 1
Women’s Fashion and Magical Appliances: 2
Men’s Wear and Weaponry: 3
Cosmetics, Potions, Poisons & Sundries: 4

“Kennels for what?” Piper said. “And what kind of department store has its entrance in a sewer?”

“Or sells poisons,” Leo said. “Man, what does ‘sundries’ even mean? Is that like underwear?”

Jason took a deep breath. “When in doubt, start at the top.”

* * *

The doors slid open on the fourth floor, and the scent of perfume wafted into the elevator. Jason stepped out first, sword ready.

“Guys,” he said. “You’ve got to see this.”

Piper joined him and caught her breath. “This is *not* Macy’s.”

The department store looked like the inside of a kaleidoscope. The entire ceiling was a stained glass mosaic with astrological signs around a giant sun. The daylight streaming through it washed everything in a thousand different colors. The upper floors made a ring of balconies around a huge central atrium, so they could see all the way down to the ground floor. Gold railings glittered so brightly, they were hard to look at.

Aside from the stained glass ceiling and the elevator, Jason couldn’t see any other windows or doors, but two sets of glass escalators ran between the levels. The carpeting was a riot of oriental patterns and colors, and the racks of merchandise were just as bizarre. There was too much to take it at once, but Jason saw normal stuff like shirt racks and shoe trees mixed in with armored manikins, beds of nails, and fur coats that seemed to be moving.

Leo stepped to the railing and looked down. “Check it out.”

In the middle of the atrium a fountain sprayed water twenty feet into the air, changing color from red to yellow to blue. The pool glittered with gold coins, and on either side of the fountain stood a gilded cage—like an oversize canary cage.

Inside one, a miniature hurricane swirled, and lightning flashed. Somebody had imprisoned the storm spirits, and the cage shuddered as they tried to get out.

In the other, frozen like a statue, was a short, buff satyr, holding a tree-branch club.

“Coach Hedge!” Piper said. “We’ve got to get down there.”

A voice said, “May I help you find something?”

All three of them jumped back.

A woman had just *appeared* in front of them. She wore an elegant black dress with diamond jewelry, and she looked like a retired fashion model—maybe fifty years old, though it was hard for Jason to judge. Her long dark hair swept over one shoulder, and her face was gorgeous in that surreal super-model way—thin and haughty and cold, not quite human. With their long red-painted nails, her fingers looked more like talons.

She smiled. “I’m so happy to see new customers. How may I help you?”

Leo glanced at Jason like, *All yours*.

“Um,” Jason started, “is this your store?”

The woman nodded. “I found it abandoned, you know. I understand so many stores are, these days. I decided it would make the perfect place. I love collecting tasteful objects, helping people, and offering quality goods at a reasonable price. So this seemed a good ... how do you say ... first acquisition in this country.”

She spoke with a pleasing accent, but Jason couldn’t guess where from. Clearly she wasn’t hostile, though. Jason started to relax. Her voice was rich and exotic. Jason wanted to hear more.

“So you’re new to America?” he asked.

“I am ... new,” the woman agreed. “I am the Princess of Colchis. My friends call me Your Highness. Now, what are you looking for?”

Jason had heard of rich foreigners buying American department stores. Of course most of the time they didn’t sell poisons, living fur coats, storm spirits, or satyrs, but still—with a nice voice like that, the Princess of Colchis couldn’t be all bad.

Piper poked him in the ribs. “Jason ...”

“Um, right. Actually, Your Highness ...” He pointed to the gilded cage on the first floor. “That’s our friend down there, Gleeson Hedge. The satyr. Could we ... have him back, please?”

“Of course!” the princess agreed immediately. “I would love to show you my inventory. First, may I know your names?”

Jason hesitated. It seemed like a bad idea to give out their names. A memory tugged at the back of his mind—something Hera had warned him about, but it seemed fuzzy.

On the other hand, Her Highness was on the verge of cooperating. If they

could get what they wanted without a fight, that would be better. Besides, this lady didn't seem like an enemy.

Piper started to say, "Jason, I wouldn't—"

"This is Piper," he said. "This is Leo. I'm Jason."

The princess fixed her eyes on him and, just for a moment, her face literally glowed, blazing with so much anger, Jason could see her skull beneath her skin. Jason's mind was getting blurrier, but he knew something didn't seem right. Then the moment passed, and Her Highness looked like a normal elegant woman again, with a cordial smile and a soothing voice.

"Jason. What an interesting name," she said, her eyes as cold as the Chicago wind. "I think we'll have to make a special deal for you. Come, children. Let's go shopping."

PIPER

PIPER WANTED TO RUN FOR THE ELEVATOR.

Her second choice: attack the weird princess now, because she was sure a fight was coming. The way the lady's face glowed when she'd heard Jason's name had been bad enough. Now Her Highness was smiling like nothing had happened, and Jason and Leo didn't seem to think anything was wrong.

The princess gestured toward the cosmetics counter. "Shall we start with the potions?"

"Cool," Jason said.

"Guys," Piper interrupted, "we're here to get the storm spirits and Coach Hedge. If this—*princess*—is really our friend—"

"Oh, I'm better than a friend, my dear," Her Highness said. "I'm a saleswoman." Her diamonds sparkled, and her eyes glittered like a snake's—cold and dark. "Don't worry. We'll work our way down to the first floor, eh?"

Leo nodded eagerly. "Sure, yeah! That sounds okay. Right, Piper?"

Piper did her best to stare daggers at him: *No, it is not okay!*

"Of course it's okay." Her Highness put her hands on Leo's and Jason's shoulders and steered them toward the cosmetics. "Come along, boys."

Piper didn't have much choice except to follow.

She hated department stores—mostly because she'd gotten caught stealing from several of them. Well, not exactly *caught*, and not exactly *stealing*. She'd talked salesmen into giving her computers, new boots, a gold ring, once even a lawn mower, though she had no idea why she wanted one. She never kept the stuff. She just did it to get her dad's attention. Usually she talked her neighborhood UPS guy into taking the stuff back. But of course the salesmen she duped always came to their senses and called the police, who eventually tracked her down.

Anyway, she wasn't thrilled to be back in a department store—especially one run by a crazy princess who glowed in the dark.

"And here," the princess said, "is the finest assortment of magical mixtures anywhere."

The counter was crammed with bubbling beakers and smoking vials on

tripods. Lining the display shelves were crystal flasks—some shaped like swans or honey bear dispensers. The liquids inside were every color, from glowing white to polka-dotted. And the smells—ugh! Some were pleasant, like fresh-baked cookies or roses, but they were mixed with the scents of burning tires, skunk spray, and gym lockers.

The princess pointed to a bloodred vial—a simple test tube with a cork stopper. “This one will heal any disease.”

“Even cancer?” Leo asked. “Leprosy? Hangnails?”

“Any disease, sweet boy. And this vial”—she pointed to a swan-shaped container with blue liquid inside—“will kill you very painfully.”

“Awesome,” Jason said. His voice sounded dazed and sleepy.

“Jason,” Piper said. “We’ve got a job to do. Remember?” She tried to put power into her words, to snap him out of his trance with charmspeak, but her voice sounded shaky even to her. This princess woman scared her too much, made her confidence crumble, just the way she’d felt back in the Aphrodite cabin with Drew.

“Job to do,” Jason muttered. “Sure. But shopping first, okay?”

The princess beamed at him. “Then we have potions for resisting fire—”

“Got that covered,” Leo said.

“Indeed?” The princess studied Leo’s face more closely. “You don’t appear to be wearing my trademark sunscreen ...but no matter. We also have potions that cause blindness, insanity, sleep, or—”

“Wait.” Piper was still staring at the red vial. “Could that potion cure lost memory?”

The princess narrowed her eyes. “Possibly. Yes. Quite possibly. Why, my dear? Have you forgotten something important?”

Piper tried to keep her expression neutral, but if that vial could cure Jason’s memory ...

Do I really want that? she wondered.

If Jason found out who he was, he might not even be her friend. Hera had taken away his memories for a reason. She’d told him it was the only way he’d survive at Camp Half-Blood. What if Jason found out that he was their enemy, or something? He might come out of his amnesia and decide he hated Piper. He might have a girlfriend wherever he came from.

It doesn’t matter, she decided, which kind of surprised her.

Jason always looked so anguished when he tried to remember things. Piper hated seeing him that way. She wanted to help him because she cared about him, even if that meant losing him. And maybe it would make this trip through Her Craziness’s department store worthwhile.

“How much?” Piper asked.

The princess got a faraway look in her eyes. “Well, now ... The price is always tricky. I love helping people. Honestly, I do. And I always keep my bargains, but sometimes people try to cheat me.” Her gaze drifted to Jason. “Once, for instance, I met a handsome young man who wanted a treasure from my father’s kingdom. We made a bargain, and I promised to help him steal it.”

“From your own dad?” Jason still looked half in a trance, but the idea seemed to bother him.

“Oh, don’t worry,” the princess said. “I demanded a high price. The young man had to take me away with him. He was quite good-looking, dashing, strong ...” She looked at Piper. “I’m sure, my dear, you understand how one might be attracted to such a hero, and want to help him.”

Piper tried to control her emotions, but she probably blushed. She got the creepiest feeling the princess could read her thoughts.

She also found the princess’s story disturbingly familiar. Pieces of old myths she’d read with her dad started coming together, but this woman couldn’t be the one she was thinking of.

“At any rate,” Her Highness continued, “my hero had to do many impossible tasks, and I’m not bragging when I say he couldn’t have done them without me. I betrayed my own family to win the hero his prize. And still he cheated me of my payment.”

“Cheated?” Jason frowned, as if trying to remember something important.

“That’s messed up,” Leo said.

Her Highness patted his cheek affectionately. “I’m sure you don’t need to worry, Leo. You seem honest. You would always pay a fair price, wouldn’t you?”

Leo nodded. “What were we buying again? I’ll take two.”

Piper broke in: “So, the vial, Your Highness—how much?”

The princess assessed Piper’s clothes, her face, her posture, as if putting a price tag on one slightly used demigod.

“Would you give anything for it, my dear?” the princess asked. “I sense that you would.”

The words washed over Piper as powerfully as a good surfing wave. The force of the suggestion nearly lifted her off her feet. She wanted to pay any price. She wanted to say yes.

Then her stomach twisted. Piper realized she was being charmspoken. She’d sensed something like it before, when Drew spoke at the campfire, but this was a thousand times more potent. No wonder her friends were dazed. Was *this* was what people felt when Piper used charmspeak? A feeling of guilt settled

over her.

She summoned all her willpower. “No, I won’t pay *any* price. But a fair price, maybe. After that, we need to leave. Right, guys?”

Just for a moment, her words seemed to have some effect. The boys looked confused.

“Leave?” Jason said.

“You mean ... after shopping?” Leo asked.

Piper wanted to scream, but the princess tilted her head, examining Piper with newfound respect.

“Impressive,” the princess said. “Not many people could resist my suggestions. Are you a child of Aphrodite, my dear? Ah, yes—I should have seen it. No matter. Perhaps we should shop a while longer before you decide what to buy, eh?”

“But the vial—”

“Now, boys.” She turned to Jason and Leo. Her voice was so much more powerful than Piper’s, so full of confidence, Piper didn’t stand a chance. “Would you like to see more?”

“Sure,” Jason said.

“Okay,” Leo said.

“Excellent,” the princess said. “You’ll need all the help you can get if you’re to make it to the Bay Area.”

Piper’s hand moved to her dagger. She thought about her dream of the mountaintop—the scene Enceladus had shown her, a place she knew, where she was supposed to betray her friends in two days.

“The Bay Area?” Piper said. “Why the Bay Area?”

The princess smiled. “Well, that’s where they’ll die, isn’t it?”

Then she led them toward the escalators, Jason and Leo still looking excited to shop.

PIPER

PIPER CORNERED THE PRINCESS as Jason and Leo went off to check out the living fur coats.

“You want them shopping for their deaths?” Piper demanded.

“Mmm.” The princess blew dust off a display case of swords. “I’m a seer, my dear. I know your little secret. But we don’t want to dwell on that, do we? The boys are having such fun.”

Leo laughed as he tried on a hat that seemed to be made from enchanted raccoon fur. Its ringed tail twitched, and its little legs wiggled frantically as Leo walked. Jason was ogling the men’s sportswear. Boys interested in shopping for clothes? A definite sign they were under an evil spell.

Piper glared at the princess. “Who are you?”

“I told you, my dear. I’m the Princess of Colchis.”

“Where’s Colchis?”

The princess’s expression turned a little sad. “Where *was* Colchis, you mean. My father ruled the far shores of the Black Sea, as far to the east as a Greek ship could sail in those days. But Colchis is no more—lost eons ago.”

“Eons?” Piper asked. The princess looked no more than fifty, but a bad feeling started settling over Piper—something King Boreas had mentioned back in Quebec. “How old are you?”

The princess laughed. “A lady should avoid asking or answering that question. Let’s just say the, ah, immigration process to enter your country took quite a while. My patron finally brought me through. She made all this possible.” The princess swept her hand around the department store.

Piper’s mouth tasted like metal. “Your patron ...”

“Oh, yes. She doesn’t bring just anyone through, mind you—only those who have special talents, such as me. And really, she insists on so little—a store entrance that must be underground so she can, ah, monitor my clientele; and a favor now and then. In exchange for a new life? Really, it was the best bargain I’d made in centuries.”

Run, Piper thought. We have to get out of here.

But before she could even turn her thoughts into words, Jason called, “Hey,

check it out!”

From a rack labeled distressed clothing, he held up a purple T-shirt like the one he'd worn on the school field trip—except this shirt looked as if it had been clawed by tigers.

Jason frowned. “Why does this look so familiar?”

“Jason, it's like *yours*,” Piper said. “Now we really have to leave.” But she wasn't sure he could even hear her anymore through the princess's enchantment.

“Nonsense,” the princess said. “The boys aren't done, are they? And yes, my dear. Those shirts are very popular—trade-ins from previous customers. It suits you.”

Leo picked up an orange Camp Half-Blood tee with a hole through the middle, as if it had been hit by a javelin. Next to that was a dented bronze breastplate pitted with corrosion—acid, maybe?—and a Roman toga slashed to pieces and stained with something that looked disturbingly like dried blood.

“Your Highness,” Piper said, trying to control her nerves. “Why don't you tell the boys how you betrayed your family? I'm sure they'd like to hear that story.”

Her words didn't have any effect on the princess, but the boys turned, suddenly interested.

“More story?” Leo asked.

“I like more story!” Jason agreed.

The princess flashed Piper an irritated look. “Oh, one will do strange things for love, Piper. You should know that. I fell for that young hero, in fact, because your mother Aphrodite had me under a spell. If it wasn't for her—but I can't hold a grudge against a goddess, can I?”

The princess's tone made her meaning clear: *I can take it out on you.*

“But that hero took you with him when he fled Colchis,” Piper remembered. “Didn't he, Your Highness? He married you just as he promised.”

The look in the princess's eyes made Piper want to apologize, but she didn't back down.

“At first,” Her Highness admitted, “it seemed he would keep his word. But even after I helped him steal my father's treasure, he *still* needed my help. As we fled, my brother's fleet came after us. His warships overtook us. He would have destroyed us, but I convinced my brother to come aboard our ship first and talk under a flag of truce. He trusted me.”

“And you killed your own brother,” Piper said, the horrible story all coming back to her, along with a name—an infamous name that began with the letter *M*.

“What?” Jason stirred. For a moment he looked almost like himself. “Killed your own—”

“No,” the princess snapped. “Those stories are lies. It was my new husband and his men who killed my brother, though they couldn’t have done it without my deception. They threw his body into the sea, and the pursuing fleet had to stop and search for it so they could give my brother a proper burial. This gave us time to get away. All this, I did for my husband. And he forgot our bargain. He betrayed me in the end.”

Jason still looked uncomfortable. “What did he do?”

The princess held the sliced-up toga against Jason’s chest, as if measuring him for an assassination. “Don’t you know the story, my boy? You of all people should. You were named for him.”

“Jason,” Piper said. “The *original* Jason. But then you’re —you should be dead!”

The princess smiled. “As I said, a new life in a new country. Certainly I made mistakes. I turned my back on my own people. I was called a traitor, a thief, a liar, a murderess. But I acted out of love.” She turned to the boys and gave them a pitiful look, batting her eyelashes. Piper could feel the sorcery washing over them, taking control more firmly than ever.

“Wouldn’t you do the same for someone you loved, my dears?”

“Oh, sure,” Jason said.

“Okay,” Leo said.

“Guys!” Piper ground her teeth in frustration. “Don’t you see who she is? Don’t you—”

“Let’s continue, shall we?” the princess said breezily. “I believe you wanted to talk about a price for the storm spirits—and your satyr.”

Leo got distracted on the second floor with the appliances.

“No way,” he said. “Is that an armored forge?”

Before Piper could stop him, he hopped off the escalator and ran over to a big oval oven that looked like a barbecue on steroids.

When they caught up with him, the princess said, “You have good taste. This is the H-2000, designed by Hephaestus himself. Hot enough to melt Celestial bronze or Imperial gold.”

Jason flinched as if he recognized that term. “Imperial gold?”

The princess nodded. “Yes, my dear. Like that weapon so cleverly concealed in your pocket. To be properly forged, Imperial gold had to be consecrated in the Temple of Jupiter on Capitoline Hill in Rome. Quite a powerful and rare metal, but like the Roman emperors, quite volatile. Be sure never to break that blade...” She smiled pleasantly. “Rome was *after* my time, of

course, but I do hear stories. And now over here—this golden throne is one of my finest luxury items.

Hephaestus made it as a punishment for his mother, Hera. Sit in it and you'll be immediately trapped."

Leo apparently took this as an order. He began walking toward it in a trance.

"Leo, don't!" Piper warned.

He blinked. "How much for both?"

"Oh, the seat I could let you have for five great deeds. The forge, seven years of servitude. And for only a bit of your strength—" She led Leo into the appliance section, giving him prices on various items.

Piper didn't want to leave him alone with her, but she had to try reasoning with Jason. She pulled him aside and slapped him across the face.

"Ow," he muttered sleepily. "What was that for?"

"Snap out of it!" Piper hissed.

"What do you mean?"

"She's charmspeaking you. Can't you feel it?"

He knit his eyebrows. "She seems okay."

"She's not okay! She shouldn't even be alive! She was married to Jason—the *other* Jason—three thousand years ago. Remember what Boreas said—something about the souls no longer being confined to Hades? It's not just monsters who can't stay dead. She's come back from the Underworld!"

Jason shook his head uneasily. "She's not a ghost."

"No, she's worse! She's—"

"Children." The princess was back with Leo in tow. "If you please, we will now see what you came for. That is what you want, yes?"

Piper had to choke back a scream. She was tempted to pull out her dagger and take on this witch herself, but she didn't like her chances—not in the middle of Her Highness's department store while her friends were under a spell. Piper couldn't even be sure they'd take her side in a fight. She had to figure out a better plan.

They took the escalator down to the base of the fountain. For the first time, Piper noticed two large bronze sundials—each about the size of a trampoline—inlaid on the marble tile floor to the north and south of the fountain. The gilded oversize canary cages stood to the east and west, and the farthest one held the storm spirits. They were so densely packed, spinning around like a super-concentrated tornado, that Piper couldn't tell how many there were—dozens, at least.

"Hey," Leo said, "Coach Hedge looks okay!"

They ran to the nearest canary cage. The old satyr seemed to have been petrified at the moment he was sucked into the sky above the Grand Canyon. He was frozen mid-shout, his club raised over his head like he was ordering the gym class to drop and give him fifty. His curly hair stuck up at odd angles. If Piper just concentrated on certain details—the bright orange polo shirt, the wispy goatee, the whistle around his neck—she could imagine Coach Hedge as his good old annoying self. But it was hard to ignore the stubby horns on his head, and the fact that he had furry goat legs and hooves instead of workout pants and Nikes.

“Yes,” the princess said. “I always keep my wares in good condition. We can certainly barter for the storm spirits and the satyr. A package deal. If we come to terms, I’ll even throw in the vial of healing potion, and you can go in peace.” She gave Piper a shrewd look. “That’s better than starting unpleasantness, isn’t it, dear?”

Don’t trust her, warned a voice in her head. If Piper was right about this lady’s identity, nobody would be leaving in peace. A fair deal wasn’t possible. It was all a trick. But her friends were looking at her, nodding urgently and mouthing, *Say yes!* Piper needed more time to think.

“We can negotiate,” she said.

“Totally!” Leo agreed. “Name your price.”

“Leo!” Piper snapped.

The princess chuckled. “Name my price? Perhaps not the best haggling strategy, my boy, but at least you know a thing’s value. Freedom is very valuable indeed. You would ask me to release this satyr, who attacked my storm winds—”

“Who attacked us,” Piper interjected.

Her Highness shrugged. “As I said, my patron asks me for small favors from time to time. Sending the storm spirits to abduct you—that was one. I assure you it was nothing personal. And no harm done, as you came here, in the end, of your own free will! At any rate, you want the satyr freed, and you want my storm spirits—who are very valuable servants, by the way—so you can hand them over to that tyrant Aeolus. Doesn’t seem quite fair, does it? The price will be high.”

Piper could see that her friends were ready to offer anything, promise anything. Before they could speak, she played her last card.

“You’re Medea,” she said. “You helped the original Jason steal the Golden Fleece. You’re one of the most evil villains in Greek mythology. Jason, Leo—don’t trust her.”

Piper put all the intensity she could gather into those words. She was utterly

sincere, and it seemed to have some effect. Jason stepped away from the sorceress.

Leo scratched his head and looked around like he was coming out of a dream.

“What are we doing, again?”

“Boys!” The princess spread her hands in a welcoming gesture. Her diamond jewelry glittered, and her painted fingers curled like blood-tipped claws. “It’s true, I’m Medea. But I’m so misunderstood. Oh, Piper, my dear, you don’t know what it was like for women in the old days. We had no power, no leverage. Often we couldn’t even choose our own husbands. But *I* was different. I chose my own destiny by becoming a sorceress. Is that so wrong? I made a pact with Jason: my help to win the fleece, in exchange for his love. A fair deal. He became a famous hero! Without me, he would’ve died unknown on the shores of Colchis.”

Jason—Piper’s Jason—scowled. “Then ... you really did die three thousand years ago? You came back from the Underworld?”

“Death no longer holds me, young hero,” Medea said. “Thanks to my patron, I am flesh and blood again.”

“You ... re-formed?” Leo blinked. “Like a monster?”

Medea spread her fingers, and steam hissed from her nails, like water splashed on hot iron. “You have no idea what’s happening, do you, my dears? It is so much worse than a stirring of monsters from Tartarus. My patron knows that giants and monsters are not her greatest servants. *I* am mortal. I learn from my mistakes. And now that I have returned to the living, I will not be cheated again. Now, here is my price for what you ask.”

“Guys,” Piper said. “The original Jason left Medea because she was crazy and bloodthirsty.”

“Lies!” Medea said.

“On the way back from Colchis, Jason’s ship landed at another kingdom, and Jason agreed to dump Medea and marry the king’s daughter.”

“After I bore him two children!” Medea said. “Still he broke his promise! I ask you, was that right?”

Jason and Leo dutifully shook their heads, but Piper wasn’t through.

“It may not have been right,” she said, “but neither was Medea’s revenge. She murdered her own children to get back at Jason. She poisoned his new wife and fled the kingdom.”

Medea snarled. “An invention to ruin my reputation! The people of the Corinth—that unruly mob—killed my children and drove me out. Jason did nothing to protect me. He robbed me of everything. So yes, I sneaked back into

the palace and poisoned his lovely new bride. It was only fair—a suitable price.”

“You’re insane,” Piper said.

“I am the victim!” Medea wailed. “I died with my dreams shattered, but no longer. I know now not to trust heroes. When they come asking for treasures, they will pay a heavy price. Especially when the one asking has the name of Jason!”

The fountain turned bright red. Piper drew her dagger, but her hand was shaking almost too badly to hold it. “Jason, Leo—it’s time to go. *Now.*”

“Before you’ve closed the deal?” Medea asked. “What of your quest, boys? And my price is so easy. Did you know this fountain is magic? If a dead man were to be thrown into it, even if he was chopped to pieces, he would pop back out fully formed—stronger and more powerful than ever.”

“Seriously?” Leo asked.

“Leo, she’s lying,” Piper said. “She did that trick with somebody before—a king, I think. She convinced his daughters to cut him to pieces so he could come out of the water young and healthy again, but it just killed him!”

“Ridiculous,” Medea said, and Piper could hear the power charged in every syllable. “Leo, Jason—my price is so simple. Why don’t you two fight? If you get injured, or even killed, no problem. We’ll just throw you into the fountain and you’ll be better than ever. You *do* want to fight, don’t you? You resent each other!”

“Guys, no!” Piper said. But they were already glaring at each other, as if it was just dawning on them how they really felt.

Piper had never felt more helpless. Now she understood what real sorcery looked like. She’d always thought magic meant wands and fireballs, but this was worse. Medea didn’t just rely on poisons and potions. Her most potent weapon was her voice.

Leo scowled. “Jason’s always the star. He always gets the attention and takes me for granted.”

“You’re annoying, Leo,” Jason said. “You never take anything seriously. You can’t even fix a dragon.”

“Stop!” Piper pleaded, but both drew weapons—Jason his gold sword, and Leo a hammer from his tool belt.

“Let them go, Piper,” Medea urged. “I’m doing you a favor. Let it happen now, and it will make your choice so much easier. Enceladus will be pleased. You could have your father back today!”

Medea’s charmspeak didn’t work on her, but the sorceress still had a persuasive voice. *Her father back today?* Despite her best intentions, Piper wanted that. She wanted her father back so much, it hurt.

“You work for Enceladus,” she said.

Medea laughed. “Serve a giant? No. But we all serve the same greater cause—a patron you cannot begin to challenge. Walk away, child of Aphrodite. This does not have to be your death, too. Save yourself, and your father can go free.”

Leo and Jason were still facing off, ready to fight, but they looked unsteady and confused—waiting for another order. Part of them had to be resisting, Piper hoped. This went completely against their nature.

“Listen to me, girl.” Medea plucked a diamond off her bracelet and threw it into a spray of water from the fountain. As it passed through the multicolored light, Medea said, “O Iris, goddess of the rainbow, show me the office of Tristan McLean.”

The mist shimmered, and Piper saw her father’s study. Sitting behind his desk, talking on the phone, was her dad’s assistant, Jane, in her dark business suit, her hair swirled in a tight bun.

“Hello, Jane,” Medea said.

Jane hung up the phone calmly. “How can I help you, ma’am? Hello, Piper.”

“You—” Piper was so angry she could hardly talk.

“Yes, child,” Medea said. “Your father’s assistant. Quite easy to manipulate. An organized mind for a mortal, but incredibly weak.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Jane said.

“Don’t mention it,” Medea said. “I just wanted to congratulate you, Jane. Getting Mr. McLean to leave town so suddenly, take his jet to Oakland without alerting the press or the police—well done! No one seems to know where he’s gone. And telling him his daughter’s life was on the line—that was a nice touch to get his cooperation.”

“Yes,” Jane agreed in a bland tone, as if she were sleepwalking. “He was quite cooperative when he believed Piper was in danger.”

Piper looked down at her dagger. The blade trembled in her hand. She couldn’t use it for a weapon any better than Helen of Troy could, but it was still a looking glass, and what she saw in it was a scared girl with no chance of winning.

“I may have new orders for you, Jane,” Medea said. “If the girl cooperates, it may be time for Mr. McLean to come home. Would you arrange a suitable cover story for his absence, just in case? And I imagine the poor man will need some time in a psychiatric hospital.”

“Yes, ma’am. I will stand by.”

The image faded, and Medea turned to Piper. “There, you see?”

“You lured my dad into a trap,” Piper said. “You helped the giant—”

“Oh, please, dear. You’ll work yourself into a fit! I’ve been preparing for this war for years, even before I was brought back to life. I’m a seer, as I said. I can tell the future as well as your little oracle. Years ago, still suffering in the Fields of Punishment, I had a vision of the seven in your so-called Great Prophecy. I saw your friend Leo here, and saw that he would be an important enemy someday. I stirred the consciousness of my patron, gave her this information, and she managed to wake just a little—just enough to visit him.”

“Leo’s mother,” Piper said. “Leo, listen to this! She helped get your mother killed!”

“Uh-huh,” Leo mumbled, in a daze. He frowned at his hammer. “So ... I just attack Jason? That’s okay?”

“Perfectly safe,” Medea promised. “And Jason, strike him hard. Show me you are worthy of your namesake.”

“No!” Piper ordered. She knew it was her last chance. “Jason, Leo—she’s tricking you. Put down your weapons.”

The sorceress rolled her eyes. “Please, girl. You’re no match for me. I trained with my aunt, the immortal Circe. I can drive men mad or heal them with my voice. What hope do these puny young heroes have against me? Now, boys, kill each other!”

“Jason, Leo, listen to me.” Piper put all of her emotion into her voice. For years she’d been trying to control herself and not show weakness, but now she poured everything into her words—her fear, her desperation, her anger. She knew she might be signing her dad’s death warrant, but she cared too much about her friends to let them hurt each other. “Medea is charming you. It’s part of her magic. You are best friends. Don’t fight each other. Fight *her!*”

They hesitated, and Piper could feel the spell shatter.

Jason blinked. “Leo, was I just about to stab you?”

“Something about my mother ... ?” Leo frowned, then turned toward Medea. “You ... you’re working for Dirt Woman. You sent her to the machine shop.” He lifted his arm. “Lady, I got a three-pound hammer with your name on it.”

“Bah!” Medea sneered. “I’ll simply collect payment another way.”

She pressed one of the mosaic tiles on the floor, and the building rumbled. Jason swung his sword at Medea, but she dissolved into smoke and reappeared at the base of the escalator.

“You’re slow, hero!” She laughed. “Take your frustration out on my pets!”

Before Jason could go after her, the giant bronze sundials at either end of the fountain swung open. Two snarling gold beasts—flesh-and-blood winged

dragons—crawled out from the pits below. Each was the size of a camper van, maybe not large compared to Festus, but large enough.

“So that’s what’s in the kennels,” Leo said meekly.

The dragons spread their wings and hissed. Piper could feel the heat coming off their glittering skin. One turned his angry orange eyes on her.

“Don’t look them in the eye!” Jason warned. “They’ll paralyze you.”

“Indeed!” Medea was leisurely riding the escalator up, leaning against the handrail as she watched the fun. “These two dears have been with me a long time—sun dragons, you know, gifts from my grandfather Helios. They pulled my chariot when I left Corinth, and now they will be your destruction. Ta-ta!”

The dragons lunged. Leo and Jason charged to intercept. Piper was amazed how fearlessly the boys attacked—working like a team who had trained together for years.

Medea was almost to the second floor, where she’d be able to choose from a wide assortment of deadly appliances.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Piper growled, and took off after her.

When Medea spotted Piper, she started climbing in earnest. She was quick for a three-thousand-year-old lady. Piper climbed at top speed, taking the steps three at a time, and still she couldn’t catch her. Medea didn’t stop at floor two. She hopped the next escalator and continued to ascend.

The potions, Piper thought. Of course that’s what she would go for. She was famous for potions.

Down below, Piper heard the battle raging. Leo was blowing his safety whistle, and Jason was yelling to keep the dragons’ attention. Piper didn’t dare look—not while she was running with a dagger in her hand. She could just see herself tripping and stabbing herself in the nose. That would be super heroic.

She grabbed a shield from an armored manikin on floor three and continued to climb. She imagined Coach Hedge yelling in her mind, just like back in gym class at Wilderness School: *Move it, McLean! You call that escalator-climbing?*

She reached the top floor, breathing hard, but she was too late. Medea had reached the potions counter.

The sorceress grabbed a swan-shaped vial—the blue one that caused painful death—and Piper did the only thing that came to mind. She threw her shield.

Medea turned triumphantly just in time to get hit in the chest by a fifty-pound metal Frisbee. She stumbled backward, crashing over the counter, breaking vials and knocking down shelves. When the sorceress stood from the wreckage, her dress was stained a dozen different colors. Many of the stains were smoldering and glowing.

“Fool!” Medea wailed. “Do you have any idea what so many potions will

do when mixed?”

“Kill you?” Piper said hopefully.

The carpet began to steam around Medea’s feet. She coughed, and her face contorted in pain—or was she faking?

Below, Leo called, “Jason, help!”

Piper risked a quick look, and almost sobbed in despair. One of the dragons had Leo pinned to the floor. It was baring its fangs, ready to snap. Jason was all the way across the room battling the other dragon, much too far away to assist.

“You’ve doomed us all!” Medea screamed. Smoke was rolling across the carpet as the stain spread, throwing sparks and setting fires in the clothing racks. “You have only seconds before this concoction consumes everything and destroys the building. There’s no time—”

CRASH! The stained glass ceiling splintered in a rain of multicolored shards, and Festus the bronze dragon dropped into the department store.

He hurtled into the fray, snatching up a sun dragon in each claw. Only now did Piper appreciate just how big and strong their metal friend was.

“That’s my boy!” Leo yelled.

Festus flew halfway up the atrium, then hurled the sun dragons into the pits they’d come from. Leo raced to the fountain and pressed the marble tile, closing the sundials. They shuddered as the dragons banged against them, trying to get out, but for the moment they were contained.

Medea cursed in some ancient language. The whole fourth floor was on fire now. The air filled with noxious gas. Even with the roof open, Piper could feel the heat intensifying. She backed up to the edge of the railing, keeping her dagger pointed toward Medea.

“I will not be abandoned again!” The sorceress knelt and snatched up the red healing potion, which had somehow survived the crash. “You want your boyfriend’s memory restored? Take me with you!”

Piper glanced behind her. Leo and Jason were on board Festus’s back. The bronze dragon flapped his mighty wings, snatched the two cages with the satyr and the storm spirits in his claws, and began to ascend.

The building rumbled. Fire and the smoke curled up the walls, melting the railings, turning the air to acid.

“You’ll never survive your quest without me!” Medea growled. “Your boy hero will stay ignorant forever, and your father will die. Take me with you!”

For one heartbeat, Piper was tempted. Then she saw Medea’s grim smile. The sorceress was confident in her powers of persuasion, confident that she could always make a deal, always escape and win in the end.

“Not today, witch.” Piper jumped over the side. She plummeted for only a

second before Leo and Jason caught her, hauling her aboard the dragon.

She heard Medea screaming in rage as they soared through the broken roof and over downtown Chicago. Then the department store exploded behind them.

LEO

LEO KEPT LOOKING BACK. HE HALF EXPECTED to see those nasty sun dragons toting a flying chariot with a screaming magical saleswoman throwing potions, but nothing followed them.

He steered the dragon toward the southwest. Eventually, the smoke from the burning department store faded in the distance, but Leo didn't relax until the suburbs of Chicago gave way to snowy fields, and the sun began to set.

"Good job, Festus." He patted the dragon's metal hide. "You did awesome."

The dragon shuddered. Gears popped and clicked in his neck.

Leo frowned. He didn't like those noises. If the control disk was failing again—No, hopefully it was something minor. Something he could fix.

"I'll give you a tune-up next time we land," Leo promised. "You've earned some motor oil and Tabasco sauce."

Festus whirled his teeth, but even that sounded weak. He flew at a steady pace, his great wings angling to catch the wind, but he was carrying a heavy load. Two cages in his claws plus three people on his back—the more Leo thought about it, the more worried he got. Even metal dragons had limits.

"Leo." Piper patted his shoulder. "You feeling okay?"

"Yeah ... not bad for a brainwashed zombie." He hoped he didn't look as embarrassed as he felt. "Thanks for saving us back there, beauty queen. If you hadn't talked me out of that spell—"

"Don't worry about it," Piper said.

But Leo worried a lot. He felt terrible about how easily Medea had set him against his best friend. And those feelings hadn't come from nowhere—his resentment of the way Jason always got the spotlight and didn't really seem to need him. Leo did feel that way sometimes, even if he wasn't proud of it.

What bothered him more was the news about his mom. Medea had seen the future down in the Underworld. That was how her patron, the woman in the black earthen robes, had come to the machine shop seven years ago to scare him, ruin his life. That's how his mother had died—because of something Leo might do someday. So in a weird way, even if his fire powers weren't to blame, Mom's

death was *still* his fault.

When they had left Medea in that exploding store, Leo had felt a little too good. He hoped she wouldn't make it out, and would go right back to the Fields of Punishment, where she belonged. Those feelings didn't make him proud, either.

And if souls were coming back from the Underworld ...was it possible Leo's mom could be brought back?

He tried to put the idea aside. That was Frankenstein thinking. It wasn't natural. It wasn't right. Medea might've been brought back to life, but she hadn't seemed quite human, with the hissing nails and the glowing head and whatnot.

No, Leo's mom had passed on. Thinking any other way would just drive Leo nuts. Still, the thought kept poking at him, like an echo of Medea's voice.

"We're going to have to put down soon," he warned his friends. "Couple more hours, maybe, to make sure Medea's not following us. I don't think Festus can fly much longer than that."

"Yeah," Piper agreed. "Coach Hedge probably wants to get out of his canary cage, too. Question is—where are we going?"

"The Bay Area," Leo guessed. His memories of the department store were fuzzy, but he seemed to remember hearing that. "Didn't Medea say something about Oakland?"

Piper didn't respond for so long, Leo wondered if he'd said something wrong.

"Piper's dad," Jason put in. "Something's happened to your dad, right? He got lured into some kind of trap."

Piper let out a shaky breath. "Look, Medea said you would both *die* in the Bay Area. And besides ... even if we went there, the Bay Area is huge! First we need to find Aeolus and drop off the storm spirits. Boreas said Aeolus was the only one who could tell us exactly where to go."

Leo grunted. "So how do we find Aeolus?"

Jason leaned forward. "You mean you don't see it?" He pointed ahead of them, but Leo didn't see anything except clouds and the lights of a few towns glowing in the dusk.

"What?" Leo asked. "That ... whatever it is," Jason said. "In the air."

Leo glanced back. Piper looked just as confused as he was.

"Right," Leo said. "Could you be more specific on the 'whatever-it-is' part?"

"Like a vapor trail," Jason said. "Except it's glowing. Really faint, but it's definitely there. We've been following it since Chicago, so I figured you saw it."

Leo shook his head. "Maybe Festus can sense it. You think Aeolus made

it?”

“Well, it’s a magic trail in the wind,” Jason said. “Aeolus is the wind god. I think he knows we’ve got prisoners for him. He’s telling us where to fly.”

“Or it’s another trap,” Piper said.

Her tone worried Leo. She didn’t just sound nervous. She sounded broken with despair, like they’d already sealed their fate, and like it was her fault.

“Pipes, you all right?” he asked.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Okay, fine. You don’t like any of the names I make up for you. But if your dad’s in trouble and we can help—”

“You can’t,” she said, her voice getting shakier. “Look, I’m tired. If you don’t mind ...”

She leaned back against Jason and closed her eyes.

All right, Leo thought—pretty clear signal she didn’t want to talk.

They flew in silence for a while. Festus seemed to know where he was going. He kept his course, gently curving toward the southwest and hopefully Aeolus’s fortress. Another wind god to visit, a whole new flavor of crazy—Oh, boy, Leo couldn’t wait.

He had way too much on his mind to sleep, but now that he was out danger, his body had different ideas. His energy level was crashing. The monotonous beat of the dragon’s wings made his eyes feel heavy. His head started to nod.

“Catch a few Z’s,” Jason said. “It’s cool. Hand me the reins.”

“Nah, I’m okay—”

“Leo,” Jason said, “you’re not a machine. Besides, I’m the only one who can see the vapor trail. I’ll make sure we stay on course.”

Leo’s eyes started to close on their own. “All right. Maybe just ...”

He didn’t finish the sentence before slumping forward against the dragon’s warm neck.

In his dream, he heard a voice full of static, like a bad AM radio: “Hello? Is this thing working?”

Leo’s vision came into focus—sort of. Everything was hazy and gray, with bands of interference running across his sight. He’d never dreamed with a bad connection before.

He seemed to be in a workshop. Out of the corners of his eyes he saw bench saws, metal lathes, and tool cages. A forge glowed cheerfully against one wall.

It wasn’t the camp forge—too big. Not Bunker 9—much warmer and more comfortable, obviously not abandoned.

Then Leo realized something was blocking the middle of his view—

something large and fuzzy, and so close, Leo had to cross his eyes to see it properly. It was a large ugly face.

“Holy mother!” he yelped.

The face backed away and came into focus. Staring down at him was a bearded man in grimy blue coveralls. His face was lumpy and covered with welts, as if he’d been bitten by a million bees, or dragged across gravel. Possibly both.

“Humph,” the man said. “Holy *father*, boy. I should think you’d know the difference.”

Leo blinked. “Hephaestus?”

Being in the presence of his father for the first time, Leo probably should’ve been speechless or awestruck or something. But after what he’d been through the last couple of days, with Cyclopes and a sorceress and a face in the potty sludge, all Leo felt was a surge of complete annoyance.

“Now you show up?” he demanded. “After fifteen years? Great parenting, Fur Face. Where do you get off sticking your ugly nose into my dreams?”

The god raised an eyebrow. A little spark caught fire in his beard. Then he threw back his head and laughed so loudly, the tools rattled on the workbenches.

“You sound just like your mother,” Hephaestus said. “I miss Esperanza.”

“She’s been dead seven years.” Leo’s voice trembled. “Not that you’d care.”

“But I do care, boy. About both of you.”

“Uh-huh. Which is why I never saw you before today.”

The god made a rumbling sound in his throat, but he looked more uncomfortable than angry. He pulled a miniature motor from his pocket and began fiddling absently with the pistons—just the way Leo did when he was nervous.

“I’m not good with children,” the god confessed. “Or people. Well, any organic life forms, really. I thought about speaking to you at your mom’s funeral. Then again when you were in fifth grade ... that science project you made, steam-powered chicken chucker. Very impressive.”

“You saw that?”

Hephaestus pointed to the nearest worktable, where a shiny bronze mirror showed a hazy image of Leo asleep on the dragon’s back.

“Is that me?” Leo asked. “Like—me right now, having this dream—looking at me having a dream?”

Hephaestus scratched his beard. “Now you’ve confused me. But yes—it’s you. I’m always keeping an eye on you, Leo. But talking to you is, um ... different.”

“You’re scared,” Leo said.

“Grommets and gears!” the god yelled. “Of course not!”

“Yeah, you’re scared.” But Leo’s anger seeped away. He’d spent years thinking about what he’d say to his dad if they ever met—how Leo would chew him out for being a deadbeat. Now, looking at that bronze mirror, Leo thought about his dad watching his progress over the years, even his stupid science experiments.

Maybe Hephaestus was still a jerk, but Leo kind of understood where he was coming from. Leo knew about running away from people, not fitting in. He knew about hiding out in a workshop rather than trying to deal with organic life forms.

“So,” Leo grumbled, “you keep track of all your kids? You got like twelve back at camp. How’d you even—Never mind. I don’t want to know.”

Hephaestus might’ve blushed, but his face was so beat up and red, it was hard to tell. “Gods are different from mortals, boy. We can exist in many places at once—wherever people call on us, wherever our sphere of influence is strong. In fact, it’s rare our entire essence is ever together in one place—our true form. It’s dangerous, powerful enough to destroy any mortal who looks upon us. So, yes ... lots of children. Add to that our different aspects, Greek and Roman—” The god’s fingers froze on his engine project. “Er, that is to say, being a god is complicated. And yes, I try to keep an eye on all my children, but you especially.”

Leo was pretty sure Hephaestus had almost slipped and said something important, but he wasn’t sure what.

“Why contact me now?” Leo asked. “I thought the gods had gone silent.”

“We have,” Hephaestus grumped. “Zeus’s orders—very strange, even for him. He’s blocked all visions, dreams, and Iris-messages to and from Olympus. Hermes is sitting around bored out of his mind because he can’t deliver the mail. Fortunately, I kept my old pirate broadcasting equipment.”

Hephaestus patted a machine on the table. It looked like a combination satellite dish, V-6 engine, and espresso maker. Each time Hephaestus jostled the machine, Leo’s dream flickered and changed color.

“Used this in the Cold War,” the god said fondly. “Radio Free Hephaestus. Those were the days. I keep it around for pay-for-view, mostly, or making viral brain videos—”

“Viral brain videos?”

“But now it’s come in handy again. If Zeus knew I was contacting you, he’d have my hide.”

“Why is Zeus being such a jerk?”

“Hrumph. He excels at that, boy.” Hephaestus called him *boy* as if Leo were an annoying machine part—an extra washer, maybe, that had no clear purpose, but that Hephaestus didn’t want to throw away for fear he might need it someday.

Not exactly heartwarming. Then again, Leo wasn’t sure he wanted to be called “son.” Leo wasn’t about to start calling this big awkward ugly guy “Dad.”

Hephaestus got tired of his engine and tossed it over his shoulder. Before it could hit the floor, it sprouted helicopter wings and flew itself into a recycling bin.

“It was the second Titan War, I suppose,” Hephaestus said. “That’s what got Zeus upset. We gods were ... well, embarrassed. Don’t think there’s any other way to say it.”

“But you won,” Leo said.

The god grunted. “We won because the demigods of”—again he hesitated, as if he’d almost made a slip—“of Camp Half-Blood took the lead. We won because our children fought our battles for us, smarter than we did. If we’d relied on Zeus’s plan, we would’ve all gone down to Tartarus fighting the storm giant Typhon, and Kronos would’ve won. Bad enough mortals won our war for us, but then that young upstart, Percy Jackson—”

“The guy who’s missing.”

“Hmph. Yes. Him. He had the nerve to turn down our offer of immortality and tell us to pay better attention to our children. Er, no offense.”

“Oh, how could I take offense? Please, go on ignoring me.”

“Mighty understanding of you ...” Hephaestus frowned, then sighed wearily. “That was sarcasm, wasn’t it? Machines don’t have sarcasm, usually. But as I was saying, the gods felt ashamed, shown up by mortals. At first, of course, we were grateful. But after a few months, those feelings turned bitter. We’re gods, after all. We need to be admired, looked up to, held in awe and admiration.”

“Even if you’re wrong?”

“Especially then! And to have Jackson refuse our gift, as if being mortal were somehow *better* than being a god... well, that stuck in Zeus’s craw. He decided it was high time we got back to traditional values. Gods were to be respected. Our children were to be seen and not visited. Olympus was closed. At least that was *part* of his reasoning. And, of course, we started hearing of bad things stirring under the earth.”

“The giants, you mean. Monsters re-forming instantly. The dead rising again. Little stuff like that?”

“Aye, boy.” Hephaestus turned a knob on his pirate broadcasting machine. Leo’s dream sharpened to full color, but the god’s face was such a riot of red welts and yellow and black bruises, Leo wished it would go back to black and white.

“Zeus thinks he can reverse the tide,” the god said, “lull the earth back to sleep as long as we stay quiet. None of us really believes that. And I don’t mind saying, we’re in no shape to fight another war. We barely survived the Titans. If we’re repeating the old pattern, what comes next is even worse.”

“The giants,” Leo said. “Hera said demigods and gods had to join forces to defeat them. Is that true?”

“Mmm. I hate to agree with my mother about anything, but yes. Those giants are tough to kill, boy. They’re a different breed.”

“Breed? You make them sound like racehorses.”

“Ha!” the god said. “More like war dogs. Back in the beginning, y’see, everything in creation came from the same parents—Gaea and Ouranos, Earth and Sky. They had their different batches of children—your Titans, your Elder Cyclopes, and so forth. Then Kronos, the head Titan—well, you’ve probably heard how he chopped up his father Ouranos with a scythe and took over the world. Then we gods came along, children of the Titans, and defeated *them*. But that wasn’t the end of it. The earth bore a new batch of children, except they were sired by Tartarus, the spirit of the eternal abyss—the darkest, most evil place in the Underworld. Those children, the giants, were bred for one purpose—revenge on *us* for the fall of the Titans. They rose up to destroy Olympus, and they came awfully close.”

Hephaestus’s beard began to smolder. He absently swatted out the flames. “What my blasted mother Hera is doing now—she’s a meddling fool playing a dangerous game, but she’s right about one thing: you demigods have to unite. That’s the only way to open Zeus’s eyes, convince the Olympians they must accept your help. And that’s the only way to defeat what’s coming. You’re a big part of that, Leo.”

The god’s gaze seemed far away. Leo wondered if really could split himself into different parts—where else was he right now? Maybe his Greek side was fixing a car or going on a date, while his Roman side was watching a ball game and ordering pizza. Leo tried to imagine what it would feel like to have multiple personalities. He hoped it wasn’t hereditary.

“Why me?” he asked, and as soon as he said it, more questions flooded out. “Why claim me now? Why not when I was thirteen, like you’re supposed to? Or you could’ve claimed me at seven, before my mom died! Why didn’t you find me earlier? Why didn’t you warn me about *this*?”

Leo's hand burst into flames.

Hephaestus regarded him sadly. "Hardest part, boy. Letting my children walk their own paths. Interfering doesn't work. The Fates make sure of that. As for the claiming, you were a special case, boy. The timing had to be right. I can't explain it much more, but—"

Leo's dream went fuzzy. Just for a moment, it turned into a rerun of *Wheel of Fortune*. Then Hephaestus came back into focus.

"Blast," he said. "I can't talk much longer. Zeus is sensing an illegal dream. He is lord of the air, after all, including the airwaves. Just listen, boy: you have a role to play. Your friend Jason is right—fire is a gift, not a curse. I don't give that blessing to just anyone. They'll never defeat the giants without you, much less the mistress they serve. She's worse than any god or Titan."

"Who?" Leo demanded.

Hephaestus frowned, his image becoming fuzzier. "I told you. Yes, I'm pretty sure I told you. Just be warned: along the way, you're going to lose some friends and some valuable tools.

But that isn't your fault, Leo. Nothing lasts forever, not even the best machines. And everything can be reused."

"What do you mean? I don't like the sound of that."

"No, you shouldn't." Hephaestus's image was barely visible now, just a blob in the static. "Just watch out for—"

Leo's dream switched to *Wheel of Fortune* just as the wheel hit Bankrupt and the audience said, "Awwww!"

Then Leo snapped awake to Jason and Piper screaming.

X X X

LEO

THEY SPIRALED THROUGH THE DARK in a free fall, still on the dragon's back, but Festus's hide was cold. His ruby eyes were dim.

"Not again!" Leo yelled. "You can't fall again!"

He could barely hold on. The wind stung his eyes, but he managed to pull open the panel on the dragon's neck. He toggled the switches. He tugged the wires. The dragon's wings flapped once, but Leo caught a whiff of burning bronze. The drive system was overloaded. Festus didn't have the strength to keep flying, and Leo couldn't get to the main control panel on the dragon's head—not in midair. He saw the lights of a city below them—just flashes in the dark as they plummeted in circles. They had only seconds before they crashed.

"Jason!" he screamed. "Take Piper and fly out of here!"

"What?"

"We need to lighten the load! I might be able to reboot Festus, but he's carrying too much weight!"

"What about you?" Piper cried. "If you can't reboot him—"

"I'll be fine," Leo yelled. "Just follow me to the ground. Go!"

Jason grabbed Piper around the waist. They both unbuckled their harnesses, and in a flash they were gone—shooting into the air.

"Now," Leo said. "Just you and me, Festus—and two heavy cages. You can do it, boy!"

Leo talked to the dragon while he worked, falling at terminal velocity. He could see the city lights below him, getting closer and closer. He summoned fire in his hand so he could see what he was doing, but the wind kept extinguishing it.

He pulled a wire that he thought connected the dragon's nerve center to its head, hoping for a little wake-up jolt.

Festus groaned—metal creaking inside his neck. His eyes flickered weakly to life, and he spread his wings. Their fall turned into a steep glide.

"Good!" Leo said. "Come on, big boy. Come on!"

They were still flying in way too hot, and the ground was too close. Leo needed a place to land—fast.

There was a big river—no. Not good for a fire-breathing dragon. He'd never get Festus out from the bottom if he sank, especially in freezing temperatures. Then, on the riverbanks, Leo spotted a white mansion with a huge snowy lawn inside a tall brick perimeter fence—like some rich person's private compound, all of it blazing with light. A perfect landing field. He did his best to steer the dragon toward it, and Festus seemed to come back to life. They could make this!

Then everything went wrong. As they approached the lawn, spotlights along the fence fixed on them, blinding Leo. He heard bursts like tracer fire, the sound of metal being cut to shreds—and *BOOM*.

Leo blacked out.

When Leo came to his senses, Jason and Piper were leaning over him. He was lying in the snow, covered in mud and grease. He spit a clump of frozen grass out of his mouth.

"Where—"

"Lie still." Piper had tears in her eyes. "You rolled pretty hard when—when Festus—"

"Where is he?" Leo sat up, but his head felt like it was floating. They'd landed inside the compound. Something had happened on the way in—gunfire?

"Seriously, Leo," Jason said. "You could be hurt. You shouldn't—"

Leo pushed himself to his feet. Then he saw the wreckage. Festus must have dropped the big canary cages as he came over the fence, because they'd rolled in different directions and landed on their sides, perfectly undamaged.

Festus hadn't been so lucky.

The dragon had disintegrated. His limbs were scattered across the lawn. His tail hung on the fence. The main section of his body had plowed a trench twenty feet wide and fifty feet long across the mansion's yard before breaking apart. What remained of his hide was a charred, smoking pile of scraps. Only his neck and head were somewhat intact, resting across a row of frozen rosebushes like a pillow.

"No," Leo sobbed. He ran to the dragon's head and stroked its snout. The dragon's eyes flickered weakly. Oil leaked out of his ear.

"You can't go," Leo pleaded. "You're the best thing I ever fixed."

The dragon's head whirred its gears, as if it were purring. Jason and Piper stood next to him, but Leo kept his eyes fixed on the dragon.

He remembered what Hephaestus had said: *That isn't your fault, Leo. Nothing lasts forever, not even the best machines.*

His dad had been trying to warn him.

“It’s not fair,” he said.

The dragon clicked. Long *creak*. Two short *clicks*. *Creak. Creak*. Almost like a pattern ... triggering an old memory in Leo’s mind. Leo realized Festus was trying to say something. He was using Morse code—just like Leo’s mom had taught him years ago. Leo listened more intently, translating the clicks into letters: a simple message repeating over and over.

“Yeah,” Leo said. “I understand. I will. I promise.”

The dragon’s eyes went dark. Festus was gone.

Leo cried. He wasn’t even embarrassed. His friends stood on either side, patting his shoulders, saying comforting things; but the buzzing in Leo’s ears drowned out their words.

Finally Jason said, “I’m so sorry, man. What did you promise Festus?”

Leo sniffled. He opened the dragon’s head panel, just to be sure, but the control disk was cracked and burned beyond repair.

“Something my dad told me,” Leo said. “Everything can be reused.”

“Your dad talked to you?” Jason asked. “When was this?”

Leo didn’t answer. He worked at the dragon’s neck hinges until the head was detached. It weighed about a hundred pounds, but Leo managed to hold it in his arms. He looked up at the starry sky and said, “Take him back to the bunker, Dad. Please, until I can reuse him. I’ve never asked you for anything.”

The wind picked up, and the dragon’s head floated out of Leo’s arms like it weighed nothing. It flew into the sky and disappeared.

Piper looked at him in amazement. “He *answered* you?”

“I had a dream,” Leo managed. “Tell you later.”

He knew he owed his friends a better explanation, but Leo could barely speak. He felt like a broken machine himself—like someone had removed one little part of him, and now he’d never be complete. He might move, he might talk, he might keep going and do his job. But he’d always be off balance, never calibrated exactly right.

Still, he couldn’t afford to break down completely. Otherwise, Festus had died for nothing. He had to finish this quest—for his friends, for his mom, for his dragon.

He looked around. The large white mansion glowed in the center of the grounds. Tall brick walls with lights and security cameras surrounded the perimeter, but now Leo could see—or rather *sense*—just how well those walls were defended.

“Where are we?” he asked. “I mean, what city?”

“Omaha, Nebraska,” Piper said. “I saw a billboard as we flew in. But I don’t know what this mansion is. We came in right behind you, but as you were

landing, Leo, I swear it looked like—I don't know—”

“Lasers,” Leo said. He picked up a piece of dragon wreckage and threw it toward the top of the fence. Immediately a turret popped up from the brick wall and a beam of pure heat incinerated the bronze plating to ashes.

Jason whistled. “Some defense system. How are we even alive?”

“Festus,” Leo said miserably. “He took the fire. The lasers sliced him to bits as he came in so they didn't focus on you. I led him into a death trap.”

“You couldn't have known,” Piper said. “He saved our lives again.”

“But what now?” Jason said. “The main gates are locked, and I'm guessing I can't fly us out of here without getting shot down.”

Leo looked up the walkway at the big white mansion. “Since we can't go out, we'll have to go in.”

JASON

JASON WOULD'VE DIED FIVE TIMES on the way to the front door if not for Leo.

First it was the motion-activated trapdoor on the sidewalk, then the lasers on the steps, then the nerve gas dispenser on the porch railing, the pressure-sensitive poison spikes in the welcome mat, and of course the exploding doorbell.

Leo deactivated all of them. It was like he could smell the traps, and he picked just the right tool out of his belt to disable them.

“You’re amazing, man,” Jason said.

Leo scowled as he examined the front door lock. “Yeah, amazing,” he said. “Can’t fix a dragon right, but I’m amazing.”

“Hey, that wasn’t your—”

“Front door’s already unlocked,” Leo announced.

Piper stared at the door in disbelief. “It is? All those traps, and the *door’s* unlocked?”

Leo turned the knob. The door swung open easily. He stepped inside without hesitation.

Before Jason could follow, Piper caught his arm. “He’s going to need some time to get over Festus. Don’t take it personally.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Yeah, okay.”

But still he felt terrible. Back in Medea’s store, he’d said some pretty harsh stuff to Leo—stuff a friend shouldn’t say, not to mention the fact he’d almost skewered Leo with a sword. If it hadn’t been for Piper, they’d both be dead. And Piper hadn’t gotten out of that encounter easily, either.

“Piper,” he said, “I know I was in a daze back in Chicago, but that stuff about your dad—if he’s in trouble, I want to help. I don’t care if it’s a trap or not.”

Her eyes were always different colors, but now they looked shattered, as if she’d seen something she just couldn’t cope with. “Jason, you don’t know what you’re saying. Please—don’t make me feel worse. Come on. We should stick together.”

She ducked inside.

“Together,” Jason said to himself. “Yeah, we’re doing great with that.”

Jason’s first impression of the house: Dark.

From the echo of his footsteps he could tell the entry hall was enormous, even bigger than Boreas’s penthouse; but the only illumination came from the yard lights outside. A faint glow peeked through the breaks in the thick velvet curtains. The windows rose about ten feet tall. Spaced between them along the walls were life-size metal statues. As Jason’s eyes adjusted, he saw sofas arranged in a U in the middle of the room, with a central coffee table and one large chair at the far end. A massive chandelier glinted overhead. Along the back wall stood a row of closed doors.

“Where’s the light switch?” His voice echoed alarmingly through the room.

“Don’t see one,” Leo said.

“Fire?” Piper suggested.

Leo held out his hand, but nothing happened. “It’s not working.”

“Your fire is out? Why?” Piper asked.

“Well, if I knew that—”

“Okay, okay,” she said. “What do we do—explore?”

Leo shook his head. “After all those traps outside? Bad idea.”

Jason’s skin tingled. He hated being a demigod. Looking around, he didn’t see a comfortable room to hang out in. He imagined vicious storm spirits lurking in the curtains, dragons under the carpet, a chandelier made of lethal ice shards, ready to impale them.

“Leo’s right,” he said. “We’re not separating again—not like in Detroit.”

“Oh, thank you for reminding me of the Cyclopes.” Piper’s voice quavered. “I needed that.”

“It’s a few hours until dawn,” Jason guessed. “Too cold to wait outside. Let’s bring the cages in and make camp in this room. Wait for daylight; then we can decide what to do.”

Nobody offered a better idea, so they rolled in the cages with Coach Hedge and the storm spirits, then settled in. Thankfully, Leo didn’t find any poison throw pillows or electric whoopee cushions on the sofas.

Leo didn’t seem in the mood to make more tacos. Besides, they had no fire, so they settled for cold rations.

As Jason ate, he studied the metal statues along the walls. They looked like Greek gods or heroes. Maybe that was a good sign. Or maybe they were used for target practice. On the coffee table sat a tea service and a stack of glossy brochures, but Jason couldn’t make out the words. The big chair at the other end of the table looked like a throne. None of them tried to sit in it.

The canary cages didn't make the place any less creepy. The *venti* kept churning in their prison, hissing and spinning, and Jason got the uncomfortable feeling they were watching him. He could sense their hatred for the children of Zeus—the lord of the sky who'd ordered Aeolus to imprison their kind. The *venti* would like nothing better than to tear Jason apart.

As for Coach Hedge, he was still frozen mid-shout, his cudgel raised. Leo was working on the cage, trying to open it with various tools, but the lock seemed to be giving him a hard time. Jason decided not to sit next to him in case Hedge suddenly unfroze and went into ninja goat mode.

Despite how wired he felt, once his stomach was full, Jason started to nod off. The couches were a little too comfortable—a lot better than a dragon's back—and he'd taken the last two watches while his friends slept. He was exhausted.

Piper had already curled up on the other sofa. Jason wondered if she was really asleep or dodging a conversation about her dad. Whatever Medea had meant in Chicago, about Piper getting her dad back if she cooperated—it didn't sound good. If Piper had risked her own dad to save them, that made Jason feel even guiltier.

And they were running out of time. If Jason had his days straight, this was early morning of December 20. Which meant tomorrow was the winter solstice.

"Get some sleep," Leo said, still working on the locked cage. "It's your turn."

Jason took a deep breath. "Leo, I'm sorry about that stuff I said in Chicago. That wasn't me. You're not annoying and you *do* take stuff seriously—especially your work. I wish I could do half the things you can do."

Leo lowered his screwdriver. He looked at the ceiling and shook his head like, *What am I gonna do with this guy?*

"I try very hard to be annoying," Leo said. "Don't insult my ability to *annoy*. And how am I supposed to resent you if you go apologizing? I'm a lowly mechanic. You're like the prince of the sky, son of the Lord of the Universe. I'm *supposed* to resent you."

"Lord of the Universe?"

"Sure, you're all—*bam!* Lightning man. And 'Watch me fly. I am the eagle that soars—'"

"Shut up, Valdez."

Leo managed a little smile. "Yeah, see. I *do* annoy you."

"I apologize for apologizing."

"Thank you." He went back to work, but the tension had eased between them. Leo still looked sad and exhausted—just not quite so angry.

"Go to sleep, Jason," he ordered. "It's gonna take a few hours to get this

goat man free. Then I still got to figure out how to make the winds a smaller holding cell, 'cause I am *not* lugging that canary cage to California.”

“You did fix Festus, you know,” Jason said. “You gave him a purpose again. I think this quest was the high point of his life.”

Jason was afraid he'd blown it and made Leo mad again, but Leo just sighed.

“I hope,” he said. “Now, sleep, man. I want some time without you organic life forms.”

Jason wasn't quite sure what that meant, but he didn't argue. He closed his eyes and had a long, blissfully dreamless sleep.

He only woke when the yelling started.

“Ahhhggggggh!”

Jason leaped to his feet. He wasn't sure what was more jarring—the full sunlight that now bathed the room, or the screaming satyr.

“Coach is awake,” Leo said, which was kind of unnecessary. Gleeson Hedge was capering around on his furry hindquarters, swinging his club and yelling, “Die!” as he smashed the tea set, whacked the sofas, and charged at the throne.

“Coach!” Jason yelled.

Hedge turned, breathing hard. His eyes were so wild, Jason was afraid he might attack. The satyr was still wearing his orange polo shirt and his coach's whistle, but his horns were clearly visible above his curly hair, and his beefy hindquarters were definitely all goat. Could you call a goat *beefy*? Jason put the thought aside.

“You're the new kid,” Hedge said, lowering his club. “Jason.” He looked at Leo, then Piper, who'd apparently also just woken up. Her hair looked like it had become a nest for a friendly hamster.

“Valdez, McLean,” the coach said. “What's going on? We were at the Grand Canyon. The *anemoui thuellai* were attacking and—” He zeroed in on the storm spirit cage, and his eyes went back to DEFCON 1. “Die!”

“Whoa, Coach!” Leo stepped in his path, which was pretty brave, even though Hedge was six inches shorter. “It's okay. They're locked up. We just sprang you from the other cage.”

“Cage? Cage? What's going on? Just because I'm a satyr doesn't mean I can't have you doing plank push-ups, Valdez!”

Jason cleared his throat. “Coach—Gleeson—um, whatever you want us to call you. You saved us at the Grand Canyon. You were totally brave.”

“Of course I was!”

“The extraction team came and took us to Camp Half-Blood. We thought we’d lost you. Then we got word the storm spirits had taken you back to their—um, operator, Medea.”

“That witch! Wait—that’s impossible. She’s mortal. She’s dead.”

“Yeah, well,” Leo said, “somehow she got not dead anymore.”

Hedge nodded, his eyes narrowing. “So! You were sent on a dangerous quest to rescue me. Excellent!”

“Um.” Piper got to her feet, holding out her hands so Coach Hedge wouldn’t attack her. “Actually, Glee—can I still call you Coach Hedge? Gleeson seems *wrong*. We’re on a quest for something else. We kind of found you by accident.”

“Oh.” The coach’s spirits seemed to deflate, but only for a second. Then his eyes lit up again. “But there are no accidents! Not on quests. This was *meant* to happen! So, this is the witch’s lair, eh? Why is everything gold?”

“Gold?” Jason looked around. From the way Leo and Piper caught their breath, he guessed they hadn’t noticed yet either.

The room was full of gold—the statues, the tea set Hedge had smashed, the chair that was definitely a throne. Even the curtains—which seemed to have opened by themselves at daybreak—appeared to be woven of gold fiber.

“Nice,” Leo said. “No wonder they got so much security.”

“This isn’t—” Piper stammered. “This isn’t Medea’s place, Coach. It’s some rich person’s mansion in Omaha. We got away from Medea and crash-landed here.”

“It’s destiny, cupcakes!” Hedge insisted. “I’m meant to protect you. What’s the quest?”

Before Jason could decide if he wanted to explain or just shove Coach Hedge back into his cage, a door opened at the far end of the room.

A pudgy man in a white bathrobe stepped out with a golden toothbrush in his mouth. He had a white beard and one of those long, old-fashioned sleeping caps pressed down over his white hair. He froze when he saw them, and the toothbrush fell out of his mouth.

He glanced into the room behind him and called, “Son? Lit, come out here, please. There are strange people in the throne room.”

Coach Hedge did the obvious thing. He raised his club and shouted, “Die!”

JASON

IT TOOK ALL THREE OF THEM to hold back the satyr. “Whoa, Coach!” Jason said. “Bring it down a few notches.” A younger man charged into the room. Jason guessed he must be Lit, the old guy’s son. He was dressed in pajama pants with a sleeveless T-shirt that said cornhuskers, and he held a sword that looked like it could husk a lot of things besides corn. His ripped arms were covered in scars, and his face, framed by curly dark hair, would’ve been handsome if it wasn’t also sliced up.

Lit immediately zeroed in on Jason like he was the biggest threat, and stalked toward him, swinging his sword overhead. “Hold on!” Piper stepped forward, trying for her best calming voice. “This is just a misunderstanding! Everything’s fine.” Lit stopped in his tracks, but he still looked wary. It didn’t help that Hedge was screaming, “I’ll get them!”

Don’t worry!”

“Coach,” Jason pleaded, “they may be friendly. Besides, we’re trespassing in their house.”

“Thank you!” said the old man in the bathrobe. “Now, who are you, and why are you here?”

“Let’s all put our weapons down,” Piper said. “Coach, you first.”

Hedge clenched his jaw. “Just one thwack?”

“No,” Piper said.

“What about a compromise? I’ll kill them first, and if it turns out they were friendly, I’ll apologize.”

“No!” Piper insisted.

“Meh.” Coach Hedge lowered his club.

Piper gave Lit a friendly *sorry-about-that* smile. Even with her hair messed up and wearing two-day-old clothes, she looked extremely cute, and Jason felt a little jealous she was giving Lit that smile.

Lit huffed and sheathed his sword. “You speak well, girl—fortunately for your friends, or I would’ve run them through.”

“Appreciate it,” Leo said. “I try not to get run through before lunchtime.”

The old man in the bathrobe sighed, kicking the teapot that Coach Hedge

had smashed. “Well, since you’re here. Please, sit down.”

Lit frowned. “Your Majesty—”

“No, no, it’s fine, Lit,” the old man said. “New land, new customs. They may sit in my presence. After all, they’ve seen me in my nightclothes. No sense observing formalities.” He did his best to smile, though it looked a little forced. “Welcome to my humble home. I am King Midas.”

“Midas? Impossible,” said Coach Hedge. “He died.”

They were sitting on the sofas now, while the king reclined on his throne. Tricky to do that in a bathrobe, and Jason kept worrying the old guy would forget and uncross his legs. Hopefully he was wearing golden boxers under there.

Lit stood behind the throne, both hands on his sword, glancing at Piper and flexing his muscular arms just to be annoying. Jason wondered if *he* looked that ripped holding a sword. Sadly, he doubted it.

Piper sat forward. “What our satyr friend means, Your Majesty, is that you’re the second mortal we’ve met who should be—sorry—dead. King Midas lived thousands of years ago.”

“Interesting.” The king gazed out the windows at the brilliant blue skies and the winter sunlight. In the distance, downtown Omaha looked like a cluster of children’s blocks—way too clean and small for a regular city.

“You know,” the king said, “I think I *was* a bit dead for a while. It’s strange. Seems like a dream, doesn’t it, Lit?”

“A very long dream, Your Majesty.”

“And yet, now we’re here. I’m enjoying myself very much. I like being alive better.”

“But how?” Piper asked. “You didn’t happen to have a ... patron?”

Midas hesitated, but there was a sly twinkle in his eyes. “Does it matter, my dear?”

“We could kill them again,” Hedge suggested.

“Coach, not helping,” Jason said. “Why don’t you go outside and stand guard?”

Leo coughed. “Is that safe? They’ve got some serious security.”

“Oh, yes,” the king said. “Sorry about that. But it’s lovely stuff, isn’t it? Amazing what gold can still buy. Such excellent toys you have in this country!”

He fished a remote control out of his bathrobe pocket and pressed a few buttons—a pass code, Jason guessed.

“There,” Midas said. “Safe to go out now.”

Coach Hedge grunted. “Fine. But if you need me ...” He winked at Jason meaningfully. Then he pointed at himself, pointed two fingers at their hosts, and

sliced a finger across his throat. Very subtle sign language.

“Yeah, thanks,” Jason said.

After the satyr left, Piper tried another diplomatic smile. “So ... you don’t know how you got here?”

“Oh, well, yes. Sort of,” the king said. He frowned at Lit. “Why did we pick Omaha, again? I know it wasn’t the weather.”

“The oracle,” Lit said.

“Yes! I was told there was an oracle in Omaha.” The king shrugged. “Apparently I was mistaken. But this is a rather nice house, isn’t it? Lit—it’s short for Lityerses, by the way—horrible name, but his mother insisted—Lit has plenty of wide-open space to practice his swordplay. He has quite a reputation for that. They called him the Reaper of Men back in the old days.”

“Oh.” Piper tried to sound enthusiastic. “How nice.”

Lit’s smile was more of a cruel sneer. Jason was now one hundred percent sure he didn’t like this guy, and he was starting to regret sending Hedge outside.

“So,” Jason said. “All this gold—”

The king’s eyes lit up. “Are you here for gold, my boy? Please, take a brochure!”

Jason looked at the brochures on the coffee table. The title said *GOLD: Invest for Eternity*. “Um, you sell gold?”

“No, no,” the king said. “I *make* it. In uncertain times like these, gold is the wisest investment, don’t you think? Governments fall. The dead rise. Giants attack Olympus. But gold retains its value!”

Leo frowned. “I’ve seen that commercial.”

“Oh, don’t be fooled by cheap imitators!” the king said. “I assure you, I can beat any price for a serious investor. I can make a wide assortment of gold items at a moment’s notice.”

“But ...” Piper shook her head in confusion. “Your Majesty, you gave up the golden touch, didn’t you?”

The king looked astonished. “Gave it up?”

“Yes,” Piper said. “You got it from some god—”

“Dionysus,” the king agreed. “I’d rescued one of his satyrs, and in return, the god granted me one wish. I chose the golden touch.”

“But you accidentally turned your own daughter to gold,” Piper remembered. “And you realized how greedy you’d been. So you repented.”

“Repented!” King Midas looked at Lit incredulously. “You see, son? You’re away for a few thousand years, and the story gets twisted all around. My dear girl, did those stories ever say I’d lost my magic touch?”

“Well, I guess not. They just said you learned how to reverse it with

running water, and you brought your daughter back to life.”

“That’s all true. Sometimes I still have to reverse my touch. There’s no running water in the house because I don’t want accidents”—he gestured to his statues—“but we chose to live next to a river just in case. Occasionally, I’ll forget and pat Lit on the back—”

Lit retreated a few steps. “I hate that.”

“I *told* you I was sorry, son. At any rate, gold is wonderful. Why would I give it up?”

“Well ...” Piper looked truly lost now. “Isn’t that the point of the story? That you learned your lesson?”

Midas laughed. “My dear, may I see your backpack for a moment? Toss it here.”

Piper hesitated, but she wasn’t eager to offend the king. She dumped everything out of the pack and tossed it to Midas. As soon as he caught it, the pack turned to gold, like frost spreading across the fabric. It still looked flexible and soft, but definitely gold. The king tossed it back.

“As you see, I can still turn anything to gold,” Midas said. “That pack is magic now, as well. Go ahead—put your little storm spirit enemies in there.”

“Seriously?” Leo was suddenly interested. He took the bag from Piper and held it up to the cage. As soon as he unzipped the backpack, the winds stirred and howled in protest. The cage bars shuddered. The door of the prison flew open and the winds got vacuumed straight into the pack. Leo zipped it shut and grinned. “Gotta admit. That’s cool.”

“You see?” Midas said. “My golden touch a *curse*? Please. I didn’t learn any lesson, and life isn’t a story, girl. Honestly, my daughter Zoe was much more pleasant as a gold statue.”

“She talked a lot,” Lit offered.

“Exactly! And so I turned her back to gold.” Midas pointed. There in the corner was a golden statue of a girl with a shocked expression, as if she were thinking, *Dad!*

“That’s horrible!” Piper said.

“Nonsense. She doesn’t mind. Besides, if I’d learned my lesson, would I have gotten these?”

Midas pulled off his oversize sleeping cap, and Jason didn’t know whether to laugh or get sick. Midas had long fuzzy gray ears sticking up from his white hair—like Bugs Bunny’s, but they weren’t rabbit ears. They were donkey ears.

“Oh, wow,” Leo said. “I didn’t need to see that.”

“Terrible, isn’t it?” Midas sighed. “A few years after the golden touch incident, I judged a music contest between Apollo and Pan, and I declared Pan

the winner. Apollo, sore loser, said I must have the ears of an ass, and *voilà*. This was my reward for being truthful. I tried to keep them a secret. Only my barber knew, but he couldn't help blabbing." Midas pointed out another golden statue—a bald man in a toga, holding a pair of shears. "That's him. He won't be telling anyone's secrets again."

The king smiled. Suddenly he didn't strike Jason as a harmless old man in a bathrobe. His eyes had a merry glow to them—the look of a madman who knew he was mad, accepted his madness, and enjoyed it. "Yes, gold has many uses. I think that *must* be why I was brought back, eh Lit? To bankroll our patron."

Lit nodded. "That and my good sword arm."

Jason glanced at his friends. Suddenly the air in the room seemed much colder.

"So you do have a patron," Jason said. "You work for the giants."

King Midas waved his hand dismissively. "Well, I don't care for giants myself, of course. But even supernatural armies need to get paid. I do owe my patron a great debt. I tried to explain that to the last group that came through, but they were very unfriendly. Wouldn't cooperate at all."

Jason slipped his hand into his pocket and grabbed his gold coin. "The last group?"

"Hunters," Lit snarled. "Blasted girls from Artemis."

Jason felt a spark of electricity—a *literal* spark—travel down his spine. He caught a whiff of electrical fire like he'd just melted some of the springs in the sofa.

His *sister* had been here.

"When?" he demanded. "What happened?"

Lit shrugged. "Few days ago? I didn't get to kill them, unfortunately. They were looking for some evil wolves, or something. Said they were following a trail, heading west. Missing demigod—I don't recall."

Percy Jackson, Jason thought. Annabeth had mentioned the Hunters were looking for him. And in Jason's dream of the burned-out house in the redwoods, he'd heard enemy wolves baying. Hera had called them her keepers. It had to be connected somehow.

Midas scratched his donkey ears. "Very unpleasant young ladies, those Hunters," he recalled. "They absolutely refused to be turned into gold. Much of the security system outside I installed to keep that sort of thing from happening again, you know. I don't have time for those who aren't serious investors."

Jason stood warily and glanced at his friends. They got the message.

"Well," Piper said, managing a smile. "It's been a great visit. Welcome back to life. Thanks for the gold bag."

“Oh, but you can’t leave!” Midas said. “I know you’re not serious investors, but that’s all right! I have to rebuild my collection.”

Lit was smiling cruelly. The king rose, and Leo and Piper moved away from him.

“Don’t worry,” the king assured them. “You don’t *have* to be turned to gold. I give all my guests a choice—join my collection, or die at the hands of Lityerses. Really, it’s good either way.”

Piper tried to use her charmspeak. “Your Majesty, you can’t—”

Quicker than any old man should’ve been able to move, Midas lashed out and grabbed her wrist.

“No!” Jason yelled.

But a frost of gold spread over Piper, and in a heartbeat she was a glittering statue. Leo tried to summon fire, but he’d forgotten his power wasn’t working. Midas touched his hand, and Leo transformed into solid metal.

Jason was so horrified he couldn’t move. His friends—just *gone*. And he hadn’t been able to stop it.

Midas smiled apologetically. “Gold trumps fire, I’m afraid.” He waved around him at all the gold curtains and furniture. “In this room, my power dampens all others: fire... even charmspeak. Which leaves me only one more trophy to collect.”

“Hedge!” Jason yelled. “Need help in here!”

For once, the satyr didn’t charge in. Jason wondered if the lasers had gotten him, or if he was sitting at the bottom of a trap pit.

Midas chuckled. “No goat to the rescue? Sad. But don’t worry, my boy. It’s really not painful. Lit can tell you.”

Jason fixed on an idea. “I choose combat. You said I could choose to fight Lit instead.”

Midas looked mildly disappointed, but he shrugged. “I said you could *die* fighting Lit. But of course, if you wish.”

The king backed away, and Lit raised his sword.

“I’m going to enjoy this,” Lit said. “I am the Reaper of Men!”

“Come on, Cornhusker.” Jason summoned his own weapon. This time it came up as a javelin, and Jason was glad for the extra length.

“Oh, gold weapon!” Midas said. “Very nice.”

Lit charged.

The guy was fast. He slashed and sliced, and Jason could barely dodge the strikes, but his mind went into a different mode—analyzing patterns, learning Lit’s style, which was all offense, no defense.

Jason countered, sidestepped, and blocked. Lit seemed surprised to find him

still alive.

“What is that style?” Lit growled. “You don’t fight like a Greek.”

“Legion training,” Jason said, though he wasn’t sure how he knew that. “It’s Roman.”

“Roman?” Lit struck again, and Jason deflected his blade. “What is *Roman*?”

“News flash,” Jason said. “While you were dead, Rome defeated Greece. Created the greatest empire of all time.”

“Impossible,” Lit said. “Never even heard of them.”

Jason spun on one heel, smacked Lit in the chest with the butt of his javelin, and sent him toppling into Midas’s throne.

“Oh, dear,” Midas said. “Lit?”

“I’m fine,” Lit growled.

“You’d better help him up,” Jason said.

Lit cried, “Dad, no!”

Too late. Midas put his hand on his son’s shoulder, and suddenly a very angry-looking gold statue was sitting on Midas’s throne.

“Curses!” Midas wailed. “That was a naughty trick, demigod. I’ll get you for that.” He patted Lit’s golden shoulder. “Don’t worry, son. I’ll get you down to the river right after I collect this prize.”

Midas raced forward. Jason dodged, but the old man was fast, too. Jason kicked the coffee table into the old man’s legs and knocked him over, but Midas wouldn’t stay down for long.

Then Jason glanced at Piper’s golden statue. Anger washed over him. He was the son of Zeus. He could *not* fail his friends.

He felt a tugging sensation in his gut, and the air pressure dropped so rapidly that his ears popped. Midas must’ve felt it too, because he stumbled to his feet and grabbed his donkey ears.

“Ow! What are you doing?” he demanded. “My power is supreme here!”

Thunder rumbled. Outside, the sky turned black.

“You know another good use for gold?” Jason said.

Midas raised his eyebrows, suddenly excited. “Yes?”

“It’s an excellent conductor of electricity.”

Jason raised his javelin, and the ceiling exploded. A lightning bolt ripped through the roof like it was an eggshell, connected with the tip of Jason’s spear, and sent out arcs of energy that blasted the sofas to shreds. Chunks of ceiling plaster crashed down. The chandelier groaned and snapped off its chain, and Midas screamed as it pinned him to the floor. The glass immediately turned into gold.

When the rumbling stopped, freezing rain poured into the building. Midas cursed in Ancient Greek, thoroughly pinned under his chandelier. The rain soaked everything, turning the gold chandelier back to glass. Piper and Leo were slowly changing too, along with the other statues in the room.

Then the front door burst open, and Coach Hedge charged in, club ready. His mouth was covered with dirt, snow, and grass.

“What’d I miss?” he asked.

“Where were you?” Jason demanded. His head was spinning from summoning the lightning bolt, and it was all he could do to keep from passing out. “I was screaming for help.”

Hedge belched. “Getting a snack. Sorry. Who needs killing?”

“No one, now!” Jason said. “Just grab Leo. I’ll get Piper.”

“Don’t leave me like this!” Midas wailed.

All around him the statues of his victims were turning to flesh—his daughter, his barber, and a whole lot of angry-looking guys with swords.

Jason grabbed Piper’s golden bag and his own supplies.

Then he threw a rug over the golden statue of Lit on the throne. Hopefully that would keep the Reaper of Men from turning back to flesh—at least until after Midas’s victims did.

“Let’s get out of here,” Jason told Hedge. “I think these guys will want some quality time with Midas.”

PIPER

PIPER WOKE UP COLD AND SHIVERING.

She'd had the worst dream about an old guy with donkey ears chasing her around and shouting, *You're it!*

"Oh, god." Her teeth chattered. "He turned me to gold!"

"You're okay now." Jason leaned over and tucked a warm blanket around her, but she still felt as cold as a Boread.

She blinked, trying to figure out where they were. Next to her, a campfire blazed, turning the air sharp with smoke. Firelight flickered against rock walls. They were in a shallow cave, but it didn't offer much protection. Outside, the wind howled. Snow blew sideways. It might've been day or night. The storm made it too dark to tell.

"L-L-Leo?" Piper managed.

"Present and un-gold-ified." Leo was also wrapped in blankets. He didn't look great, but better than Piper felt. "I got the precious metal treatment too," he said. "But I came out of it faster. Dunno why. We had to dunk you in the river to get you back completely. Tried to dry you off, but ... it's really, really cold."

"You've got hypothermia," Jason said. "We risked as much nectar as we could. Coach Hedge did a little nature magic—"

"Sports medicine." The coach's ugly face loomed over her. "Kind of a hobby of mine. Your breath might smell like wild mushrooms and Gatorade for a few days, but it'll pass. You probably won't die. Probably."

"Thanks," Piper said weakly. "How did you beat Midas?"

Jason told her the story, putting most of it down to luck.

The coach snorted. "Kid's being modest. You should've seen him. Hi-yah! Slice! Boom with the lightning!"

"Coach, you didn't even see it," Jason said. "You were outside eating the lawn."

But the satyr was just warming up. "Then I came in with my club, and we dominated that room. Afterward, I told him, 'Kid, I'm proud of you! If you could just work on your upper body strength—'"

"Coach," said Jason.

“Yeah?”

“Shut up, please.”

“Sure.” The coach sat down at the fire and started chewing his cudgel.

Jason put his hand on Piper’s forehead and checked her temperature. “Leo, can you stoke the fire?”

“On it.” Leo summoned a baseball-sized clump of flames and lobbed it into the campfire.

“Do I look that bad?” Piper shivered.

“Nah,” Jason said.

“You’re a terrible liar,” she said. “Where are we?”

“Pikes Peak,” Jason said. “Colorado.”

“But that’s, what—five hundred miles from Omaha?”

“Something like that,” Jason agreed. “I harnessed the storm spirits to bring us this far. They didn’t like it—went a little faster than I wanted, almost crashed us into the mountainside before I could get them back in the bag. I’m not going to be trying that again.”

“Why are we here?”

Leo sniffed. “That’s what *I* asked him.”

Jason gazed into the storm as if watching for something. “That glittery wind trail we saw yesterday? It was still in the sky, though it had faded a lot. I followed it until I couldn’t see it anymore. Then—honestly I’m not sure. I just felt like this was the right place to stop.”

“Course it is.” Coach Hedge spit out some cudgel splinters. “Aeolus’s floating palace should be anchored above us, right at the peak. This is one of his favorite spots to dock.”

“Maybe that was it.” Jason knit his eyebrows. “I don’t know. Something else, too ...”

“The Hunters were heading west,” Piper remembered. “Do you think they’re around here?”

Jason rubbed his forearm as if the tattoos were bothering him. “I don’t see how anyone could survive on the mountain right now. The storm’s pretty bad. It’s already the evening before the solstice, but we didn’t have much choice except to wait out the storm here. We had to give you some time to rest before we tried moving.”

He didn’t need to convince her. The wind howling outside the cave scared her, and she couldn’t stop shivering.

“We have to get you warm.” Jason sat next to her and held out his arms a little awkwardly. “Uh, you mind if I ...”

“I suppose.” She tried to sound nonchalant.

He put his arms around her and held her. They scooted closer to the fire. Coach Hedge chewed on his club and spit splinters into the fire.

Leo broke out some cooking supplies and started frying burger patties on an iron skillet. “So, guys, long as you’re cuddled up for story time ... something I’ve been meaning to tell you. On the way to Omaha, I had this dream. Kinda hard to understand with the static and the *Wheel of Fortune* breaking in—”

“*Wheel of Fortune?*” Piper assumed Leo was kidding, but when he looked up from his burgers, his expression was deadly serious.

“The thing is,” he said, “my dad Hephaestus talked to me.”

Leo told them about his dream. In the firelight, with the wind howling, the story was even creepier. Piper could imagine the static-filled voice of the god warning about giants who were the sons of Tartarus, and about Leo losing some friends along the way.

She tried to concentrate on something good: Jason’s arms around her, the warmth slowly spreading into her body, but she was terrified. “I don’t understand. If demigods and gods have to work together to kill the giants, why would the gods stay silent? If they need us—”

“Ha,” said Coach Hedge. “The gods *hate* needing humans. They like to be needed *by* humans, but not the other way around. Things will have to get a whole lot worse before Zeus admits he made a mistake closing Olympus.”

“Coach,” Piper said, “that was almost an intelligent comment.”

Hedge huffed. “What? I’m intelligent! I’m not surprised you cupcakes haven’t heard of the Giant War. The gods don’t like to talk about it. Bad PR to admit you needed mortals to help beat an enemy. That’s just embarrassing.”

“There’s more, though,” Jason said. “When I dreamed about Hera in her cage, she said Zeus was acting unusually paranoid. And Hera—she said she went to those ruins because a voice had been speaking in her head. What if someone’s influencing the gods, like Medea influenced us?”

Piper shuddered. She’d had a similar thought—that some force they couldn’t see was manipulating things behind the scenes, helping the giants. Maybe the same force was keeping Enceladus informed about their movements, and had even knocked their dragon out of the sky over Detroit. Perhaps Leo’s sleeping Dirt Woman, or another servant of hers ...

Leo set hamburger buns on the skillet to toast. “Yeah, Hephaestus said something similar, like Zeus was acting weirder than usual. But what bothered me was the stuff my dad *didn’t* say. Like a couple of times he was talking about the demigods, and how he had so many kids and all. I don’t know. He acted like getting the greatest demigods together was going to be almost impossible—like

Hera was trying, but it was a really stupid thing to do, and there was some secret Hephaestus wasn't supposed to tell me."

Jason shifted. Piper could feel the tension in his arms.

"Chiron was the same way back at camp," he said. "He mentioned a sacred oath not to discuss—something. Coach, you know anything about that?"

"Nah. I'm just a satyr. They don't tell us the juicy stuff. Especially an old —" He stopped himself.

"An old guy like you?" Piper asked. "But you're not that old, are you?"

"Hundred and six," the coach muttered.

Leo coughed. "Say what?"

"Don't catch your panties on fire, Valdez. That's just fifty-three in human years. Still, yeah, I made some enemies on the Council of Cloven Elders. I've been a protector a *longtime*. But they started saying I was getting unpredictable. Too violent. Can you imagine?"

"Wow." Piper tried not to look at her friends. "That's hard to believe."

Coach scowled. "Yeah, then finally we get a good war going with the Titans, and do they put me on the front lines? No! They send me as far away as possible—the Canadian frontier, can you believe it? Then after the war, they put me out to pasture. The Wilderness School. Bah! Like I'm too old to be helpful just because I like playing offense. All those flower-pickers on the Council—talking about nature."

"I thought satyrs liked nature," Piper ventured.

"Shoot, I love nature," Hedge said. "Nature means big things killing and eating little things! And when you're a —you know—vertically challenged satyr like me, you get in good shape, you carry a big stick, and you don't take nothing from no one! That's nature." Hedge snorted indignantly. "Flower-pickers. Anyway, I hope you got something vegetarian cooking, Valdez. I don't do flesh."

"Yeah, Coach. Don't eat your cudgel. I got some tofu patties here. Piper's a vegetarian too. I'll throw them on in a second."

The smell of frying burgers filled the air. Piper usually hated the smell of cooking meat, but her stomach rumbled like it wanted to mutiny.

I'm losing it, she thought. Think broccoli. Carrots. Lentils.

Her stomach wasn't the only thing rebelling. Lying by the fire, with Jason holding her, Piper's conscience felt like a hot bullet slowing working its way toward her heart. All the guilt she'd been holding in for the last week, since the giant Enceladus had first sent her a dream, was about to kill her.

Her friends wanted to help her. Jason even said he'd walk into a trap to save her dad. And Piper had shut them out.

For all she knew, she'd already doomed her father when she attacked Medea.

She choked back a sob. Maybe she'd done the right thing in Chicago by saving her friends, but she'd only delayed her problem. She could never betray her friends, but the tiniest part of her was desperate enough to think, *What if I did?*

She tried to imagine what her dad would say. *Hey, Dad, if you were ever chained up by a cannibal giant and I had to betray a couple of friends to save you, what should I do?*

Funny, that had never come up when they did Any Three Questions. Her dad would never take the question seriously, of course. He'd probably tell her one of Grandpa Tom's old stories—something with glowing hedgehogs and talking birds—and then laugh about it as if the advice was silly.

Piper wished she remembered her grandpa better. Sometimes she dreamed about that little two-room house in Oklahoma. She wondered what it would've been like to grow up there.

Her dad would think that was nuts. He'd had spent his whole life running away from that place, distancing himself from the rez, playing any role except Native American. He'd always told Piper how lucky she was to grow up rich and well cared-for, in a nice house in California.

She'd learned to be vaguely uncomfortable about her ancestry—like Dad's old pictures from the eighties, when he had feathered hair and crazy clothes. *Can you believe I ever looked like that?* he'd say. Being Cherokee was the same way for him—something funny and mildly embarrassing.

But what else were they? Dad didn't seem to know. Maybe that's why he was always so unhappy, changing roles. Maybe that's why Piper started stealing things, looking for something her dad couldn't give her.

Leo put tofu patties on the skillet. The wind kept raging. Piper thought of an old story her dad had told her ... one that maybe *did* answer some of her questions.

One day in second grade she'd come home in tears and demanded why her father had named her Piper. The kids were making fun of her because Piper Cherokee was a kind of airplane.

Her dad laughed, as if that had never occurred to him. "No, Pipes. Fine airplane. That's not how I named you. Grandpa Tom picked out your name. First time he heard you cry, he said you had a powerful voice—better than any reed flute piper. He said you'd learn to sing the hardest Cherokee songs, even the snake song."

“The snake song?”

Dad told her the legend—how one day a Cherokee woman had seen a snake playing too near her children and killed it with a rock, not realizing it was the king of rattlesnakes. The snakes prepared for war on the humans, but the woman’s husband tried to make peace. He promised he’d do anything to repay the rattlesnakes. The snakes held him to his word. They told him to send his wife to the well so the snakes could bite her and take her life in exchange. The man was heartbroken, but he did what they asked. Afterward, the snakes were impressed that the man had given up so much and kept his promise. They taught him the snake song for all the Cherokee to use. From that point on, if any Cherokee met a snake and sang that song, the snake would recognize the Cherokee as a friend, and would not bite.

“That’s awful!” Piper had said. “He let his wife die?”

Her dad spread his hands. “It was a hard sacrifice. But one life brought generations of peace between snakes and Cherokee. Grandpa Tom believed that Cherokee music could solve almost any problem. He thought you’d know lots of songs, and be the greatest musician of the family. That’s why we named you Piper.”

A hard sacrifice. Had her grandfather foreseen something about her, even when she was a baby? Had he sensed she was a child of Aphrodite? Her dad would probably tell her that was crazy. Grandpa Tom was no oracle.

But still ... she’d made a promise to help on this quest. Her friends were counting on her. They’d saved her when Midas had turned her to gold. They’d brought her back to life. She couldn’t repay them with lies.

Gradually, she started to feel warmer. She stopped shivering and settled against Jason’s chest. Leo handed out the food. Piper didn’t want to move, talk, or do anything to disrupt the moment. But she had to.

“We need to talk.” She sat up so she could face Jason. “I don’t want to hide anything from you guys anymore.”

They looked at her with their mouths full of burger. Too late to change her mind now.

“Three nights before the Grand Canyon trip,” she said, “I had a dream vision—a giant, telling me my father had been taken hostage. He told me I had to cooperate, or my dad would be killed.”

The flames crackled.

Finally Jason said, “Enceladus? You mentioned that name before.”

Coach Hedge whistled. “Big giant. Breathes fire. Not somebody I’d want barbecuing my daddy goat.”

Jason gave him a *shut up* look. “Piper, go on. What happened next?”

“I—I tried to reach my dad, but all I got was his personal assistant, and she told me not to worry.”

“Jane?” Leo remembered. “Didn’t Medea say something about controlling her?”

Piper nodded. “To get my dad back, I had to sabotage this quest. I didn’t realize it would be the three of us. Then after we started the quest, Enceladus sent me another warning: He told me he wanted you two dead. He wants me to lead you to a mountain. I don’t know exactly which one, but it’s in the Bay Area—I could see the Golden Gate Bridge from the summit. I have to be there by noon on the solstice, tomorrow. An exchange.”

She couldn’t meet her friends’ eyes. She waited for them to yell at her, or turn their backs, or kick her out into the snowstorm.

Instead, Jason scooted next to her and put his arm around her again. “God, Piper. I’m so sorry.”

Leo nodded. “No kidding. You’ve been carrying this around for a week? Piper, we could *help* you.”

She glared at them. “Why don’t you yell at me or something? I was ordered to kill you!”

“Aw, come on,” Jason said. “You’ve saved us both on this quest. I’d put my life in your hands any day.”

“Same,” Leo said. “Can I have a hug too?”

“You don’t get it!” Piper said. “I’ve probably just killed my dad, telling you this.”

“I doubt it.” Coach Hedge belched. He was eating his tofu burger folded inside the paper plate, chewing it all like a taco. “Giant hasn’t gotten what he wants yet, so he still needs your dad for leverage. He’ll wait until the deadline passes, see if you show up. He wants you to divert the quest to this mountain, right?”

Piper nodded uncertainly.

“So that means Hera is being kept somewhere else,” Hedge reasoned. “And she has to be saved by the same day. So you have to choose—rescue your dad, or rescue Hera. If you go after Hera, *then* Enceladus takes care of your dad. Besides, Enceladus would never let you go even if you cooperated. You’re obviously one of the seven in the Great Prophecy.”

One of the seven. She’d talked about this before with Jason and Leo, and she supposed it must be true, but she still had trouble believing it. She didn’t feel that important. She was just a stupid child of Aphrodite. How could she be worth deceiving and killing?

“So we have no choice,” she said miserably. “We have to save Hera, or the giant king gets unleashed. That’s our quest. The world depends on it. And Enceladus seems to have ways of watching me. He isn’t stupid. He’ll know if we change course and go the wrong way. He’ll kill my dad.”

“He’s not going to kill your dad,” Leo said. “We’ll save him.”

“We don’t have time!” Piper cried. “Besides, it’s a trap.”

“We’re your friends, beauty queen,” Leo said. “We’re not going to let your dad die. We just gotta figure out a plan.”

Coach Hedge grumbled. “Would help if we knew where this mountain was. Maybe Aeolus can tell you that. The Bay Area has a bad reputation for demigods. Old home of the Titans, Mount Othrys, sits over Mount Tam, where Atlas holds up the sky. I hope that’s not the mountain you saw.”

Piper tried to remember the vista in her dreams. “I don’t think so. This was inland.”

Jason frowned at the fire, like he was trying to remember something.

“Bad reputation ... that doesn’t seem right. The Bay Area ...”

“You think you’ve been there?” Piper asked.

“I ...” He looked like he was almost on the edge of a breakthrough. Then the anguish came back into his eyes. “I don’t know. Hedge, what happened to Mount Othrys?”

Hedge took another bite of paper and burger. “Well, Kronos built a new palace there last summer. Big nasty place, was going to be the headquarters for his new kingdom and all. Weren’t any battles there, though. Kronos marched on Manhattan, tried to take Olympus. If I remember right, he left some other Titans in charge of his palace, but after Kronos got defeated in Manhattan, the whole palace just crumbled on its own.”

“No,” Jason said.

Everyone looked at him.

“What do you mean, ‘No’?” Leo asked.

“That’s not what happened. I—” He tensed, looking toward the cave entrance. “Did you hear that?”

For a second, nothing. Then Piper heard it: howls piercing the night.

PIPER

“WOLVES,” PIPER SAID. “THEY SOUND CLOSE.”

Jason rose and summoned his sword. Leo and Coach Hedge got to their feet too. Piper tried, but black spots danced before her eyes.

“Stay there,” Jason told her. “We’ll protect you.”

She gritted her teeth. She hated feeling helpless. She didn’t *want* anyone to protect her. First the stupid ankle. Now stupid hypothermia. She wanted to be on her feet, with her dagger in her hand.

Then, just outside the firelight at the entrance of the cave, she saw a pair of red eyes glowing in dark.

Okay, she thought. Maybe a little protection is fine.

More wolves edged into the firelight—black beasts bigger than Great Danes, with ice and snow caked on their fur. Their fangs gleamed, and their glowing red eyes looked disturbingly intelligent. The wolf in front was almost as tall as a horse, his mouth stained as if he’d just made a fresh kill.

Piper pulled her dagger out of its sheath.

Then Jason stepped forward and said something in Latin.

Piper didn’t think a dead language would have much effect on wild animals, but the alpha wolf curled his lip. The fur stood up along his spine. One of his lieutenants tried to advance, but the alpha wolf snapped at his ear. Then all of the wolves backed into the dark.

“Dude, I gotta study Latin.” Leo’s hammer shook in his hand. “What’d you say, Jason?”

Hedge cursed. “Whatever it was, it wasn’t enough. Look.”

The wolves were coming back, but the alpha wolf wasn’t with them. They didn’t attack. They waited—at least a dozen now, in a rough semicircle just outside the firelight, blocking the cave exit.

The coach hefted his club. “Here’s the plan. I’ll kill them all, and you guys escape.”

“Coach, they’ll rip you apart,” Piper said.

“Nah, I’m good.”

Then Piper saw the silhouette of a man coming through the storm, wading

through the wolf pack.

“Stick together,” Jason said. “They respect a pack. And Hedge, no crazy stuff. We’re not leaving you or anyone else behind.”

Piper got a lump in her throat. She was the weak link in their “pack” right now. No doubt the wolves could smell her fear. She might as well be wearing a sign that said free lunch.

The wolves parted, and the man stepped into the firelight. His hair was greasy and ragged, the color of fireplace soot, topped with a crown of what looked like finger bones. His robes were tattered fur—wolf, rabbit, raccoon, deer, and several others Piper couldn’t identify. The furs didn’t look cured, and from the smell, they weren’t very fresh. His frame was lithe and muscular, like a distance runner’s. But the most horrible thing was his face. His thin pale skin was pulled tight over his skull. His teeth were sharpened like fangs. His eyes glowed bright red like his wolves’—and they fixed on Jason with absolute hatred.

“*Ecce,*” he said, “*filli Romani.*”

“Speak English, wolf man!” Hedge bellowed.

The wolf man snarled. “Tell your faun to mind his tongue, son of Rome. Or he’ll be my first snack.”

Piper remembered that *faun* was the Roman name for *satyr*. Not exactly helpful information. Now, if she could remember who this wolf guy was in Greek mythology, and how to defeat him, *that* she could use.

The wolf man studied their little group. His nostrils twitched. “So it’s true,” he mused. “A child of Aphrodite. A son of Hephaestus. A faun. And a child of Rome, of Lord Jupiter, no less. All together, without killing each other. How interesting.”

“You were told about us?” Jason asked. “By whom?”

The man snarled—perhaps a laugh, perhaps a challenge. “Oh, we’ve been patrolling for you all across the west, demigod, hoping we’d be the first to find you. The giant king will reward me well when he rises. I am Lycaon, king of the wolves. And my pack is hungry.”

The wolves snarled in the darkness.

Out of the corner of her eye, Piper saw Leo put up his hammer and slip something else from his tool belt—a glass bottle full of clear liquid.

Piper racked her brain trying to place the wolf guy’s name. She knew she’d heard it before, but she couldn’t remember details.

Lycaon glared at Jason’s sword. He moved to each side as if looking for an opening, but Jason’s blade moved with him.

“Leave,” Jason ordered. “There’s no food for you here.”

“Unless you want tofu burgers,” Leo offered.

Lycaon bared his fangs. Apparently he wasn't a tofu fan.

“If I had my way,” Lycaon said with regret, “I'd kill you first, son of Jupiter. Your father made me what I am. I was the powerful mortal king of Arcadia, with fifty fine sons, and Zeus slew them all with his lightning bolts.”

“Ha,” Coach Hedge said. “For good reason!”

Jason glanced over his shoulder. “Coach, you know this clown?”

“I do,” Piper answered. The details of the myth came back to her—a short, horrible story she and her father had laughed at over breakfast. She wasn't laughing now.

“Lycaon invited Zeus to dinner,” she said. “But the king wasn't sure it was really Zeus. So to test his powers, Lycaon tried to feed him human flesh. Zeus got outraged—”

“And killed my sons!” Lycaon howled. The wolves behind him howled too.

“So Zeus turned him into a wolf,” Piper said. “They call... they call werewolves *lycanthropes*, named after him, the first werewolf.”

“The king of wolves,” Coach Hedge finished. “An immortal, smelly, vicious mutt.”

Lycaon growled. “I will tear you apart, faun!”

“Oh, you want some goat, buddy? 'Cause I'll give you goat.”

“Stop it,” Jason said. “Lycaon, you said you *wanted* to kill me first, but...?”

“Sadly, Child of Rome, you are spoken for. Since this one”—he wagged his claws at Piper—“has failed to kill you, you are to be delivered alive to the Wolf House. One of my compatriots has asked for the honor of killing you herself.”

“Who?” Jason said.

The wolf king snickered. “Oh, a great admirer of yours. Apparently, you made quite an impression on her. She will take care of you soon enough, and really I cannot complain. Spilling your blood at the Wolf House should mark my new territory quite well. Lupa will think twice about challenging my pack.”

Piper's heart tried to jump out of her chest. She didn't understand everything Lycaon had said, but a woman who wanted to kill Jason? Medea, she thought. Somehow, she must've survived the explosion.

Piper struggled to her feet. Spots danced before her eyes again. The cave seemed to spin.

“You're going to leave now,” Piper said, “before we destroy you.”

She tried to put power into the words, but she was too weak. Shivering in her blankets, pale and sweaty and barely able to hold a knife, she couldn't have looked very threatening.

Lycaon's red eyes crinkled with humor. "A brave try, girl.

I admire that. Perhaps I'll make your end quick. Only the son of Jupiter is needed alive. The rest of you, I'm afraid, are dinner."

At that moment, Piper knew she was going to die. But at least she'd die on her feet, fighting next to Jason.

Jason took a step forward. "You're not killing anyone, wolf man. Not without going through me."

Lycaon howled and extended his claws. Jason slashed at him, but his golden sword passed straight through as if the wolf king wasn't there.

Lycaon laughed. "Gold, bronze, steel—none of these are any good against my wolves, son of Jupiter."

"Silver!" Piper cried. "Aren't werewolves hurt by silver?"

"We don't have any silver!" Jason said.

Wolves leaped into the firelight. Hedge charged forward with an elated "Woot!"

But Leo struck first. He threw his glass bottle and it shattered on the ground, splattering liquid all over the wolves—the unmistakable smell of gasoline. He shot a burst of fire at the puddle, and a wall of flames erupted.

Wolves yelped and retreated. Several caught fire and had to run back into the snow. Even Lycaon looked uneasily at the barrier of flames now separating his wolves from the demigods.

"Aw, c'mon," Coach Hedge complained. "I can't hit them if they're way over there."

Every time a wolf came closer, Leo shot a new wave of fire from his hands, but each effort seemed to make him a little more tired, and the gasoline was already dying down. "I can't summon any more gas!" Leo warned. Then his face turned red. "Wow, that came out wrong. I mean the *burning* kind. Gonna take the tool belt a while to recharge. What you got, man?"

"Nothing," Jason said. "Not even a weapon that works."

"Lightning?" Piper asked.

Jason concentrated, but nothing happened. "I think the snowstorm is interfering, or something."

"Unleash the *venti*!" Piper said.

"Then we'll have nothing to give Aeolus," Jason said. "We'll have come all this way for nothing."

Lycaon laughed. "I can smell your fear. A few more minutes of life, heroes. Pray to whatever gods you wish. Zeus did not grant me mercy, and you will have none from me."

The flames began to sputter out. Jason cursed and dropped his sword. He

crouched like he was ready to go hand-to-hand. Leo pulled his hammer out of his pack. Piper raised her dagger—not much, but it was all she had. Coach Hedge hefted his club, and he was the only one who looked excited about dying.

Then a ripping sound cut through the wind—like a piece of tearing cardboard. A long stick sprouted from the neck of the nearest wolf—the shaft of a silver arrow. The wolf writhed and fell, melting into a puddle of shadow.

More arrows. More wolves fell. The pack broke in confusion. An arrow flashed toward Lycaon, but the wolf king caught it in midair. Then he yelled in pain. When he dropped the arrow, it left a charred, smoking gash across his palm. Another arrow caught him in the shoulder, and the wolf king staggered.

“Curse them!” Lycaon yelled. He growled at his pack, and the wolves turned and ran. Lycaon fixed Jason with those glowing red eyes. “This isn’t over, boy.”

The wolf king disappeared into the night.

Seconds later, Piper heard more wolves baying, but the sound was different—less threatening, more like hunting dogs on the scent. A smaller white wolf burst into the cave, followed by two more.

Hedge said, “Kill it?”

“No!” Piper said. “Wait.”

The wolves tilted their heads and studied the campers with huge golden eyes.

A heartbeat later, their masters appeared: a troop of hunters in white-and-gray winter camouflage, at least half a dozen. All of them carried bows, with quivers of glowing silver arrows on their backs.

Their faces were covered with parka hoods, but clearly they were all girls. One, a little taller than the rest, crouched in the firelight and snatched up the arrow that had wounded Lycaon’s hand.

“So close.” She turned to her companions. “Phoebe, stay with me. Watch the entrance. The rest of you, follow Lycaon. We can’t lose him now. I’ll catch up with you.”

The other hunters mumbled agreement and disappeared, heading after Lycaon’s pack.

The girl in white turned toward them, her face still hidden in her parka hood. “We’ve been following that demon’s trail for over a week. Is everyone all right? No one got bit?”

Jason stood frozen, staring at the girl. Piper realized something about her voice sounded familiar. It was hard to pin down, but the way she spoke, the way she formed her words, reminded her of Jason.

“You’re her,” Piper guessed. “You’re Thalia.”

The girl tensed. Piper was afraid she might draw her bow, but instead she pulled down her parka hood. Her hair was spiky black, with a silver tiara across her brow. Her face had a super-healthy glow to it, as if she were a little more than human, and her eyes were brilliant blue. She was the girl from Jason's photograph.

"Do I know you?" Thalia asked.

Piper took a breath. "This might be a shock, but—"

"Thalia." Jason stepped forward, his voice trembling. "I'm Jason, your brother."

LEO

LEO FIGURED HE HAD THE WORST LUCK in the group, and that was saying a lot. Why didn't *he* get to have the long-lost sister or the movie star dad who needed rescuing? All he got was a tool belt and a dragon that broke down halfway through the quest. Maybe it was the stupid curse of the Hephaestus cabin, but Leo didn't think so. His life had been unlucky way before he got to camp.

A thousand years from now, when this quest was being told around a campfire, he figured people would talk about brave Jason, beautiful Piper, and their sidekick Flaming Valdez, who accompanied them with a bag of magic screwdrivers and occasionally fixed tofu burgers.

If that wasn't bad enough, Leo fell in love with every girl he saw—as long as she was totally out of his league.

When he first saw Thalia, Leo immediately thought she was *way* too pretty to be Jason's sister. Then he thought he'd better not say that or he'd get in trouble. He liked her dark hair, her blue eyes, and her confident attitude. She looked like the kind of girl who could stomp anybody on the ball court or the battlefield, and wouldn't give Leo the time of day—just Leo's type!

For a minute, Jason and Thalia faced each other, stunned. Then Thalia rushed forward and hugged him.

"My gods! She told me you were dead!" She gripped Jason's face and seemed to be examining everything about it. "Thank Artemis, it *is* you. That little scar on your lip—you tried to eat a stapler when you were two!"

Leo laughed. "Seriously?"

Hedge nodded like he approved of Jason's taste. "Staplers —excellent source of iron."

"W-wait," Jason stammered. "Who told you I was dead? What happened?"

At the cave entrance, one of the white wolves barked. Thalia looked back at the wolf and nodded, but she kept her hands on Jason's face, like she was afraid he might vanish. "My wolf is telling me I don't have much time, and she's right. But we *have* to talk. Let's sit."

Piper did better than that. She collapsed. She would've cracked her head on the cave floor if Hedge hadn't caught her.

Thalia rushed over. “What’s wrong with her? Ah—never mind. I see. Hypothermia. Ankle.” She frowned at the satyr. “Don’t you know nature healing?”

Hedge scoffed. “Why do you think she looks *this* good? Can’t you smell the Gatorade?”

Thalia looked at Leo for the first time, and of course it was an accusatory glare, like *Why did you let the goat be a doctor?* As if that was Leo’s fault.

“You and the satyr,” Thalia ordered, “take this girl to my friend at the entrance. Phoebe’s an excellent healer.”

“It’s cold out there!” Hedge said. “I’ll freeze my horns off.”

But Leo knew when they weren’t wanted. “Come on, Hedge. These two need time to talk.”

“Humph. Fine,” the satyr muttered. “Didn’t even get to brain anybody.”

Hedge carried Piper toward the entrance. Leo was about to follow when Jason called, “Actually, man, could you, um, stick around?”

Leo saw something in Jason’s eyes he didn’t expect: Jason was asking for support. He wanted somebody else there. He was scared.

Leo grinned. “Sticking around is my specialty.”

Thalia didn’t look too happy about it, but the three of them sat at the fire. For a few minutes, nobody spoke. Jason studied his sister like she was a scary device—one that might explode if handled incorrectly. Thalia seemed more at ease, as if she was used to stumbling across stranger things than long-lost relatives. But still she regarded Jason in a kind of amazed trance, maybe remembering a little two-year-old who tried to eat a stapler. Leo took a few pieces of copper wire out of his pockets and twisted them together.

Finally he couldn’t stand the silence. “So ... the Hunters of Artemis. This whole ‘not dating’ thing—is that like *always*, or more of a seasonal thing, or what?”

Thalia stared at him as if he’d just evolved from pond scum. Yeah, he was *definitely* liking this girl.

Jason kicked him in the shin. “Don’t mind Leo. He’s just trying to break the ice. But, Thalia ... what happened to our family? Who told you I was dead?”

Thalia tugged at a silver bracelet on her wrist. In the firelight, in her winter camouflage, she almost looked like Khione the snow princess—just as cold and beautiful.

“Do you remember anything?” she asked.

Jason shook his head. “I woke up three days ago on a bus with Leo and Piper.”

“Which wasn’t our fault,” Leo added hastily. “Hera stole his memories.”

Thalia tensed. “Hera? How do you know that?”

Jason explained about their quest—the prophecy at camp, Hera getting imprisoned, the giant taking Piper’s dad, and the winter solstice deadline. Leo chimed in to add the important stuff: how he’d fixed the bronze dragon, could throw fireballs, and made excellent tacos.

Thalia was a good listener. Nothing seemed to surprise her—the monsters, the prophecies, the dead rising. But when Jason mentioned King Midas, she cursed in Ancient Greek.

“I knew we should’ve burned down his mansion,” she said. “That man’s a menace. But we were so intent on following Lycaon—Well, I’m glad you got away. So Hera’s been ... what, hiding you all these years?”

“I don’t know.” Jason brought out the photo from his pocket. “She left me just enough memory to recognize your face.”

Thalia looked at the picture, and her expression softened. “I’d forgotten about that. I left it in Cabin One, didn’t I?”

Jason nodded. “I think Hera wanted for us to meet. When we landed here, at this cave ... I had a feeling it was important. Like I knew you were close by. Is that crazy?”

“Nah,” Leo assured him. “We were absolutely destined to meet your hot sister.”

Thalia ignored him. Probably she just didn’t want to let on how much Leo impressed her.

“Jason,” she said, “when you’re dealing with the gods, *nothing* is too crazy. But you can’t trust Hera, especially since we’re children of Zeus. She *hates* all children of Zeus.”

“But she said something about Zeus giving her my life as a peace offering. Does that make any sense?”

The color drained from Thalia’s face. “Oh, gods. Mother wouldn’t have ... You don’t remember—No, of course you don’t.”

“What?” Jason asked.

Thalia’s features seemed to grow older in the firelight, like her immortality wasn’t working so well. “Jason ... I’m not sure how to say this. Our mom wasn’t exactly stable. She caught Zeus’s eye because she was a television actress, and she *was* beautiful, but she didn’t handle the fame well. She drank, pulled stupid stunts. She was always in the tabloids. She could never get enough attention. Even before you were born, she and I argued all the time. She ... she knew Dad was Zeus, and I think that was too much for her to take. It was like the ultimate achievement for her to attract the lord of the sky, and she couldn’t accept it when he left. The thing about the gods... well, they don’t hang around.”

Leo remembered his own mom, the way she'd assured him over and over that his dad would be back someday. But she'd never acted mad about it. She didn't seem to want Hephaestus for herself—only so Leo could know his father. She'd dealt with working a dead-end job, living in a tiny apartment, never having enough money—and she'd seemed fine with it. As long as she had Leo, she always said, life would be okay.

He watched Jason's face—looking more and more devastated as Thalia described their mom—and for once, Leo didn't feel jealous of his friend. Leo might have lost his mom. He might have had some hard times. But at least he remembered her. He found himself tapping out a Morse code message on his knee: *Love you*. He felt bad for Jason, not having memories like that—not having anything to fall back on.

“So ...” Jason didn't seem able to finish the question.

“Jason, you got friends,” Leo told him. “Now you got a sister. You're not alone.”

Thalia offered her hand, and Jason took it.

“When I was about seven,” she said, “Zeus started visiting Mom again. I think he felt bad about wrecking her life, and he seemed—different somehow. A little older and sterner, more fatherly toward me. For a while, Mom improved. She loved having Zeus around, bringing her presents, causing the sky to rumble. She always wanted more attention. That's the year you were born. Mom ... well, I never got along with her, but you gave me a reason to hang around. You were so cute.

And I didn't trust Mom to look after you. Of course, Zeus eventually stopped coming by again. He probably couldn't stand Mom's demands anymore, always pestering him to let her visit Olympus, or to make her immortal or eternally beautiful. When he left for good, Mom got more and more unstable. That was about the time the monsters started attacking me. Mom blamed Hera. She claimed the goddess was coming after you too—that Hera had barely tolerated my birth, but *two* demigod children from the same family was too big an insult. Mom even said she hadn't wanted to name you Jason, but Zeus insisted, as a way to appease Hera because the goddess liked that name. I didn't know what to believe.”

Leo fiddled with his copper wires. He felt like an intruder. He shouldn't be listening to this, but it also made him feel like he was getting to know Jason for the first time—like maybe being here now made up for those four months at Wilderness School, when Leo had just imagined they'd had a friendship.

“How did you guys get separated?” he asked.

Thalia squeezed her brother's hand. “If I'd known you were alive ... gods,

things would've been so different. But when you were two, Mom packed us in the car for a family vacation. We drove up north, toward the wine country, to this park she wanted to show us. I remember thinking it was strange because Mom never took us anywhere, and she was acting super nervous. I was holding your hand, walking you toward this big building in the middle of the park, and ...” She took a shaky breath. “Mom told me to go back to the car and get the picnic basket. I didn't want to leave you alone with her, but it was only for a few minutes. When I came back ... Mom was kneeling on the stone steps, hugging herself and crying. She said—she said you were gone. She said Hera claimed you and you were as good as dead. I didn't know what she'd done. I was afraid she'd completely lost her mind. I ran all over the place looking for you, but you'd just vanished. She had to drag me away, kicking and screaming. For the next few days I was hysterical. I don't remember everything, but I called the police on Mom and they questioned her for a long time. Afterward, we fought. She told me I'd betrayed her, that I should support her, like *she* was the only one who mattered. Finally I couldn't stand it. Your disappearance was the last straw. I ran away from home, and I never went back, not even when Mom died a few years ago. I thought you were gone forever. I never told anyone about you—not even Annabeth or Luke, my two best friends. It was just too painful.”

“Chiron knew.” Jason's voice sounded far away. “When I got to camp, he took one look at me and said, ‘You should be dead.’”

“That doesn't make sense,” Thalia insisted. “I never told him.”

“Hey,” Leo said. “Important thing is you've got each other now, right? You two are lucky.”

Thalia nodded. “Leo's right. Look at you. You're *my* age. You've grown up.”

“But where have I been?” Jason said. “How could I be missing all that time? And the Roman stuff ...”

Thalia frowned. “The Roman stuff?”

“Your brother speaks Latin,” Leo said. “He calls gods by their Roman names, and he's got tattoos.” Leo pointed out the marks on Jason's arm. Then he gave Thalia the rundown about the other weird stuff that had happened: Boreas turning into Aquilon, Lycaon calling Jason a “child of Rome,” and the wolves backing off when Jason spoke Latin to them.

Thalia plucked her bowstring. “Latin. Zeus sometimes spoke Latin, the second time he stayed with Mom. Like I said, he seemed different, more formal.”

“You think he was in his Roman aspect?” Jason asked. “And that's why I think of myself as a child of Jupiter?”

“Possibly,” Thalia said. “I’ve never heard of something like that happening, but it might explain why you think in Roman terms, why you can speak Latin rather than Ancient Greek. That would make you unique. Still, it doesn’t explain how you’ve survived without Camp Half-Blood. A child of Zeus, or Jupiter, or whatever you want to call him—you would’ve been hounded by monsters. If you were on your own, you should’ve died years ago. I know *I* wouldn’t have been able to survive without friends. You would’ve needed training, a safe haven —”

“He wasn’t alone,” Leo blurted out. “We’ve heard about others like him.”

Thalia looked at him strangely. “What do you mean?”

Leo told her about the slashed-up purple shirt in Medea’s department store, and the story the Cyclopes told about the child of Mercury who spoke Latin.

“Isn’t there anywhere else for demigods?” Leo asked. “I mean besides Camp Half-Blood? Maybe some crazy Latin teacher has been abducting children of the gods or something, making them think like Romans.”

As soon as he said it, Leo realized how stupid the idea sounded. Thalia’s dazzling blue eyes studied him intently, making him feel like a suspect in a lineup.

“I’ve been all over the country,” Thalia mused. “I’ve never seen evidence of a crazy Latin teacher, or demigods in purple shirts. Still ...” Her voice trailed off, like she’d just had a troubling thought.

“What?” Jason asked.

Thalia shook her head. “I’ll have to talk to the goddess. Maybe Artemis will guide us.”

“She’s still talking to you?” Jason asked. “Most of the gods have gone silent.”

“Artemis follows her own rules,” Thalia said. “She has to be careful not to let Zeus know, but she thinks Zeus is being ridiculous closing Olympus. She’s the one who set us on the trail of Lycaon. She said we’d find a lead to a missing friend of ours.”

“Percy Jackson,” Leo guessed. “The guy Annabeth is looking for.”

Thalia nodded, her face full of concern.

Leo wondered if anyone had ever looked that worried all the times *he’d* disappeared. He kind of doubted it.

“So what would Lycaon have to do with it?” Leo asked. “And how does it connect to us?”

“We need to find out soon,” Thalia admitted. “If your deadline is tomorrow, we’re wasting time. Aeolus could tell you—”

The white wolf appeared again at the doorway and yipped insistently.

“I have to get moving.” Thalia stood. “Otherwise I’ll lose the other Hunters’ trail. First, though, I’ll take you to Aeolus’s palace.”

“If you can’t, it’s okay,” Jason said, though he sounded kind of distressed.

“Oh, please.” Thalia smiled and helped him up. “I haven’t had a brother in years. I think I can stand a few minutes with you before you get annoying. Now, let’s go!”

LEO

WHEN LEO SAW HOW WELL PIPER AND HEDGE were being treated, he was thoroughly offended.

He'd imagined them freezing their hindquarters off in the snow, but the Hunter Phoebe had set up this silver tent pavilion thing right outside the cave. How she'd done it so fast, Leo had no idea, but inside was a kerosene heater keeping them toasty warm and a bunch of comfy throw pillows. Piper looked back to normal, decked out in a new parka, gloves, and camo pants like a Hunter. She and Hedge and Phoebe were kicking back, drinking hot chocolate.

"Oh, no way," Leo said. "We've been sitting in a *cave* and you get the luxury tent? Somebody give me hypothermia. I want hot chocolate and a parka!"

Phoebe sniffed. "Boys," she said, like it was the worst insult she could think of.

"It's all right, Phoebe," Thalia said. "They'll need extra coats. And I think we can spare some chocolate."

Phoebe grumbled, but soon Leo and Jason were also dressed in silvery winter clothes that were incredibly lightweight and warm. The hot chocolate was first-rate.

"Cheers!" said Coach Hedge. He crunched down his plastic thermos cup.

"That cannot be good for your intestines," Leo said.

Thalia patted Piper on the back. "You up for moving?"

Piper nodded. "Thanks to Phoebe, yeah. You guys are really good at this wilderness survival thing. I feel like I could run ten miles."

Thalia winked at Jason. "She's tough for a child of Aphrodite. I like this one."

"Hey, I could run ten miles too," Leo volunteered. "Tough Hephaestus kid here. Let's hit it."

Naturally, Thalia ignored him.

It took Phoebe exactly six seconds to break camp, which Leo could not believe. The tent self-collapsed into a square the size of a pack of chewing gum. Leo wanted to ask her for the blueprints, but they didn't have time.

Thalia ran uphill through the snow, hugging a tiny little path on the side of

the mountain, and soon Leo was regretting trying to look macho, because the Hunters left him in the dust.

Coach Hedge leaped around like a happy mountain goat, coaxing them on like he used to do on track days at school. “Come on, Valdez! Pick up the pace! Let’s chant. *I’ve got a girl in Kalamazoo—*”

“Let’s not,” Thalia snapped.

So they ran in silence.

Leo fell in next to Jason at the back of the group. “How you doing, man?”

Jason’s expression was enough of an answer: *Not good.*

“Thalia takes it so calmly,” Jason said. “Like it’s no big deal that I appeared. I didn’t know what I was expecting, but ... she’s not like me. She seems so much more *together.*”

“Hey, she’s not fighting amnesia,” Leo said. “Plus, she’s had more time to get used to this whole demigod thing. You fight monsters and talk to gods for a while, you probably get used to surprises.”

“Maybe,” Jason said. “I just wish I understood what happened when I was two, why my mom got rid of me. Thalia ran away because of *me.*”

“Hey, whatever’s happened, it wasn’t your fault. And your sister is pretty cool. She’s a *lot* like you.”

Jason took that in silence. Leo wondered if he’d said the right things. He wanted to make Jason feel better, but this was way outside his comfort zone.

Leo wished he could reach inside his tool belt and pick just the right wrench to fix Jason’s memory—maybe a little hammer—bonk the sticking spot and make everything run right. That would be a lot easier than trying to talk it through. *Not good with organic life forms.* Thanks for those inherited traits, Dad.

He was so lost in thought, he didn’t realize the Hunters had stopped. He slammed into Thalia and nearly sent them both down the side of the mountain the hard way. Fortunately, the Hunter was light on her feet. She steadied them both, then pointed up.

“That,” Leo choked, “is a really large rock.”

They stood near the summit of Pikes Peak. Below them the world was blanketed in clouds. The air was so thin, Leo could hardly breathe. Night had set in, but a full moon shone and the stars were incredible. Stretching out to the north and south, peaks of other mountains rose from the clouds like islands—or teeth.

But the real show was above them. Hovering in the sky, about a quarter mile away, was a massive free-floating island of glowing purple stone. It was hard to judge its size, but Leo figured it was at least as wide as a football stadium and just as tall. The sides were rugged cliffs, riddled with caves, and every once

in a while a gust of wind burst out with a sound like a pipe organ blast. At the top of the rock, brass walls ringed some kind of a fortress.

The only thing connecting Pikes Peak to the floating island was a narrow bridge of ice that glistened in the moonlight.

Then Leo realized the bridge wasn't exactly ice, because it wasn't solid. As the winds changed direction, the bridge snaked around—blurring and thinning, in some places even breaking into a dotted line like the vapor trail of a plane.

"We're not seriously crossing that," Leo said.

Thalia shrugged. "I'm not a big fan of heights, I'll admit. But if you want to get to Aeolus's fortress, this is the only way."

"Is the fortress always hanging there?" Piper asked. "How can people not notice it sitting on top of Pikes Peak?"

"The Mist," Thalia said. "Still, mortals do notice it indirectly. Some days, Pikes Peak looks purple. People say it's a trick of the light, but actually it's the color of Aeolus's palace, reflecting off the mountain face."

"It's enormous," Jason said.

Thalia laughed. "You should see Olympus, little brother."

"You're serious? You've been there?"

Thalia grimaced as if it wasn't a good memory. "We should go across in two different groups. The bridge is fragile."

"That's reassuring," Leo said. "Jason, can't you just fly us up there?"

Thalia laughed. Then she seemed to realize Leo's question wasn't a joke. "Wait ... Jason, you can *fly*?"

Jason gazed up at the floating fortress. "Well, sort of. More like I can control the winds. But the winds up here are so strong, I'm not sure I'd want to try. Thalia, you mean ... you can't fly?"

For a second, Thalia looked genuinely afraid. Then she got her expression under control. Leo realized she was a lot more scared of heights than she was letting on.

"Truthfully," she said, "I've never tried. Might be better if we stuck to the bridge."

Coach Hedge tapped the ice vapor trail with his hoof, then jumped onto the bridge. Amazingly, it held his weight. "Easy! I'll go first. Piper, come on, girl. I'll give you a hand."

"No, that's okay," Piper started to say, but the coach grabbed her hand and dragged her up the bridge.

When they were about halfway, the bridge still seemed to be holding them just fine.

Thalia turned to her Hunter friend. “Phoebe, I’ll be back soon. Go find the others. Tell them I’m on my way.”

“You sure?” Phoebe narrowed her eyes at Leo and Jason, like they might kidnap Thalia or something.

“It’s fine,” Thalia promised.

Phoebe nodded reluctantly, then raced down the mountain path, the white wolves at her heels.

“Jason, Leo, just be careful where you step,” Thalia said. “It hardly ever breaks.”

“It hasn’t met me yet,” Leo muttered, but he and Jason led the way up the bridge.

Halfway up, things went wrong, and of course it was Leo’s fault. Piper and Hedge had already made it safely to the top and were waving at them, encouraging them to keep climbing, but Leo got distracted. He was thinking about bridges—how he would design something way more stable than this shifting ice vapor business if this were his palace. He was pondering braces and support columns. Then a sudden revelation stopped him in his tracks.

“Why do they have a bridge?” he asked.

Thalia frowned. “Leo, this isn’t a good place to stop. What do you mean?”

“They’re wind spirits,” Leo said. “Can’t they fly?”

“Yes, but sometimes they need a way to connect to the world below.”

“So the bridge isn’t always here?” Leo asked.

Thalia shook her head. “The wind spirits don’t like to anchor to the earth, but sometimes it’s necessary. Like now. They know you’re coming.”

Leo’s mind was racing. He was so excited he could almost feel his body’s temperature rising. He couldn’t quite put his thoughts into words, but he knew he was on to something important.

“Leo?” Jason said. “What are you thinking?”

“Oh, gods,” Thalia said. “Keep moving. Look at your feet.”

Leo shuffled backward. With horror, he realized his body temperature really *was* rising, just as it had years ago at that picnic table under the pecan tree, when his anger had gotten away from him. Now, excitement was causing the reaction. His pants steamed in the cold air. His shoes were literally smoking, and the bridge didn’t like it. The ice was thinning.

“Leo, stop it,” Jason warned. “You’re going to melt it.”

“I’ll try,” Leo said. But his body was overheating on its own, running as fast as his thoughts. “Listen, Jason, what did Hera call you in that dream? She

called you a *bridge*.”

“Leo, seriously, cool down,” Thalia said. “I don’t what you’re talking about, but the bridge is—”

“Just listen,” Leo insisted. “If Jason is a bridge, what’s he connecting? Maybe two different places that normally don’t get along—like the air palace and the ground. You had to be somewhere before this, right? And Hera said you were an exchange.”

“An exchange.” Thalia’s eyes widened. “Oh, gods.”

Jason frowned. “What are you two talking about?”

Thalia murmured something like a prayer. “I understand now why Artemis sent me here. Jason—she told me to hunt for Lycaon and I would find a clue about Percy. *You* are the clue. Artemis wanted us to meet so I could hear your story.”

“I don’t understand,” he protested. “I don’t have a story. I don’t remember anything.”

“But Leo’s right,” Thalia said. “It’s all connected. If we just knew where —”

Leo snapped his fingers. “Jason, what did you call that place in your dream? That ruined house. The Wolf House?”

Thalia nearly choked. “The Wolf House? Jason, why didn’t you tell me that! *That’s* where they’re keeping Hera?”

“You know where it is?” Jason asked.

Then the bridge dissolved. Leo would’ve fallen to his death, but Jason grabbed his coat and pulled him to safety. The two of them scrambled up the bridge, and when they turned, Thalia was on the other side of a thirty-foot chasm. The bridge was continuing to melt.

“Go!” Thalia shouted, backing down the bridge as it crumbled. “Find out where the giant is keeping Piper’s dad. Save him! I’ll take the Hunters to the Wolf House and hold it until you can get there. We can do both!”

“But where *is* the Wolf House?” Jason shouted.

“You know where it is, little brother!” She was so far away now that they could barely hear her voice over the wind. Leo was pretty sure she said: “I’ll see you there. I promise.”

Then she turned and raced down the dissolving bridge.

Leo and Jason had no time to stand around. They climbed for their lives, the ice vapor thinning under their feet. Several times, Jason grabbed Leo and used the winds to keep them aloft, but it was more like bungee jumping than flying.

When they reached the floating island, Piper and Coach Hedge pulled them aboard just as the last of the vapor bridge vanished. They stood gasping for

breath at the base of a stone stairway chiseled into the side of the cliff, leading up to the fortress.

Leo looked back down. The top of Pikes Peak floated below them in a sea of clouds, but there was no sign of Thalia. And Leo had just burned their only exit.

“What happened?” Piper demanded. “Leo, why are your clothes smoking?”

“I got a little heated,” he gasped. “Sorry, Jason. Honest. I didn’t—”

“It’s all right,” Jason said, but his expression was grim. “We’ve got less than twenty-four hours to rescue a goddess and Piper’s dad. Let’s go see the king of the winds.”

JASON

JASON HAD FOUND HIS SISTER AND lost her in less than an hour. As they climbed the cliffs of the floating island, he kept looking back, but Thalia was gone.

Despite what she'd said about meeting him again, Jason wondered. She'd found a new family with the Hunters, and a new mother in Artemis. She seemed so confident and comfortable with her life, Jason wasn't sure if he'd ever be part of it. And she seemed so set on finding her friend Percy. Had she ever searched for Jason that way?

Not fair, he told himself. *She thought you were dead.*

He could barely tolerate what she'd said about their mom. It was almost like Thalia had handed him a baby—a really loud, ugly baby—and said, *Here, this is yours. Carry it.* He didn't want to carry it. He didn't want to look at it or claim it. He didn't want to know that he had an unstable mother who'd gotten rid of him to appease a goddess. No wonder Thalia had run away.

Then he remembered the Zeus cabin at Camp Half-Blood—that tiny little alcove Thalia had used as a bunk, out of sight from the glowering statue of the sky god. Their dad wasn't much of a bargain, either. Jason understood why Thalia had renounced that part of her life too, but he was still resentful. He couldn't be so lucky. He was left holding the bag—literally.

The golden backpack of winds was strapped over his shoulders. The closer they got to Aeolus's palace, the heavier the bag got. The winds struggled, rumbling and bumping around.

The only one who seemed in a good mood was Coach Hedge. He kept bounding up the slippery staircase and trotting back down. "Come on, cupcakes! Only a few thousand more steps!"

As they climbed, Leo and Piper left Jason in his silence. Maybe they could sense his bad mood. Piper kept glancing back, worried, as if he were the one who'd almost died of hypothermia rather than she. Or maybe she was thinking about Thalia's idea. They'd told her what Thalia had said on the bridge—how they could save both her dad and Hera—but Jason didn't really understand how they were going to do that, and he wasn't sure if the possibility had made Piper more hopeful or just more anxious.

Leo kept swatting his own legs, checking for signs that his pants were on fire. He wasn't steaming anymore, but the incident on the ice bridge had really freaked Jason out. Leo hadn't seemed to realize that he had smoke coming out his ears and flames dancing through his hair. If Leo started spontaneously combusting every time he got excited, they were going to have a tough time taking him anywhere. Jason imagined trying to get food at a restaurant. *I'll have a cheeseburger and—Ahhh! My friend's on fire! Get me a bucket!*

Mostly, though, Jason worried about what Leo had said. Jason didn't want to be a bridge, or an exchange, or anything else. He just wanted to know where he'd come from. And Thalia had looked so unnerved when Leo mentioned the burned-out house in his dreams—the place the wolf Lupa had told him was his starting point. How did Thalia know that place, and why did she assume Jason could find it?

The answer seemed close. But the nearer Jason got to it, the less it cooperated, like the winds on his back.

Finally they arrived at the top of the island. Bronze walls marched all the way around the fortress grounds, though Jason couldn't imagine who would possibly attack this place. Twenty-foot-high gates opened for them, and a road of polished purple stone led up to the main citadel—a white-columned rotunda, Greek style, like one of the monuments in Washington, D.C.—except for the cluster of satellite dishes and radio towers on the roof.

“That's bizarre,” Piper said.

“Guess you can't get cable on a floating island,” Leo said. “Dang, check this guy's front yard.”

The rotunda sat in the center of a quarter-mile circle. The grounds were amazing in a scary way. They were divided into four sections like big pizza slices, each one representing a season.

The section on their right was an icy waste, with bare trees and a frozen lake. Snowmen rolled across the landscape as the wind blew, so Jason wasn't sure if they were decorations or alive.

To their left was an autumn park with gold and red trees. Mounds of leaves blew into patterns—gods, people, animals that ran after each other before scattering back into leaves.

In the distance, Jason could see two more areas behind the rotunda. One looked like a green pasture with sheep made out of clouds. The last section was a desert where tumbleweeds scratched strange patterns in the sand like Greek letters, smiley faces, and a huge advertisement that read: *watch aeolus nightly!*

“One section for each of the four wind gods,” Jason guessed. “Four cardinal directions.”

“I’m loving that pasture.” Coach Hedge licked his lips. “You guys mind—”

“Go ahead,” Jason said. He was actually relieved to send the satyr off. It would be hard enough getting on Aeolus’s good side without Coach Hedge waving his club and screaming, “Die!”

While the satyr ran off to attack springtime, Jason, Leo, and Piper walked down the road to the steps of the palace. They passed through the front doors into a white marble foyer decorated with purple banners that read olympian weather channel, and some that just read ow!

“Hello!” A woman floated up to them. *Literally* floated. She was pretty in that elfish way Jason associated with nature spirits at Camp Half-Blood—petite, slightly pointy ears, and an ageless face that could’ve been sixteen or thirty. Her brown eyes twinkled cheerfully. Even though there was no wind, her dark hair blew in slow motion, shampoo-commercial style. Her white gown billowed around her like parachute material. Jason couldn’t tell if she had feet, but if so, they didn’t touch the floor. She had a white tablet computer in her hand. “Are you from Lord Zeus?” she asked. “We’ve been expecting you.”

Jason tried to respond, but it was a little hard to think straight, because he’d realized the woman was see-through. Her shape faded in and out like she was made of fog.

“Are you a ghost?” he asked.

Right away he knew he’d insulted her. The smile turned into a pout. “I’m an *aura*, sir. A wind nymph, as you might expect, working for the lord of the winds. My name is Mellie. We don’t have *ghosts*.”

Piper came to the rescue. “No, of course you don’t! My friend simply mistook you for Helen of Troy, the most beautiful mortal of all time. It’s an easy mistake.”

Wow, she was good. The compliment seemed a little over the top, but Mellie the aura blushed. “Oh ... well, then. So you *are* from Zeus?”

“Er,” Jason said, “I’m the son of Zeus, yeah.”

“Excellent! Please, right this way.” She led them through some security doors into another lobby, consulting her tablet as she floated. She didn’t look where she was going, but apparently it didn’t matter as she drifted straight through a marble column with no problem. “We’re out of prime time now, so that’s good,” she mused. “I can fit you in right before his 11:12 spot.”

“Um, okay,” Jason said.

The lobby was a pretty distracting place. Winds blasted around them, so Jason felt like he was pushing through an invisible crowd. Doors blew open and slammed by themselves.

The things Jason *could* see were just as bizarre. Paper airplanes of all

different sizes and shapes sped around, and other wind nymphs, *aurai*, would occasionally pluck them out of the air, unfold and read them, then toss them back into the air, where the planes would refold themselves and keep flying.

An ugly creature fluttered past. She looked like a mix between an old lady and a chicken on steroids. She had a wrinkled face with black hair tied in a hairnet, arms like a human plus wings like a chicken, and a fat, feathered body with talons for feet. It was amazing she could fly at all. She kept drifting around and bumping into things like a parade balloon.

“Not an *aura*?” Jason asked Mellie as the creature wobbled by.

Mellie laughed. “That’s a harpy, of course. Our, ah, ugly stepsisters, I suppose you would say. Don’t you have harpies on Olympus? They’re spirits of violent gusts, unlike us *aurai*. We’re all gentle breezes.”

She batted her eyes at Jason.

“Course you are,” he said.

“So,” Piper prompted, “you were taking us to see Aeolus?”

Mellie led them through a set of doors like an airlock. Above the interior door, a green light blinked.

“We have a few minutes before he starts,” Mellie said cheerfully. “He probably won’t kill you if we go in now. Come along!”

J A S O N

JASON'S JAW DROPPED. THE CENTRAL SECTION of Aeolus's fortress was as big as a cathedral, with a soaring domed roof covered in silver. Television equipment floated randomly through the air—cameras, spotlights, set pieces, potted plants. And there was no floor. Leo almost fell into the chasm before Jason pulled him back.

“Holy—!” Leo gulped. “Hey, Mellie. A little warning next time!”

An enormous circular pit plunged into the heart of the mountain. It was probably half a mile deep, honeycombed with caves. Some of the tunnels probably led straight outside. Jason remembered seeing winds blast out of them when they'd been on Pikes Peak. Other caves were sealed with some glistening material like glass or wax. The whole cavern bustled with harpies, *aurai*, and paper airplanes, but for someone who couldn't fly, it would be a very long, very fatal fall.

“Oh, my,” Mellie gasped. “I'm so sorry.” She unclipped a walkie-talkie from somewhere inside her robes and spoke into it: “Hello, sets? Is that Nuggets? Hi, Nuggets. Could we get a floor in the main studio, please? Yes, a solid one. Thanks.”

A few seconds later, an army of harpies rose from the pit—three dozen or so demon chicken ladies, all carrying squares of various building material. They went to work hammering and gluing—and using large quantities of duct tape, which didn't reassure Jason. In no time there was a makeshift floor snaking out over the chasm. It was made of plywood, marble blocks, carpet squares, wedges of grass sod—just about anything.

“That can't be safe,” Jason said.

“Oh, it is!” Mellie assured him. “The harpies are very good.”

Easy for her to say. She just drifted across without touching the floor, but Jason decided he had the best chance at surviving, since he could fly, so he stepped out first. Amazingly, the floor held.

Piper gripped his hand and followed him. “If I fall, you're catching me.”

“Uh, sure.” Jason hoped he wasn't blushing.

Leo stepped out next. “You’re catching me, too, Superman. But I ain’t holding your hand.”

Mellie led them toward the middle of the chamber, where a loose sphere of flat-panel video screens floated around a kind of control center. A man hovered inside, checking monitors and reading paper airplane messages.

The man paid them no attention as Mellie brought them forward. She pushed a forty-two-inch Sony out of their way and led them into the control area.

Leo whistled. “I *got* to get a room like this.”

The floating screens showed all sorts of television programs. Some Jason recognized—news broadcasts, mostly—but some programs looked a little strange: gladiators fighting, demigods battling monsters. Maybe they were movies, but they looked more like reality shows.

At the far end of the sphere was a silky blue backdrop like a cinema screen, with cameras and studio lights floating around it.

The man in the center was talking into an earpiece phone. He had a remote control in each hand and was pointing them at various screens, seemingly at random.

He wore a business suit that looked like the sky—blue mostly, but dappled with clouds that changed and darkened and moved across the fabric. He looked like he was in his sixties, with a shock of white hair, but he had a ton of stage makeup on, and that smooth plastic-surgery look to his face, so he appeared not really young, not really old, just *wrong*—like a Ken doll someone had halfway melted in a microwave. His eyes darted back and forth from screen to screen, like he was trying to absorb everything at once. He muttered things into his phone, and his mouth kept twitching. He was either amused, or crazy, or both.

Mellie floated toward him. “Ah, sir, Mr. Aeolus, these demigods—”

“Hold it!” He held up a hand to silence her, then pointed at one of the screens. “Watch!”

It was one of those storm-chaser programs, where insane thrill-seekers drive after tornados. As Jason watched, a Jeep plowed straight into a funnel cloud and got tossed into the sky.

Aeolus shrieked with delight. “The Disaster Channel. People do that *on purpose!*” He turned toward Jason with a mad grin. “Isn’t that amazing? Let’s watch it again.”

“Um, sir,” Mellie said, “this is Jason, son of—”

“Yes, yes, I remember,” Aeolus said. “You’re back. How did it go?”

Jason hesitated. “Sorry? I think you’ve mistaken me—”

“No, no, Jason Grace, aren’t you? It was—what—last year? You were on your way to fight a sea monster, I believe.”

“I—I don’t remember.”

Aelous laughed. “Must not have been a very good sea monster! No, I remember every hero who’s ever come to me for aid. Odysseus—gods, he docked at my island for a month! At least you only stayed a few days. Now, watch this video. These ducks get sucked straight into—”

“Sir,” Mellie interrupted. “Two minutes to air.”

“Air!” Aeolus exclaimed. “I love air. How do I look? Makeup!”

Immediately a small tornado of brushes, blotters, and cotton balls descended on Aeolus. They blurred across his face in a cloud of flesh-tone smoke until his coloration was even more gruesome than before. Wind swirled through his hair and left it sticking up like a frosted Christmas tree.

“Mr. Aeolus.” Jason slipped off the golden backpack. “We brought you these rogue storm spirits.”

“Did you!” Aeolus looked at the bag like it was a gift from a fan—something he really didn’t want. “Well, how nice.”

Leo nudged him, and Jason offered the bag. “Boreas sent us to capture them for you. We hope you’ll accept them and stop—you know—ordering demigods to be killed.”

Aeolus laughed, and looked incredulously at Mellie. “Demigods be killed—did I order that?”

Mellie checked her computer tablet. “Yes, sir, fifteenth of September. ‘Storm spirits released by the death of Typhon, demigods to be held responsible,’ etc... yes, a general order for them all to be killed.”

“Oh, pish,” Aeolus said. “I was just grumpy. Rescind that order, Mellie, and um, who’s on guard duty—Teriyaki?—Teri, take these storm spirits down to cell block Fourteen E, will you?”

A harpy swooped out of nowhere, snatched the golden bag, and spiraled into the abyss.

Aeolus grinned at Jason. “Now, sorry about that kill-on-sight business. But gods, I really was mad, wasn’t I?” His face suddenly darkened, and his suit did the same, the lapels flashing with lightning. “You know ... I remember now. Almost seemed like a voice was telling me to give that order. A little cold tingle on the back of my neck.”

Jason tensed. A cold tingle on the back of his neck ... Why did that sound so familiar? “A ... um, voice in your head, sir?”

“Yes. How odd. Mellie, *should* we kill them?”

“No, sir,” she said patiently. “They just brought us the storm spirits, which makes everything all right.”

“Of course.” Aeolus laughed. “Sorry. Mellie, let’s send the demigods

something nice. A box of chocolates, perhaps.”

“A box of chocolates to *every* demigod in the world, sir?”

“No, too expensive. Never mind. Wait, it’s time! I’m on!”

Aeolus flew off toward the blue screen as newscast music started to play.

Jason looked at Piper and Leo, who seemed just as confused as he was.

“Mellie,” he said, “is he ... always like that?”

She smiled sheepishly. “Well, you know what they say. If you don’t like his mood, wait five minutes. That expression ‘whichever way the wind blows’—that was based on him.”

“And that thing about the sea monster,” Jason said. “*Was* I here before?”

Mellie blushed. “I’m sorry, I don’t remember. I’m Mr. Aeolus’s new assistant. I’ve been with him longer than most, but still—not that long.”

“How long do his assistants usually last?” Piper asked. “

Oh ...” Mellie thought for a moment. “I’ve been doing this for ... twelve hours?”

A voice blared from floating speakers: “And now, weather every twelve minutes! Here’s your forecaster for Olympian Weather—the OW! channel—Aeolus!”

Lights blazed on Aeolus, who was now standing in front of the blue screen. His smile was unnaturally white, and he looked like he’d had so much caffeine his face was about to explode.

“Hello, Olympus! Aeolus, master of the winds here, with weather every twelve! We’ll have a low-pressure system moving over Florida today, so expect milder temperatures since Demeter wishes to spare the citrus farmers!” He gestured at the blue screen, but when Jason checked the monitors, he saw that a digital image was being projected behind Aeolus, so it looked like he was standing in front of a U.S. map with animated smiley suns and frowny storm clouds. “Along the eastern seaboard—oh, hold on.” He tapped his earpiece. “Sorry, folks! Poseidon is angry with Miami today, so it looks like that Florida freeze is back on! Sorry, Demeter. Over in the Midwest, I’m not sure what St. Louis did to offend Zeus, but you can expect winter storms! Boreas himself is being called down to punish the area with ice. Bad news, Missouri! No, wait. Hephaestus feels sorry for central Missouri, so you all will have much more moderate temperatures and sunny skies.”

Aeolus kept going like that—forecasting each area of the country and changing his prediction two or three times as he got messages over his earpiece—the gods apparently putting in orders for various winds and weather.

“This can’t be right,” Jason whispered. “Weather isn’t this random.”

Mellie smirked. “And how often are the mortal weathermen right? They

talk about fronts and air pressure and moisture, but the weather surprises them all the time. At least Aeolus tells us *why* it's so unpredictable. Very hard job, trying to appease all the gods at once. It's enough to drive anyone ..."

She trailed off, but Jason knew what she meant. *Mad*. Aeolus was completely mad.

"And that's the weather," Aeolus concluded. "See you in twelve minutes, because I'm sure it'll change!"

The lights shut off, the video monitors went back to random coverage, and just for a moment, Aeolus's face sagged with weariness. Then he seemed to remember he had guests, and he put a smile back on.

"So, you brought me some rogue storm spirits," Aeolus said. "I suppose ... thanks! And did you want something else? I assume so. Demigods always do."

Mellie said, "Um, sir, this is Zeus's son."

"Yes, yes. I know that. I said I remembered him from before."

"But, sir, they're here from *Olympus*."

Aeolus looked stunned. Then he laughed so abruptly, Jason almost jumped into the chasm. "You mean you're here on behalf of your father this time? Finally! I *knew* they would send someone to renegotiate my contract!"

"Um, what?" Jason asked.

"Oh, thank goodness!" Aeolus sighed with relief. "It's been what, three thousand years since Zeus made me master of the winds. Not that I'm ungrateful, of course! But really, my contract is so vague. Obviously I'm immortal, but 'master of the winds.' What does that mean? Am I a nature spirit? A demigod? A god? I *want* to be god of the winds, because the benefits are so much better. Can we start with that?"

Jason looked at his friends, mystified.

"Dude," Leo said, "you think we're here to promote you?"

"You are, then?" Aeolus grinned. His business suit turned completely blue—not a cloud in the fabric. "Marvelous! I mean, I think I've shown quite a bit of initiative with the weather channel, eh? And of course I'm in the press all the time. So many books have been written about me: *Into Thin Air*, *Up in the Air*, *Gone with the Wind*—"

"Er, I don't think those are about you," Jason said, before he noticed Mellie shaking her head.

"Nonsense," Aeolus said. "Mellie, they're biographies of me, aren't they?"

"Absolutely, sir," she squeaked.

"There, you see? I don't read. Who has time? But obviously the mortals love me. So, we'll change my official title to *god* of the winds. Then, about salary and staff—"

“Sir,” Jason said, “we’re not from Olympus.”

Aeolus blinked. “But—”

“I’m the son of Zeus, yes,” Jason said, “but we’re not here to negotiate your contract. We’re on a quest and we need your help.”

Aeolus’s expression hardened. “Like last time? Like *every* hero who comes here? Demigods! It’s always about *you*, isn’t it?”

“Sir, please, I don’t remember last time, but if you helped me once before —”

“I’m always helping! Well, sometimes I’m destroying, but mostly I’m helping, and sometimes I’m asked to do both at the same time! Why, Aeneas, the first of your kind—”

“My kind?” Jason asked. “You mean, demigods?”

“Oh, please!” Aeolus said. “I mean your *line* of demigods. You know, Aeneas, son of Venus—the only surviving hero of Troy. When the Greeks burned down his city, he escaped to Italy, where he founded the kingdom that would eventually become Rome, blah, blah, blah. *That’s* what I meant.”

“I don’t get it,” Jason admitted.

Aeolus rolled his eyes. “The point being, I was thrown in the middle of that conflict, too! Juno calls up: ‘Oh, Aeolus, destroy Aeneas’s ships for me. I don’t like him.’ Then Neptune says, ‘No, you don’t! That’s my territory. Calm the winds.’ Then Juno is like, ‘No, wreck his ships, or I’ll tell Jupiter you’re uncooperative!’ Do you think it’s easy juggling requests like that?”

“No,” Jason said. “I guess not.”

“And don’t get me started on Amelia Earhart! I’m *still* getting angry calls from Olympus about knocking *her* out of the sky!”

“We just want information,” Piper said in her most calming voice. “We hear you know everything.”

Aeolus straightened his lapels and looked slightly mollified. “Well ... *that’s* true, of course. For instance, I know that *this* business here”—he waggled his fingers at the three of them—“this harebrained scheme of Juno’s to bring you all together is likely to end in bloodshed. As for you, Piper McLean, I know your father is in serious trouble.” He held out his hand, and a scrap of paper fluttered into his grasp. It was a photo of Piper with a guy who must’ve been her dad. His face *did* look familiar. Jason was pretty sure he’d seen him in some movies.

Piper took the photo. Her hands were shaking. “This—this is from his wallet.”

“Yes,” Aeolus said. “All things lost in the wind eventually come to me. The photo blew away when the Earthborn captured him.”

“The what?” Piper asked.

Aeolus waved aside the question and narrowed his eyes at Leo. “Now, *you*, son of Hephaestus ... yes, I see your future.” Another paper fell into the wind god’s hands—an old tattered drawing done in crayons.

Leo took it as if it might be coated in poison. He staggered backward.

“Leo?” Jason said. “What is it?”

“Something I—I drew when I was a kid.” He folded it quickly and put it in his coat. “It’s ... yeah, it’s nothing.”

Aeolus laughed. “Really? Just the key to your success! Now, where were we? Ah, yes, you wanted information. Are you sure about that? Sometimes information can be dangerous.”

He smiled at Jason like he was issuing a challenge. Behind him, Mellie shook her head in warning.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “We need to find the lair of Enceladus.”

Aeolus’s smile melted. “The giant? Why would you want to go there? He’s horrible! He doesn’t even watch my program!”

Piper held up the photo. “Aeolus, he’s got my father. We need to rescue him and find out where Hera is being held captive.”

“Now, *that’s* impossible,” Aeolus said. “Even *I* can’t see that, and believe me, I’ve tried. There’s a veil of magic over Hera’s location—very strong, impossible to locate.”

“She’s at a place called the Wolf House,” Jason said.

“Hold on!” Aeolus put a hand to his forehead and closed his eyes. “I’m getting something! Yes, she’s at a place called the Wolf House! Sadly, I don’t know where that is.”

“Enceladus does,” Piper persisted. “If you help us find him, we could get the location of the goddess—”

“Yeah,” Leo said, catching on. “And if we save her, she’d be really grateful to you—”

“And Zeus might promote you,” Jason finished.

Aeolus’s eyebrows crept up. “A promotion—and all you want from me is the giant’s location?”

“Well, if you could get us there, too,” Jason amended, “that would be great.”

Mellie clapped her hands in excitement. “Oh, he could do that! He often sends helpful winds—”

“Mellie, quiet!” Aeolus snapped. “I have half a mind to fire you for letting these people in under false pretenses.”

Her face paled. “Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

“It wasn’t her fault,” Jason said. “But about that help ...”

Aelous tilted his head as if thinking. Then Jason realized the wind lord was listening to voices in his earpiece.

“Well ... Zeus approves,” Aeolus muttered. “He says ... he says it would be better if you could avoid saving her until after the weekend, because he has a big party planned—Ow! That’s Aphrodite yelling at him, reminding him that the solstice starts at dawn. She says I should help you. And Hephaestus... yes. Hmm. Very rare they agree on anything. Hold on ...”

Jason smiled at his friends. Finally, they were having some good luck. Their godly parents were standing up for them.

Back toward the entrance, Jason heard a loud belch. Coach Hedge waddled in from the lobby, grass all over his face. Mellie saw him coming across the makeshift floor and caught her breath. “Who is *that*?”

Jason stifled a cough. “That? That’s just Coach Hedge. Uh, Gleeson Hedge. He’s our ...” Jason wasn’t sure what to call him: *teacher, friend, problem*?

“Our guide.”

“He’s so goatly,” Mellie murmured.

Behind her, Piper poofed out her cheeks, pretending to vomit.

“What’s up, guys?” Hedge trotted over. “Wow, nice place. Oh! Sod squares.”

“Coach, you just ate,” Jason said. “And we’re using the sod as a floor. This is, ah, Mellie—”

“An *aura*.” Hedge smiled winningly. “Beautiful as a summer breeze.”

Mellie blushed.

“And Aeolus here was just about to help us,” Jason said.

“Yes,” the wind lord muttered. “It seems so. You’ll find Enceladus on Mount Diablo.”

“Devil Mountain?” Leo asked. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“I remember that place!” Piper said. “I went there once with my dad. It’s just east of San Francisco Bay.”

“The Bay Area again?” The coach shook his head. “Not good. Not good at all.”

“Now ...” Aeolus began to smile. “As to getting you there—”

Suddenly his face went slack. He bent over and tapped his earpiece as if it were malfunctioning. When he straightened again, his eyes were wild. Despite the makeup, he looked like an old man—an old, very frightened man. “She hasn’t spoke to me for centuries. I can’t—yes, yes I understand.”

He swallowed, regarding Jason as if he had suddenly turned into a giant cockroach. “I’m sorry, son of Jupiter. New orders. You all have to die.”

Mellie squeaked. “But—but, sir! Zeus said to help them. Aphrodite, Hephaestus—”

“Mellie!” Aeolus snapped. “Your job is already on the line. Besides, there are some orders that transcend even the wishes of the gods, especially when it comes to the forces of nature.”

“Whose orders?” Jason said. “Zeus will fire you if you don’t help us!”

“I doubt it.” Aeolus flicked his wrist, and far below them, a cell door opened in the pit. Jason could hear storm spirits screaming out of it, spiraling up toward them, howling for blood.

“Even Zeus understands the order of things,” Aeolus said. “And if *she* is waking—by all the gods—she cannot be denied. Good-bye, heroes. I’m terribly sorry, but I’ll have to make this quick. I’m back on the air in four minutes.”

Jason summoned his sword. Coach Hedge pulled out his club. Mellie the aura yelled, “No!”

She dived at their feet just as the storm spirits hit with hurricane force, blasting the floor to pieces, shredding the carpet samples and marble and linoleum into what should’ve been lethal projectiles, had Mellie’s robes not spread out like a shield and absorbed the brunt of the impact. The five of them fell into the pit, and Aeolus screamed above them, “Mellie, you are so fired!”

“Quick,” Mellie yelled. “Son of Zeus, do you have any power over the air?”

“A little!”

“Then help me, or you’re all dead!” Mellie grabbed his hand, and an electric charge went through Jason’s arm. He understood what she needed. They had to control their fall and head for one of the open tunnels. The storm spirits were following them down, closing rapidly, bringing with them a cloud of deadly shrapnel.

Jason grabbed Piper’s hand. “Group hug!”

Hedge, Leo, and Piper tried to huddle together, hanging on to Jason and Mellie as they fell.

“This is NOT GOOD!” Leo yelled.

“Bring it on, gas bags!” Hedge yelled up at the storm spirits. “I’ll pulverize you!”

“He’s magnificent,” Mellie sighed.

“Concentrate?” Jason prompted.

“Right!” she said.

They channeled the wind so their fall became more of a tumble into the nearest open chute. Still, they slammed into the tunnel at painful speed and went rolling over each other down a steep vent that was not designed for people. There was no way they could stop.

Mellie's robes billowed around her. Jason and the others clung to her desperately, and they began to slow down, but the storm spirits were screaming into the tunnel behind them.

"Can't—hold—long," Mellie warned. "Stay together! When the winds hit —"

"You're doing great, Mellie," Hedge said. "My own mama was an *aura*, you know. She couldn't have done better herself."

"Iris-message me?" Mellie pleaded.

Hedge winked.

"Could you guys plan your date later?" Piper screamed. "Look!"

Behind them, the tunnel was turning dark. Jason could feel his ears pop as the pressure built.

"Can't hold them," Mellie warned. "But I'll try to shield you, do you one more favor."

"Thanks, Mellie," Jason said. "I hope you get a new job."

She smiled, and then dissolved, wrapping them in a warm gentle breeze. Then the real winds hit, shooting them into the sky so fast, Jason blacked out.

PIPER

PIPER DREAMED SHE WAS ON THE Wilderness School dorm roof.

The desert night was cold, but she'd brought blankets, and with Jason next to her, she didn't need any more warmth.

The air smelled of sage and burning mesquite. On the horizon, the Spring Mountains loomed like jagged black teeth, the dim glow of Las Vegas behind them.

The stars were so bright, Piper had been afraid they wouldn't be able to see the meteor shower. She didn't want Jason to think she'd dragged him up here on false pretenses. (Even though her pretenses had been *totally* false.) But the meteors did not disappoint. One streaked across the sky almost every minute—a line of white, yellow, or blue fire. Piper was sure her Grandpa Tom would have some Cherokee myth to explain them, but at the moment she was busy creating her own story.

Jason took her hand—*finally*—and pointed as two meteors skipped across the atmosphere and formed a cross.

“Wow,” he said. “I can't believe Leo didn't want to see this.”

“Actually, I didn't invite him,” Piper said casually.

Jason smiled. “Oh, yeah?”

“Mm-hmm. You ever feel like three would be a crowd?”

“Yeah,” Jason admitted. “Like right now. You know how much trouble we'd get in if we got caught up here?”

“Oh, I'd make up something,” Piper said. “I can be very persuasive. So you want to dance, or what?”

He laughed. His eyes were amazing, and his smile was even better in the starlight. “With no music. At night. On a rooftop. Sounds dangerous.”

“I'm a dangerous girl.”

“That, I can believe.”

He stood and offered her his hand. They slow danced a few steps, but it quickly turned into a kiss. Piper almost couldn't kiss him again, because she was too busy smiling.

Then her dream changed—or maybe she was dead in the Underworld—because she found herself back in Medea’s department store.

“Please let this be a dream,” she murmured, “and not my eternal punishment.”

“No, dear,” said a woman’s honey-sweet voice. “No punishment.”

Piper turned, afraid she’d see Medea, but a different woman stood next to her, browsing through the fifty-percent-off rack.

The woman was gorgeous—shoulder-length hair, a graceful neck, perfect features, and an amazing figure tucked into jeans and a snowy white top.

Piper had seen her share of actresses—most of her dad’s dates were knockout beautiful—but this lady was different. She was elegant without trying, fashionable without effort, stunning without makeup. After seeing Aeolus with his silly face-lifts and cosmetics, Piper thought this woman looked even more astonishing. There was nothing artificial about her.

Yet as Piper watched, the woman’s appearance changed. Piper couldn’t decide the color of her eyes, or the exact color of her hair. The woman became more and more beautiful, as if her image were aligning itself to Piper’s thoughts—getting as close as possible to Piper’s ideal of beauty.

“Aphrodite,” Piper said. “Mom?”

The goddess smiled. “You’re only dreaming, my sweet. If anyone wonders, I wasn’t here. Okay?”

“I—” Piper wanted to ask a thousand questions, but they all crowded together in her head.

Aphrodite held up a turquoise dress. Piper thought it looked awesome, but the goddess made a face. “This isn’t my color, is it? Pity, it’s cute. Medea really does have some lovely things here.”

“This—this building exploded,” Piper stammered. “I saw it.”

“Yes,” Aphrodite agreed. “I suppose that’s why everything’s on sale. Just a memory, now. And I’m sorry to pull you out of your other dream. Much more pleasant, I know.”

Piper’s face burned. She didn’t know whether she was more angry or embarrassed, but mostly she felt hollow with disappointment. “It wasn’t real. It never even happened. So why do I remember it so vividly?”

Aphrodite smiled. “Because you are my daughter, Piper. You see possibilities much more vividly than others. You see what *could* be. And it still might be—don’t give up. Unfortunately—” The goddess gestured around the department store. “You have other trials to face, first. Medea will be back, along with many other enemies. The Doors of Death have opened.”

“What do you mean?”

Aphrodite winked at her. “You’re a smart one, Piper. You know.”

A cold feeling settled over her. “The sleeping woman, the one Medea and Midas called their patron. She’s managed to open a new entrance from the Underworld. She’s letting the dead escape back into the world.”

“Mmm. And not just *any* dead. The worst, the most powerful, the ones most likely to hate the gods.”

“The monsters are coming back from Tartarus the same way,” Piper guessed. “That’s why they don’t stay disintegrated.”

“Yes. Their *patron*, as you call her, has a special relationship with Tartarus, the spirit of the pit.” Aphrodite held up a gold sequined top. “No ... this would make me look ridiculous.”

Piper laughed uneasily. “You? You can’t look anything but perfect.”

“You’re sweet,” Aphrodite said. “But beauty is about finding the right fit, the most natural fit. To be perfect, you have to feel perfect about yourself—avoid trying to be something you’re not. For a goddess, that’s especially hard. We can change so easily.”

“My dad thought you were perfect.” Piper’s voice quavered. “He never got over you.”

Aphrodite’s gaze became distant. “Yes ... Tristan. Oh, he was amazing. So gentle and kind, funny and handsome. Yet he had so much sadness inside.”

“Could we please not talk about him in the past tense?”

“I’m sorry, dear. I didn’t want to leave your father, of course. It’s always so hard, but it was for the best. If he had realized who I actually was—”

“Wait—he didn’t *know* you were a goddess?”

“Of course not.” Aphrodite sounded offended. “I wouldn’t do that to him. For most mortals, that’s simply too hard to accept. It can ruin their lives! Ask your friend Jason—*lovelyboy*, by the way. His poor mother was destroyed when she found out she’d fallen in love with Zeus. No, it was much better Tristan believed that I was a mortal woman who left him without explanation. Better a bittersweet memory than an immortal, unattainable goddess. Which brings me to an important matter ...”

She opened her hand and showed Piper a glowing glass vial of pink liquid. “This is one of Medea’s kinder mixtures. It erases only recent memories. When you save your father, *if* you can save him, you should give him this.”

Piper couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “You want me to dope my dad? You want me to make him forget what he’s been through?”

Aphrodite held up the vial. The liquid cast a pink glow over her face. “Your father acts confident, Piper, but he walks a fine line between two worlds. He’s worked his whole life to deny the old stories about gods and spirits, yet he fears

those stories might be real. He fears that he's shut off an important part of himself, and someday it will destroy him. Now he's been captured by a giant. He's living a nightmare. Even if he survives ... if he has to spend the rest of his life with those memories, knowing that gods and spirits walk the earth, it will shatter him. That's what our enemy hopes for. She will break him, and thus break your spirit."

Piper wanted to shout that Aphrodite was wrong. Her dad was the strongest person she knew. Piper would never take his memories the way Hera had taken Jason's.

But somehow she couldn't stay angry with Aphrodite. She remembered what her dad had said months ago, at the beach at Big Sur: *If I really believed in Ghost Country, or animal spirits, or Greek gods... I don't think I could sleep at night. I'd always be looking for somebody to blame.*

Now Piper wanted someone to blame, too.

"Who is she?" Piper demanded. "The one controlling the giants?"

Aphrodite pursed her lips. She moved to the next rack, which held battered armor and ripped togas, but Aphrodite looked through them as if they were designer outfits.

"You have a strong will," she mused. "I'm never given much credit among the gods. My children are laughed at. They're dismissed as conceited and shallow."

"Some of them are."

Aphrodite laughed. "Granted. Perhaps I'm conceited and shallow, too, sometimes. A girl has to indulge. Oh, this is nice." She picked up a burned and stained bronze breastplate and held it up for Piper to see. "No?"

"No," Piper said. "Are you going to answer my question?"

"Patience, my sweet," the goddess said. "My point is that love is the most powerful motivator in the world. It spurs mortals to greatness. Their noblest, bravest acts are done for love."

Piper pulled out her dagger and studied its reflective blade. "Like Helen starting the Trojan War?"

"Ah, Katoptris." Aphrodite smiled. "I'm glad you found it. I get so much flack for that war, but honestly, Paris and Helen were a cute couple. And the heroes of that war are immortal now—at least in the memories of men. Love is powerful, Piper. It can bring even the gods to their knees. I told this to my son Aeneas when he escaped from Troy. He thought he had failed. He thought he was a loser! But he traveled to Italy—"

"And became the forebear of Rome."

"Exactly. You see, Piper, my children can be quite powerful. *You* can be

quite powerful, because my lineage is unique. I am closer to the beginning of creation than any other Olympian.”

Piper struggled to remember about Aphrodite’s birth. “Didn’t you ... rise from the sea? Standing on a seashell?”

The goddess laughed. “That painter Botticelli had quite an imagination. I never stood on a seashell, thank you very much. But yes, I rose from the sea. The first beings to rise from Chaos were the Earth and Sky—Gaea and Ouranos. When their son the Titan Kronos killed Ouranos—”

“By chopping him to pieces with a scythe,” Piper remembered.

Aphrodite wrinkled her nose. “Yes. The pieces of Ouranos fell into the sea. His immortal essence created sea foam. And from that foam—”

“You were born. I remember now. So you’re—”

“The last child of Ouranos, who was greater than the gods or the Titans. So, in a strange way, I’m the eldest Olympian god. As I said, love is a powerful force. And you, my daughter, are much more than a pretty face. Which is why you already know who is waking the giants, and who has the power to open doors into the deepest parts of the earth.”

Aphrodite waited, as if she could sense Piper slowly putting together the pieces of a puzzle, which made a dreadful picture.

“Gaea,” Piper said. “The earth itself. That’s our enemy.”

She hoped Aphrodite would say no, but the goddess kept her eyes on the rack of tattered armor. “She has slumbered for eons, but she is slowly waking. Even asleep, she is powerful, but once she wakes ... we will be doomed. You must defeat the giants before that happens, and lull Gaea back into her slumber. Otherwise the rebellion has only begun. The dead will continue to rise. Monsters will regenerate with even greater speed. The giants will lay waste to the birthplace of the gods. And if they do that, all civilization will burn.”

“But *Gaea*? Mother Earth?”

“Do not underestimate her,” Aphrodite warned. “She is a cruel deity. She orchestrated Ouranos’s death. *She* gave Kronos the sickle and urged him to kill his own father. While the Titans ruled the world, she slumbered in peace. But when the gods overthrew them, Gaea woke again in all her anger and gave birth to a new race—the giants—to destroy Olympus once and for all.”

“And it’s happening again,” Piper said. “The rise of the giants.”

Aphrodite nodded. “Now you know. What will you do?”

“Me?” Piper clenched her fists. “What am I supposed to do? Put on a pretty dress and sweet-talk Gaea into going back to sleep?”

“I wish that would work,” Aphrodite said. “But no, you will have to find your own strengths, and fight for what you love. Like my favored ones, Helen

and Paris. Like my son Aeneas.”

“Helen and Paris died,” Piper said.

“And Aeneas became a hero,” the goddess countered. “The first great hero of Rome. The result will depend on you, Piper, but I will tell you this: The seven greatest demigods must be gathered to defeat the giants, and that effort will not succeed without you. When the two sides meet ... you will be the mediator. You will determine whether there is friendship or bloodshed.”

“What two sides?”

Piper’s vision began to dim.

“You must wake soon, my child,” said the goddess. “I do not always agree with Hera, but she’s taken a bold risk, and I agree it must be done. Zeus has kept the two sides apart for too long. Only together will you have the power to save Olympus. Now, wake, and I hope you like the clothes I picked out.”

“What clothes?” Piper demanded, but the dream faded to black.

PIPER

PIPER WOKE AT A TABLE AT A SIDEWALK CAFÉ.

For a second, she thought she was still dreaming. It was a sunny morning. The air was brisk but not unpleasant for sitting outside. At the other tables, a mix of bicyclists, business people, and college kids sat chatting and drinking coffee.

She could smell eucalyptus trees. Lots of foot traffic passed in front of quaint little shops. The street was lined with bottle-brush trees and blooming azaleas as if winter was a foreign concept.

In other words: she was in California.

Her friends sat in chairs around her—all of them with their hands calmly folded across their chests, dozing pleasantly. And they all had new clothes on. Piper looked down at her own outfit and gasped. “Mother!”

She yelled louder than she meant. Jason flinched, bumping the table with his knees, and then all of them were awake.

“What?” Hedge demanded. “Fight who? Where?”

“Falling!” Leo grabbed the table. “No—not falling. Where are we?”

Jason blinked, trying to get his bearings. He focused on Piper and made a little choking sound. “What are you wearing?”

Piper probably blushed. She was wearing the turquoise dress she’d seen in her dream, with black leggings and black leather boots. She had on her favorite silver charm bracelet, even though she’d left that back home in L.A., and her old snowboarding jacket from her dad, which amazingly went with the outfit pretty well. She pulled out Katoptris, and judging from the reflection in the blade, she’d gotten her hair done, too.

“It’s nothing,” she said. “It’s my—” She remembered Aphrodite’s warning not to mention that they’d talked. “It’s nothing.”

Leo grinned. “Aphrodite strikes again, huh? You’re gonna be the best-dressed warrior in town, beauty queen.”

“Hey, Leo.” Jason nudged his arm. “You look at yourself recently?”

“What ... oh.”

All of them had been give a makeover. Leo was wearing pinstriped pants, black leather shoes, a white collarless shirt with suspenders, and his tool belt,

Ray-Ban sunglasses, and a porkpie hat.

“God, Leo.” Piper tried not to laugh. “I think my dad wore that to his last premiere, minus the tool belt.”

“Hey, shut up!”

“I think he looks good,” said Coach Hedge. “Course, I look better.”

The satyr was a pastel nightmare. Aphrodite had given him a baggy canary yellow zoot suit with two-tone shoes that fit over his hooves. He had a matching yellow broad-brimmed hat, a rose-colored shirt, a baby blue tie, and a blue carnation in his lapel, which Hedge sniffed and then ate.

“Well,” Jason said, “at least your mom overlooked me.”

Piper knew that wasn’t exactly true. Looking at him, her heart did a little tap dance. Jason was dressed simply in jeans and a clean purple T-shirt, like he’d worn at the Grand Canyon. He had new track shoes on, and his hair was newly trimmed. His eyes were the same color as the sky. Aphrodite’s message was clear: *This one needs no improvement.*

And Piper agreed.

“Anyway,” she said uncomfortably, “how did we get here?”

“Oh, that would be Mellie,” Hedge said, chewing happily on his carnation. “Those winds shot us halfway across the country, I’d guess. We would’ve been smashed flat on impact, but Mellie’s last gift—a nice soft breeze—cushioned our fall.”

“And she got fired for us,” Leo said. “Man, we suck.”

“Ah, she’ll be fine,” Hedge said. “Besides, she couldn’t help herself. I’ve got that effect on nymphs. I’ll send her a message when we’re through with this quest and help her figure something out. That is one *aura* I could settle down with and raise a herd of baby goats.”

“I’m going to be sick,” Piper said. “Anyone else want coffee?”

“Coffee!” Hedge’s grin was stained blue from the flower. “I love coffee!”

“Um,” Jason said, “but—money? Our packs?”

Piper looked down. Their packs were at their feet, and everything seemed to still be there. She reached into her coat pocket and felt two things she hadn’t expected. One was a wad of cash. The other was a glass vial—the amnesia potion. She left the vial in her pocket and brought out the money.

Leo whistled. “Allowance? Piper, your mom rocks!”

“Waitress!” Hedge called. “Six double espressos, and whatever these guys want. Put it on the girl’s tab.”

It didn’t take them long to figure out where they were. The menus said “Café Verve, Walnut Creek, CA.” And according to the waitress, it was 9 a.m. on

December 21, the winter solstice, which gave them three hours until Enceladus's deadline.

They didn't have to wonder where Mount Diablo was, either. They could see it on the horizon, right at the end of the street. After the Rockies, Mount Diablo didn't look very large, nor was it covered in snow. It seemed downright peaceful, its golden creases marbled with gray-green trees. But size was deceptive with mountains, Piper knew. It was probably much bigger up close. And appearances were deceptive too. Here they were—back in California—supposedly her home—with sunny skies, mild weather, laid-back people, and a plate of chocolate chip scones with coffee. And only a few miles away, somewhere on that peaceful mountain, a superpowerful, super-evil giant was about to have her father for lunch.

Leo pulled something out of his pocket—the old crayon drawing Aeolus had given him. Aphrodite must've thought it was important if she'd magically transferred it to his new outfit.

“What is that?” Piper asked.

Leo folded it up gingerly again and put it away. “Nothing. You don't want to see my kindergarten artwork.”

“It's more than that,” Jason guessed. “Aeolus said it was the key to our success.”

Leo shook his head. “Not today. He was talking about... later.”

“How can you be sure?” Piper asked.

“Trust me,” Leo said. “Now—what's our game plan?”

Coach Hedge belched. He'd already had three espressos and a plate of doughnuts, along with two napkins and another flower from the vase on the table. He would've eaten the silverware, except Piper had slapped his hand.

“Climb the mountain,” Hedge said. “Kill everything except Piper's dad. Leave.”

“Thank you, General Eisenhower,” Jason grumbled.

“Hey, I'm just saying!”

“Guys,” Piper said. “There's more you need to know.”

It was tricky, because she couldn't mention her mom; but she told them she'd figured some things out in her dreams. She told them about their real enemy: Gaea.

“Gaea?” Leo shook his head. “Isn't that Mother Nature? She's supposed to have, like, flowers in her hair and birds singing around her and deer and rabbits doing her laundry.”

“Leo, that's Snow White,” Piper said.

“Okay, but—”

“Listen, cupcake.” Coach Hedge dabbed the espresso out of his goatee. “Piper’s telling us some serious stuff, here. Gaea’s no softie. I’m not even sure *I* could take her.”

Leo whistled. “Really?”

Hedge nodded. “This earth lady—she and her old man the sky were nasty customers.”

“Ouranos,” Piper said. She couldn’t help looking up at the blue sky, wondering if it had eyes.

“Right,” Hedge said. “So Ouranos, he’s not the best dad. He throws their first kids, the Cyclopes, into Tartarus. That makes Gaea mad, but she bides her time. Then they have another set of kids—the twelve Titans—and Gaea is afraid they’ll get thrown into prison too. So she goes up to her son Kronos—”

“The big bad dude,” Leo said. “The one they defeated last summer.”

“Right. And Gaea’s the one who gives him the scythe, and tells him, ‘Hey, why don’t I call your dad down here? And while he’s talking to me, distracted, you can cut him to pieces. Then you can take over the world. Wouldn’t that be great?’”

Nobody said anything. Piper’s chocolate chip scone didn’t look so appetizing anymore. Even though she’d heard the story before, she still couldn’t quite get her mind around it. She tried to imagine a kid so messed up, he would kill his own dad just for power. Then she imagined a mom so messed up, she would convince her son to do it.

“Definitely not Snow White,” she decided.

“Nah, Kronos was a bad guy,” Hedge said. “But Gaea is literally the *mother* of all bad guys. She’s so old and powerful, so *huge*, that it’s hard for her to be fully conscious. Most of the time, she sleeps, and that’s the way we like her—snoring.” “But she talked to me,” Leo said. “How can she be asleep?”

Gleeson brushed crumbs off his canary yellow lapel. He was on his sixth espresso now, and his pupils were as big as quarters. “Even in her sleep, part of her consciousness is active—dreaming, keeping watch, doing little things like causing volcanoes to explode and monsters to rise. Even now, she’s not fully awake. Believe me, you don’t want to see her fully awake.”

“But she’s getting more powerful,” Piper said. “She’s causing the giants to rise. And if their king comes back—this guy Porphyron—”

“He’ll raise an army to destroy the gods,” Jason put in. “Starting with Hera. It’ll be another war. And Gaea will wake up fully.”

Gleeson nodded. “Which is why it’s a good idea for us to stay off the ground as much as possible.”

Leo looked warily at Mount Diablo. “So ... climbing a mountain. That

would be bad.”

Piper’s heart sank. First, she’d been asked to betray her friends. Now they were trying to help her rescue her dad even though they knew they were walking into a trap. The idea of fighting a giant had been scary enough. But the idea that Gaea was behind it—a force more powerful than a god or Titan ...

“Guys, I can’t ask you to do this,” Piper said. “This is too dangerous.”

“You kidding?” Gleeson belched and showed them his blue carnation smile. “Who’s ready to beat stuff up?”

LEO

LEO HOPED THE TAXI COULD TAKE THEM all the way to the top.

No such luck. The cab made lurching, grinding sounds as it climbed the mountain road, and halfway up they found the ranger's station closed, a chain blocking the way.

"Far as I can go," the cabbie said. "You sure about this? Gonna be a long walk back, and my car's acting funny. I can't wait for you."

"We're sure." Leo was the first one out. He had a bad feeling about what was wrong with the cab, and when he looked down he saw he was right. The wheels were sinking into the road like it was made of quicksand. Not fast—just enough to make the driver think he had a transmission problem or a bad axle—but Leo knew different.

The road was hard-packed dirt. No reason at all it should have been soft, but already Leo's shoes were starting to sink. Gaea was messing with them.

While his friends got out, Leo paid the cabbie. He was generous—heck, why not? It was Aphrodite's money. Plus, he had a feeling he might never be coming off this mountain.

"Keep the change," he said. "And get out of here. Quick."

The driver didn't argue. Soon all they could see was his dust trail.

The view from the mountain was pretty amazing. The whole inland valley around Mount Diablo was a patchwork of towns—grids of tree-lined streets and nice middle-class suburbs, shops, and schools. All these normal people living normal lives—the kind Leo had never known.

"That's Concord," Jason said, pointing to the north. "Walnut Creek below us. To the south, Danville, past those hills. And that way ..."

He pointed west, where a ridge of golden hills held back a layer of fog, like the rim of a bowl. "That's the Berkeley Hills. The East Bay. Past that, San Francisco."

"Jason?" Piper touched his arm. "You remember something? You've been here?"

"Yes ... no." He gave her an anguished look. "It just seems important."

"That's Titan land." Coach Hedge nodded toward the west. "Bad place,

Jason. Trust me, this is as close to 'Frisco as we want to get.”

But Jason looked toward the foggy basin with such longing that Leo felt uneasy. Why did Jason seem so connected with that place—a place Hedge said was evil, full of bad magic and old enemies? What if Jason came from here? Everybody kept hinting Jason was an enemy, that his arrival at Camp Half-Blood was a dangerous mistake.

No, Leo thought. Ridiculous. Jason was their friend.

Leo tried to move his foot, but his heels were now completely embedded in the dirt.

“Hey, guys,” he said. “Let’s keep moving.”

The others noticed the problem.

“Gaea is stronger here,” Hedge grumbled. He popped his hooves free from his shoes, then handed the shoes to Leo. “Keep those for me, Valdez. They’re nice.”

Leo snorted. “Yes, sir, Coach. Would you like them polished?”

“That’s varsity thinking, Valdez.” Hedge nodded approvingly. “But first, we’d better hike up this mountain while we still can.”

“How do we know where the giant is?” Piper asked.

Jason pointed toward the peak. Drifting across the summit was a plume of smoke. From a distance, Leo had thought it was a cloud, but it wasn’t. Something was burning.

“Smoke equals fire,” Jason said. “We’d better hurry.”

The Wilderness School had taken Leo on several forced marches. He thought he was in good shape. But climbing a mountain when the earth was trying to swallow his feet was like jogging on a flypaper treadmill.

In no time, Leo had rolled up the sleeves on his collarless shirt, even though the wind was cold and sharp. He wished Aphrodite had given him walking shorts and some more comfortable shoes, but he was grateful for the Ray-Bans that kept the sun out of his eyes. He slipped his hands into his tool belt and started summoning supplies—gears, a tiny wrench, some strips of bronze. As he walked, he built—not really thinking about it, just fiddling with pieces.

By the time they neared the crest of the mountain, Leo was the most fashionably dressed sweaty, dirty hero ever. His hands were covered in machine grease.

The little object he’d made was like a windup toy—the kind that rattles and walks across a coffee table. He wasn’t sure what it could do, but he slipped it into his tool belt.

He missed his army coat with all its pockets. Even more than that, he missed Festus. He could use a fire-breathing bronze dragon right now. But Leo knew Festus would not be coming back—at least, not in his old form.

He patted the picture in his pocket—the crayon drawing he’d made at the picnic table under the pecan tree when he was five years old. He remembered Tía Callida singing as he worked, and how upset he’d been when the winds had snatched the picture away. *It isn’t time yet, little hero*, Tía Callida had told him. *Someday, yes. You’ll have your quest. You will find your destiny, and your hard journey will finally make sense.*

Now Aeolus had returned the picture. Leo knew that meant his destiny was getting close; but the journey was as frustrating as this stupid mountain. Every time Leo thought they’d reached the summit, it turned out to be just another ridge with an even higher one behind it.

First things first, Leo told himself. Survive today. Figure out crayon drawing of destiny later.

Finally Jason crouched behind a wall of rock. He gestured for the others to do the same. Leo crawled up next to him. Piper had to pull Coach Hedge down.

“I don’t want to get my outfit dirty!” Hedge complained.

“Shhh!” Piper said.

Reluctantly, the satyr knelt.

Just over the ridge where they were hiding, in the shadow of the mountain’s final crest, was a forested depression about the size of a football field, where the giant Enceladus had set up camp.

Trees had been cut down to make a towering purple bonfire. The outer rim of the clearing was littered with extra logs and construction equipment—an earthmover; a big crane thing with rotating blades at the end like an electric shaver—must be a tree harvester, Leo thought—and a long metal column with an ax blade, like a sideways guillotine—a hydraulic ax.

Why a giant needed construction equipment, Leo wasn’t sure. He didn’t see how the creature in front of him could even fit in the driver’s seat. The giant Enceladus was so large, so horrible, Leo didn’t want to look at him.

But he forced himself to focus on the monster.

To start with, he was thirty feet tall—easily as tall as the treetops. Leo was sure the giant could’ve seen them behind their ridge, but he seemed intent on the weird purple bonfire, circling it and chanting under his breath. From the waist up, the giant appeared humanoid, his muscular chest clad in bronze armor, decorated with flame designs. His arms were completely ripped. Each of his biceps was bigger than Leo. His skin was bronze but sooty with ash. His face was crudely shaped, like a half-finished clay figure, but his eyes glowed white,

and his hair was matted in shaggy dreadlocks down to his shoulders, braided with bones.

From the waist down, he was even more terrifying. His legs were scaly green, with claws instead of feet—like the forelegs of a dragon. In his hand, Enceladus held a spear the size of a flagpole. Every so often he dipped its tip in the fire, turning the metal molten red.

“Okay,” Coach Hedge whispered. “Here’s the plan—”

Leo elbowed him. “You’re not charging him alone!”

“Aw, c’mon.”

Piper choked back a sob. “Look.”

Just visible on the other side of the bonfire was a man tied to a post. His head slumped like he was unconscious, so Leo couldn’t make out his face, but Piper didn’t seem to have any doubts.

“Dad,” she said.

Leo swallowed. He wished this were a Tristan McLean movie. Then Piper’s dad would be faking unconsciousness. He’d untie his bonds and knock out the giant with some cleverly hidden anti-giant gas. Heroic music would start to play, and Tristan McLean would make his amazing escape, running away in slow motion while the mountainside exploded behind him.

But this wasn’t a movie. Tristan McLean was half dead and about to be eaten. The only people who could stop it—three fashionably dressed teenaged demigods and a megalomaniac goat.

“There’s four of us,” Hedge whispered urgently. “And only one of him.”

“Did you miss the fact that he’s thirty feet tall?” Leo asked.

“Okay,” Hedge said. “So you, me, and Jason distract him. Piper sneaks around and frees her dad.”

They all looked at Jason.

“What?” Jason asked. “I’m not the leader.”

“Yes,” Piper said. “You are.”

They’d never really talked about it, but no one disagreed, not even Hedge. Coming this far had been a team effort, but when it came to a life-and-death decision, Leo knew Jason was the one to ask. Even if he had no memory, Jason had a kind of balance to him. You could just tell he’d been in battles before, and he knew how to keep his cool. Leo wasn’t exactly the trusting type, but he trusted Jason with his life.

“I hate to say it,” Jason sighed, “but Coach Hedge is right. A distraction is Piper’s best chance.”

Not a good chance, Leo thought. Not even a survivable chance. Just their *best* chance.

They couldn't sit there all day and talk about it, though. It had to be close to noon—the giant's deadline—and the ground was still trying to pull them down. Leo's knees had already sunk two inches into the dirt.

Leo looked at the construction equipment and got a crazy idea. He brought out the little toy he'd made on the climb, and he realized what it could do—if he was lucky, which he almost never was.

“Let's boogie,” he said. “Before I come to my senses.”

LEO

THE PLAN WENT WRONG ALMOST IMMEDIATELY. Piper scrambled along the ridge, trying to keep her head down, while Leo, Jason, and Coach Hedge walked straight into the clearing.

Jason summoned his golden lance. He brandished it over his head and yelled, “Giant!” Which sounded pretty good, and a lot more confident than Leo could’ve managed. He was thinking more along the lines of, “We are pathetic ants! Don’t kill us!”

Enceladus stopped chanting at the flames. He turned toward them and grinned, revealing fangs like a saber-toothed tiger’s.

“Well,” the giant rumbled. “What a nice surprise.”

Leo didn’t like the sound of that. His hand closed on his windup gadget. He stepped sideways, edging his way toward the bulldozer.

Coach Hedge shouted, “Let the movie star go, you big ugly cupcake! Or I’m gonna plant my hoof right up your—”

“Coach,” Jason said. “Shut up.”

Enceladus roared with laughter. “I’ve forgotten how funny satyrs are. When we rule the world, I think I’ll keep your kind around. You can entertain me while I eat all the other mortals.”

“Is that a compliment?” Hedge frowned at Leo. “I don’t think that was a compliment.”

Enceladus opened his mouth wide, and his teeth began to glow.

“Scatter!” Leo yelled.

Jason and Hedge dove to the left as the giant blew fire—a furnace blast so hot even Festus would’ve been jealous. Leo dodged behind the bulldozer, wound up his homemade device, and dropped it into the driver’s seat. Then he ran to the right, heading for the tree harvester.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jason rise and charge the giant. Coach Hedge ripped off his canary yellow jacket, which was now on fire, and bleated angrily. “I *liked* that outfit!” Then he raised his club and charged, too.

Before they could get very far, Enceladus slammed his spear against the ground. The entire mountain shook.

The shockwave sent Leo sprawling. He blinked, momentarily stunned. Through a haze of grassfire and bitter smoke, he saw Jason staggering to his feet on the other side of the clearing. Coach Hedge was knocked out cold. He'd fallen forward and hit his head on a log. His furry hindquarters were sticking straight up, with his canary yellow pants around his knees—a view Leo really didn't need.

The giant bellowed, "I see you, Piper McLean!" He turned and blew fire at a line of bushes to Leo's right. Piper ran into the clearing like a flushed quail, the underbrush burning behind her.

Enceladus laughed. "I'm happy you've arrived. And you brought me my prizes!"

Leo's gut twisted. This was the moment Piper had warned them about. They'd played right into Enceladus's hands.

The giant must've read Leo's expression, because he laughed even louder. "That's right, son of Hephaestus. I didn't expect you all to stay alive this long, but it doesn't matter. By bringing you here, Piper McLean has sealed the deal. If she betrays you, I'm as good as my word. She can take her father and go. What do I care about a movie star?"

Leo could see Piper's dad more clearly now. He wore a ragged dress shirt and torn slacks. His bare feet were caked with mud. He wasn't completely unconscious, because he lifted his head and groaned—yep, Tristan McLean all right. Leo had seen that face in enough movies. But he had a nasty cut down the side of his face, and he looked thin and sickly—not heroic at all.

"Dad!" Piper yelled.

Mr. McLean blinked, trying to focus. "Pipes ... ? Where ..."

Piper drew her dagger and faced Enceladus. "Let him go!"

"Of course, dear," the giant rumbled. "Swear your loyalty to me, and we have no problem. Only these others must die."

Piper looked back and forth between Leo and her dad.

"He'll kill you," Leo warned. "Don't trust him!"

"Oh, come now," Enceladus bellowed. "You know I was born to fight Athena herself? Mother Gaea made each of us giants with a specific purpose, designed to fight and destroy a particular god. I was Athena's nemesis, the *anti*-Athena, you might say. Compared to some of my brethren—I am small! But I am clever. And I keep my bargain with you, Piper McLean. It's part of my plan!"

Jason was on his feet now, lance ready; but before he could act, Enceladus roared—a call so loud it echoed down the valley and was probably heard all the way to San Francisco.

At the edge the woods, half a dozen ogre-like creatures rose up. Leo realized with nauseating certainty that they hadn't simply been hiding there. They'd risen straight out of the earth.

The ogres shuffled forward. They were small compared to Enceladus, about seven feet tall. Each one of them had six arms—one pair in the regular spot, then an extra pair sprouting out the top of their shoulders, and another set shooting from the sides of their rib cages. They wore only ragged leather loincloths, and even across the clearing, Leo could smell them. Six guys who never bathed, with six armpits each. Leo decided if he survived this day, he'd have to take a three-hour shower just to forget the stench.

Leo stepped toward Piper. "What—what are those?"

Her blade reflected the purple light of the bonfire. "Gegenees."

"In English?" Leo asked.

"The Earthborn," she said. "Six-armed giants who fought Jason—the *first* Jason."

"Very good, my dear!" Enceladus sounded delighted. "They used to live on a miserable place in Greece called Bear Mountain. Mount Diablo is much nicer! They are lesser children of Mother Earth, but they serve their purpose. They're good with construction equipment—"

"Vroom, vroom!" one of the Earthborn bellowed, and the others took up the chant, each moving his six hands as though driving a car, as if it were some kind of weird religious ritual. "Vroom, vroom!"

"Yes, thank you, boys," Enceladus said. "They also have a score to settle with heroes. Especially anyone named Jason."

"Yay-son!" the Earthborn screamed. They all picked up clumps of earth, which solidified in their hands, turning to nasty pointed stones. "Where Yay-son? Kill Yay-son!"

Enceladus smiled. "You see, Piper, you have a choice. Save your father, or ah, *try* to save your friends and face certain death."

Piper stepped forward. Her eyes blazed with such rage, even the Earthborn backed away. She radiated power and beauty, but it had nothing to do with her clothes or her makeup.

"You will not take the people I love," she said. "None of them."

Her words rippled across the clearing with such force, the Earthborn muttered, "Okay. Okay, sorry," and began to retreat.

"Stand your ground, fools!" Enceladus bellowed. He snarled at Piper. "This is why we wanted you alive, my dear. You could have been so useful to us. But as you wish. Earth-born! I will show you Jason."

Leo's heart sank. But the giant didn't point to Jason. He pointed to the other

side of the bonfire, where Tristan McLean hung helpless and half conscious.

“There is Jason,” Enceladus said with pleasure. “Tear him apart!”

Leo’s biggest surprise: One look from Jason, and all three of them knew the game plan. When had that happened, that they could read each other so well?

Jason charged Enceladus, while Piper rushed to her father, and Leo dashed for the tree harvester, which stood between Mr. McLean and the Earthborn.

The Earthborn were fast, but Leo ran like a storm spirit. He leaped toward the harvester from five feet away and slammed into the driver’s seat. His hands flew across the controls, and the machine responded with unnatural speed—coming to life as if it knew how important this was.

“Ha!” Leo screamed, and swung the crane arm through the bonfire, toppling burning logs onto the Earthborn and spraying sparks everywhere. Two giants went down under a fiery avalanche and melted back into the earth—hopefully to stay for a while.

The other four ogres stumbled across burning logs and hot coals while Leo brought the harvester around. He smashed a button, and on the end of the crane arm the wicked rotating blades began to whirl.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Piper at the stake, cutting her father free. On the other side of the clearing, Jason fought the giant, somehow managing to dodge his massive spear and blasts of fire breath. Coach Hedge was still heroically passed out with his goat tail sticking up in the air.

The whole side of the mountain would soon be ablaze. The fire wouldn’t bother Leo, but if his friends got trapped up here—No. He had to act quickly.

One of the Earthborn—apparently not the most intelligent one—charged the tree harvester, and Leo swung the crane arm in his direction. As soon as the blades touched the ogre, he dissolved like wet clay and splattered all over the clearing. Most of him flew into Leo’s face.

He spit clay out of his mouth and turned the harvester toward the three remaining Earthborn, who backed up quickly.

“Bad vroom-vroom!” one yelled.

“Yeah, that’s right!” Leo yelled at them. “You want some bad vroom-vroom? Come on!”

Unfortunately, they did. Three ogres with six arms, each throwing large, hard rocks at super speed—and Leo knew it was over. Somehow, he launched himself in a backward somersault off the harvester half a second before a boulder demolished the driver’s seat. Rocks slammed into metal. By the time Leo stumbled to his feet, the harvester looked like a crushed soda can, sinking in the mud.

“Dozer!” Leo yelled.

The ogres were picking up more clumps of earth, but this time they were glaring in Piper’s direction.

Thirty feet away, the bulldozer roared to life. Leo’s makeshift gadget had done its job, burrowing into the earthmover’s controls and giving it a temporary life of its own. It roared toward the enemy.

Just as Piper cut her father free and caught him in her arms, the giants launched their second volley of stones. The dozer swiveled in the mud, skidding to intercept, and most of the rocks slammed into its shovel. The force was so great it pushed the dozer back. Two rocks ricocheted and struck their throwers. Two more Earthborn melted into clay. Unfortunately, one rock hit the dozer’s engine, sending up a cloud of oily smoke, and the dozer groaned to a stop. Another great toy broken.

Piper dragged her father below the ridge. The last Earth-born charged after her.

Leo was out of tricks, but he couldn’t let that monster get to Piper. He ran forward, straight through the flames, and grabbed something—*anything*—from his tool belt.

“Hey, stupid!” he yelled, and threw a screwdriver at the Earthborn.

It didn’t kill the ogre, but it sure got his attention. The screwdriver sank hilt-deep into the Earthborn’s forehead like he was made of Play-Doh.

The Earthborn yelped in pain and skittered to a halt. He pulled out the screwdriver, turned and glared at Leo. Sadly, this last ogre looked like the biggest and nastiest of the bunch. Gaea had really gone all out creating him—with extra muscle upgrades, deluxe ugly face, the whole package.

Oh, great, Leo thought. I’ve made a friend.

“You die!” the Earthborn roared. “Friend of Yay-son dies!”

The ogre scooped up handfuls of dirt, which immediately hardened into rock cannonballs.

Leo’s mind went blank. He reached into his tool belt, but he couldn’t think of anything that would help. He was supposed to be clever—but he couldn’t craft or build or tinker his way out of this one.

Fine, he thought. I’ll go out blaze-of-glory style.

He burst into flames, yelled, “Hephaestus!” and charged at the ogre barehanded.

He never got there.

A blur of turquoise and black flashed behind the ogre. A gleaming bronze blade sliced up one side of the Earthborn and down the other.

Six large arms dropped to the ground, boulders rolling out of their useless

hands. The Earthborn looked down, very surprised. He mumbled, “Arms go bye-bye.”

Then he melted into the ground.

Piper stood there, breathing hard, her dagger covered with clay. Her dad sat at the ridge, dazed and wounded, but still alive.

Piper’s expression was ferocious—almost crazy, like a cornered animal. Leo was glad she was on his side.

“Nobody hurts my friends,” she said, and with a sudden warm feeling, Leo realized she was talking about him. Then she yelled, “Come on!”

Leo saw that the battle wasn’t over. Jason was still fighting the giant Enceladus—and it wasn’t going well.

JASON

WHEN JASON'S LANCE BROKE, he knew he was dead.

The battle had started well enough. Jason's instincts kicked in, and his gut told him he'd duelled opponents almost this big before. Size and strength equaled slowness, so Jason just had to be quicker—pace himself, wear out his opponent, and avoid getting smashed or flame-broiled.

He rolled away from the giant's first spear thrust and jabbed Enceladus in the ankle. Jason's javelin managed to pierce the thick dragon hide, and golden *ichor*—the blood of immortals—trickled down the giant's clawed foot.

Enceladus bellowed in pain and blasted him with fire. Jason scrambled away, rolling behind the giant, and struck again behind his knee.

It went on like that for seconds, minutes—it was hard to judge. Jason heard combat across the clearing—construction equipment grinding, fire roaring, monsters shouting, and rocks smashing into metal. He heard Leo and Piper yelling defiantly, which meant they were still alive. Jason tried not to think about it. He couldn't afford to get distracted.

Enceladus's spear missed him by a millimeter. Jason kept dodging, but the ground stuck to his feet. Gaea was getting stronger, and the giant was getting faster. Enceladus might be slow, but he wasn't dumb. He began anticipating Jason's moves, and Jason's attacks were only annoying him, making him more enraged.

"I'm not some minor monster," Enceladus bellowed. "I am a giant, born to destroy gods! Your little gold toothpick can't kill me, boy."

Jason didn't waste energy replying. He was already tired. The ground clung to his feet, making him feel like he weighed an extra hundred pounds. The air was full of smoke that burned his lungs. Fires roared around him, stoked by the winds, and the temperature was approaching the heat of an oven.

Jason raised his javelin to block the giant's next strike—a big mistake. *Don't fight force with force*, a voice chided him—the wolf Lupa, who'd told him that long ago. He managed to deflect the spear, but it grazed his shoulder, and his arm went numb.

He backed up, almost tripping over a burning log.

He had to delay—to keep the giant’s attention fixed on him while his friends dealt with the Earthborn and rescued Piper’s dad. He couldn’t fail.

He retreated, trying to lure the giant to the edge of the clearing. Enceladus could sense his weariness. The giant smiled, baring his fangs.

“The mighty Jason Grace,” he taunted. “Yes, we know about you, son of Jupiter. The one who led the assault on Mount Othrys. The one who single-handedly slew the Titan Krios and toppled the black throne.”

Jason’s mind reeled. He didn’t know these names, yet they made his skin tingle, as if his body remembered the pain his mind didn’t.

“What are you talking about?” he asked. He realized his mistake when Enceladus breathed fire.

Distracted, Jason moved too slowly. The blast missed him, but heat blistered his back. He slammed into the ground, his clothes smoldering. He was blinded from ash and smoke, choking as he tried to breathe.

He scrambled back as the giant’s spear cleaved the ground between his feet. Jason managed to stand.

If he could only summon one good blast of lightning—but he was already drained, and in this condition, the effort might kill him. He didn’t even know if electricity would harm the giant.

Death in battle is honorable, said Lupa’s voice.

That’s real comforting, Jason thought.

One last try: Jason took a deep breath and charged.

Enceladus let him approach, grinning with anticipation. At the last second, Jason faked a strike and rolled between the giant’s legs. He came up quickly, thrusting with all his might, ready to stab the giant in the small of his back, but Enceladus anticipated the trick. He stepped aside with too much speed and agility for a giant, as if the earth were helping him move.

He swept his spear sideways, met Jason’s javelin—and with a snap like a shotgun blast, the golden weapon shattered.

The explosion was hotter than the giant’s breath, blinding Jason with golden light. The force knocked him off his feet and squeezed the breath out of him.

When he regained his focus, he was sitting at the rim of a crater. Enceladus stood at the other side, staggering and confused. The javelin’s destruction had released so much energy, it had blasted a perfect cone-shaped pit thirty feet deep, fusing the dirt and rock into a slick glassy substance. Jason wasn’t sure how he’d survived, but his clothes were steaming. He was out of energy. He had no weapon. And Enceladus was still very much alive.

Jason tried to get up, but his legs were like lead. Enceladus blinked at the

destruction, then laughed. “Impressive! Unfortunately, that was your last trick, demigod.”

Enceladus leaped the crater in a single bound, planting his feet on either side of Jason. The giant raised his spear, its tip hovering six feet over Jason’s chest.

“And now,” Enceladus said, “my first sacrifice to Gaea!”

J A S O N

TIME SEEMED TO SLOW DOWN, WHICH WAS really frustrating, since Jason still couldn't move. He felt himself sinking into the earth like the ground was a waterbed—comfortable, urging him to relax and give up. He wondered if the stories of the Underworld were true. Would he end up in the Fields of Punishment or Elysium? If he couldn't remember any of his deeds, would they still count? He wondered if the judges would take that into consideration, or if his dad, Zeus, would write him a note: "Please excuse Jason from eternal damnation. He has had amnesia."

Jason couldn't feel his arms. He could see the tip of the spear coming toward his chest in slow motion. He knew he should move, but he couldn't seem to do it. Funny, he thought. All that effort to stay alive, and then, *boom*. You just lie there helplessly while a fire-breathing giant impales you.

Leo's voice yelled, "Heads up!"

A large black metal wedge slammed into Enceladus with a massive *thunk!* The giant toppled over and slid into the pit.

"Jason, get up!" Piper called. Her voice energized him, shook him out of his stupor. He sat up, his head groggy, while Piper grabbed him under his arms and hauled him to his feet.

"Don't die on me," she ordered. "You are *not* dying on me."

"Yes, ma'am." He felt light-headed, but she was about the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. Her hair was smoldering. Her face was smudged with soot. She had a cut on her arm, her dress was torn, and she was missing a boot. Beautiful.

About a hundred feet behind her, Leo was standing over a piece of construction equipment—a long cannonlike thing with a single massive piston, the edge broken clean off.

Then Jason looked down in the crater and saw where the other end of the hydraulic ax had gone. Enceladus was struggling to rise, an ax blade the size of a washing machine stuck in his breastplate.

Amazingly, the giant managed to pull the ax blade free. He yelled in pain and the mountain trembled. Golden ichor soaked the front of his armor, but

Enceladus stood.

Shakily, he bent down and retrieved his spear.

“Good try.” The giant winced. “But I cannot be beaten.”

As they watched, the giant’s armor mended itself, and the ichor stopped flowing. Even the cuts on his dragon-scale legs, which Jason had worked so hard to make, were now just pale scars.

Leo ran up to them, saw the giant, and cursed. “What *is* it with this guy? Die, already!”

“My fate is preordained,” Enceladus said. “Giants cannot be killed by gods or heroes.”

“Only by both,” Jason said. The giant’s smile faltered, and Jason saw in his eyes something like fear. “It’s true, isn’t it? Gods and demigods have to work together to kill you.”

“You will not live long enough to try!” The giant started stumbling up the crater’s slope, slipping on the glassy sides.

“Anyone have a god handy?” Leo asked.

Jason’s heart filled with dread. He looked at the giant below them, struggling to get out of the pit, and he knew what had to happen.

“Leo,” he said, “if you’ve got a rope in that tool belt, get it ready.”

He leaped at the giant with no weapon but his bare hands.

“Enceladus!” Piper yelled. “Look behind you!”

It was an obvious trick, but her voice was so compelling, even Jason bought it. The giant said, “What?” and turned like there was an enormous spider on his back.

Jason tackled his legs at just the right moment. The giant lost his balance. Enceladus slammed into the crater and slid to the bottom. While he tried to rise, Jason put his arms around the giant’s neck. When Enceladus struggled to his feet, Jason was riding his shoulders.

“Get off!” Enceladus screamed. He tried to grab Jason’s legs, but Jason scabbled around, squirming and climbing over the giant’s hair.

Father, Jason thought. If I’ve ever done anything good, anything you approved of, help me now. I offer my own life—just save my friends.

Suddenly he could smell the metallic scent of a storm. Darkness swallowed the sun. The giant froze, sensing it too.

Jason yelled to his friends, “Hit the deck!”

And every hair on his head stood straight up.

Crack!

Lightning surged through Jason’s body, straight through Enceladus, and into the ground. The giant’s back stiffened, and Jason was thrown clear. When

he regained his bearings, he was slipping down the side of the crater, and the crater was cracking open. The lightning bolt had split the mountain itself. The earth rumbled and tore apart, and Enceladus's legs slid into the chasm. He clawed helplessly at the glassy sides of the pit, and just for a moment managed to hold on to the edge, his hands trembling.

He fixed Jason with a look of hatred. "You've won nothing, boy. My brothers are rising, and they are ten times as strong as I. We will destroy the gods at their roots! You will die, and Olympus will die with—"

The giant lost his grip and fell into the crevice.

The earth shook. Jason fell toward the rift.

"Grab hold!" Leo yelled.

Jason's feet were at the edge of the chasm when he grabbed the rope, and Leo and Piper pulled him up.

They stood together, exhausted and terrified, as the chasm closed like an angry mouth. The ground stopped pulling at their feet.

For now, Gaea was gone.

The mountainside was on fire. Smoke billowed hundreds of feet into the air. Jason spotted a helicopter—maybe firefighters or reporters—coming toward them.

All around them was carnage. The Earthborn had melted into piles of clay, leaving behind only their rock missiles and some nasty bits of loincloth, but Jason figured they would re-form soon enough. Construction equipment lay in ruins. The ground was scarred and blackened.

Coach Hedge started to move. He sat up with a groan and rubbed his head. His canary yellow pants were now the color of Dijon mustard mixed with mud.

He blinked and looked around him at the battle scene. "Did I do this?"

Before Jason could reply, Hedge picked up his club and got shakily to his feet. "Yeah, you wanted some hoof? I gave you some hoof, cupcakes! Who's the goat, huh?"

He did a little dance, kicking rocks and making what were probably rude satyr gestures at the piles of clay.

Leo cracked a smile, and Jason couldn't help it—he started to laugh. It probably sounded a little hysterical, but it was such a relief to be alive, he didn't care.

Then a man stood up across the clearing. Tristan McLean staggered forward. His eyes were hollow, shell-shocked, like someone who'd just walked through a nuclear wasteland.

"Piper?" he called. His voice cracked. "Pipes, what—what is—"

He couldn't complete the thought. Piper ran over to him and hugged him

tightly, but he almost didn't seem to know her.

Jason had felt a similar way—that morning at the Grand Canyon, when he woke with no memory. But Mr. McLean had the opposite problem. He had too *many* memories, too much trauma his mind just couldn't handle. He was coming apart.

“We need to get him out of here,” Jason said.

“Yeah, but how?” Leo said. “He's in no shape to walk.”

Jason glanced up at the helicopter, which was now circling directly overhead. “Can you make us a bullhorn or something?” he asked Leo. “Piper has some talking to do.”

PIPER

BORROWING THE HELICOPTER WAS EASY.. Getting her dad on board was not.

Piper needed only a few words through Leo's improvised bullhorn to convince the pilot to land on the mountain. The Park Service copter was big enough for medical evacuations or search and rescue, and when Piper told the very nice ranger pilot lady that it would be a great idea to fly them to the Oakland Airport, she readily agreed.

"No," her dad muttered, as they picked him up off the ground. "Piper, what—there were monsters—there were monsters—"

She needed both Leo's and Jason's help to hold him, while Coach Hedge gathered their supplies. Fortunately Hedge had put his pants and shoes back on, so Piper didn't have to explain the goat legs.

It broke Piper's heart to see her dad like this—pushed beyond the breaking point, crying like a little boy. She didn't know what the giant had done to him exactly, how the monsters had shattered his spirit, but she didn't think she could stand to find out.

"It'll be okay, Dad," she said, making her voice as soothing as possible. She didn't want to charmspeak her own father, but it seemed the only way. "These people are my friends. We're going to help you. You're safe now."

He blinked, and looked up at helicopter rotors. "Blades. They had a machine with so many blades. They had six arms ..."

When they got him to the bay doors, the pilot came over to help. "What's wrong with him?" she asked.

"Smoke inhalation," Jason suggested. "Or heat exhaustion."

"We should get him to a hospital," the pilot said.

"It's okay," Piper said. "The airport is good."

"Yeah, the airport is good," the pilot agreed immediately. Then she frowned, as if uncertain why she'd changed her mind. "Isn't he Tristan McLean, the movie star?"

"No," Piper said. "He only looks like him. Forget it."

"Yeah," the pilot said. "Only looks like him. I—" She blinked, confused. "I forgot what I was saying. Let's get going."

Jason raised his eyebrows at Piper, obviously impressed, but Piper felt miserable. She didn't want to twist people's minds, convince them of things they didn't believe. It felt so bossy, so *wrong*—like something Drew would do back at camp, or Medea in her evil department store. And how would it help her father? She couldn't convince him he would be okay, or that nothing had happened. His trauma was just too deep.

Finally they got him on board, and the helicopter took off. The pilot kept getting questions over her radio, asking her where she was going, but she ignored them. They veered away from the burning mountain and headed toward the Berkeley Hills.

"Piper." Her dad grasped her hand and held on like he was afraid he'd fall. "It's you? They told me—they told me you would die. They said ... horrible things would happen."

"It's me, Dad." It took all her willpower not to cry. She had to be strong for him. "Everything's going to be okay."

"They were monsters," he said. "Real monsters. Earth spirits, right out of Grandpa Tom's stories—and the Earth Mother was angry with me. And the giant, Tsul'kälû, breathing fire—" He focused on Piper again, his eyes like broken glass, reflecting a crazy kind of light. "They said you were a demigod. Your mother was ..."

"Aphrodite," Piper said. "Goddess of love."

"I—I—" He took a shaky breath, then seemed to forget how to exhale.

Piper's friends were careful not to watch. Leo fiddled with a lug nut from his tool belt. Jason gazed at the valley below—the roads backing up as mortals stopped their cars and gawked at the burning mountain. Gleeson chewed on the stub of his carnation, and for once the satyr didn't look in the mood to yell or boast.

Tristan McLean wasn't supposed to be seen like this. He was a star. He was confident, stylish, suave—always in control. That was the public image he projected. Piper had seen the image falter before. But this was different. Now it was broken, gone.

"I didn't know about Mom," Piper told him. "Not until you were taken. When we found out where you were, we came right away. My friends helped me. No one will hurt you again."

Her dad couldn't stop shivering. "You're heroes—you and your friends. I can't believe it. You're a *real* hero, not like me. Not playing a part. I'm so proud of you, Pipes." But the words were muttered listlessly, in a semi-trance.

He gazed down on the valley, and his grip on Piper's hand went slack. "Your mother never told me."

“She thought it was for the best.” It sounded lame, even to Piper, and no amount of charmspeak could change that. But she didn’t tell her dad what Aphrodite had really worried about: *If he has to spend the rest of his life with those memories, knowing that gods and spirits walk the earth, it will shatter him.*

Piper felt inside the pocket of her jacket. The vial was still there, warm to her touch.

But how could she erase his memories? Her dad finally knew who she was. He was proud of her, and for once she was his hero, not the other way around. He would never send her away now. They shared a secret.

How could she go back to the way things were?

She held his hand, speaking to him about small things—her time at the Wilderness School, her cabin at Camp Half-Blood. She told him how Coach Hedge ate carnations and got knocked on his butt on Mount Diablo, how Leo had tamed a dragon, and how Jason had made wolves back down by talking in Latin. Her friends smiled reluctantly as she recounted their adventures. Her dad seemed to relax as she talked, but he didn’t smile. Piper wasn’t even sure he heard her.

As they passed over the hills into the East Bay, Jason tensed. He leaned so far out the doorway Piper was afraid he’d fall.

He pointed. “What is that?”

Piper looked down, but she didn’t see anything interesting—just hills, woods, houses, little roads snaking through the canyons. A highway cut through a tunnel in the hills, connecting the East Bay with the inland towns.

“Where?” Piper asked.

“That road,” he said. “The one that goes through the hills.”

Piper picked up the com helmet the pilot had given her and relayed the question over the radio. The answer wasn’t very exciting.

“She says it’s Highway 24,” Piper reported. “That’s the Caldecott Tunnel. Why?”

Jason stared intently at the tunnel entrance, but he said nothing. It disappeared from view as they flew over downtown Oakland, but Jason still stared into the distance, his expression almost as unsettled as Piper’s dad’s.

“Monsters,” her dad said, a tear tracing his cheek. “I live in a world of monsters.”

PIPER

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL DIDN'T WANT TO let an unscheduled helicopter land at the Oakland Airport—until Piper got on the radio. Then it turned out to be no problem.

They unloaded on the tarmac, and everyone looked at Piper.

“What now?” Jason asked her.

She felt uncomfortable. She didn't want to be in charge, but for her dad's sake, she had to appear confident. She had no plan. She'd just remembered that he'd flown into Oakland, which meant his private plane would still be here. But today was the solstice. They had to save Hera. They had no idea where to go or if they were even too late. And how could she leave her dad in this condition?

“First thing,” she said. “I—I have to get my dad home. I'm sorry, guys.”

Their faces fell.

“Oh,” Leo said. “I mean, absolutely. He needs you right now. We can take it from here.”

“Pipes, no.” Her dad had been sitting in the helicopter doorway, a blanket around his shoulders. But he stumbled to his feet. “You have a mission. A quest. I can't—”

“I'll take care of him,” said Coach Hedge.

Piper stared at him. The satyr was the last person she'd expected to offer. “You?” she asked.

“I'm a protector,” Gleeson said. “That's my job, not fighting.”

He sounded a little crestfallen, and Piper realized maybe she shouldn't have recounted how he got knocked unconscious in the last battle. In his own way, maybe the satyr was as sensitive as her dad.

Then Hedge straightened, and set his jaw. “Of course, I'm good at fighting, too.” He glared at them all, daring them to argue.

“Yes,” Jason said.

“Terrifying,” Leo agreed.

The coach grunted. “But I'm a protector, and I can do this. Your dad's right, Piper. You need to carry on with the quest.”

“But ...” Piper’s eyes stung, as if she were back in the forest fire. “Dad ...”

He held out his arms, and she hugged him. He felt frail. He was trembling so much, it scared her.

“Let’s give them a minute,” Jason said, and they took the pilot a few yards down the tarmac.

“I can’t believe it,” her dad said. “I failed you.”

“No, Dad!”

“The things they did, Piper, the visions they showed me ...”

“Dad, listen.” She took out the vial from her pocket. “Aphrodite gave me this, for you. It takes away your recent memories. It’ll make it like none of this ever happened.”

He gazed at her, as if translating her words from a foreign language. “But you’re a hero. I would forget that?”

“Yes,” Piper whispered. She forced an assuring tone into her voice. “Yes, you would. It’ll be like—like before.”

He closed his eyes and took a shaky breath. “I love you, Piper. I always have. I—I sent you away because I didn’t want you exposed to my life. Not the way I grew up—the poverty, the hopelessness. Not the Hollywood insanity either. I thought—I thought I was protecting you.” He managed a brittle laugh. “As if your life without me was better, or safer.”

Piper took his hand. She’d heard him talk about protecting her before, but she’d never believed it. She’d always thought he was just rationalizing. Her dad seemed so confident and easygoing, like his life was a joyride. How could he claim she needed protecting from that?

Finally Piper understood he’d been acting for her benefit, trying not to show how scared and insecure he was. He really *had* been trying to protect her. And now his ability to cope had been destroyed.

She offered him the vial. “Take it. Maybe someday we’ll be ready to talk about this again. When you’re ready.”

“When I’m ready,” he murmured. “You make it sound like—like I’m the one growing up. I’m supposed to be the parent.” He took the vial. His eyes glimmered with a small desperate hope. “I love you, Pipes.”

“Love you, too, Dad.”

He drank the pink liquid. His eyes rolled up into his head, and he slumped forward. Piper caught him, and her friends ran up to help.

“Got him,” Hedge said. The satyr stumbled, but he was strong enough to hold Tristan McLean upright. “I already asked our ranger friend to call up his plane. It’s on the way now. Home address?”

Piper was about to tell him. Then a thought occurred to her. She checked

her dad's pocket, and his BlackBerry was still there. It seemed bizarre that he'd still have something so normal after all he'd been through, but she guessed Enceladus hadn't seen any reason to take it.

"Everything's on here," Piper said. "Address, his chauffeur's number. Just watch out for Jane."

Hedge's eyes lit up, like he sensed a possible fight. "Who's Jane?"

By the time Piper explained, her dad's sleek white Gulf-stream had taxied next to the helicopter.

Hedge and the flight attendant got Piper's dad on board. Then Hedge came down one last time to say his good-byes. He gave Piper a hug and glared at Jason and Leo. "You cupcakes take care of this girl, you hear? Or I'm gonna make you do push-ups."

"You got it, Coach," Leo said, a smile tugging at his mouth.

"No push-ups," Jason promised.

Piper gave the old satyr one more hug. "Thank you, Gleeson. Take care of him, please."

"I got this, McLean," he assured her. "They got root beer and veggie enchiladas on this flight, and one hundred percent linen napkins—yum! I could get used to this."

Trotting up the stairs, he lost one shoe, and his hoof was visible for just a second. The flight attendant's eyes widened, but she looked away and pretended nothing was wrong. Piper figured she'd probably seen stranger things, working for Tristan McLean.

When the plane was heading down the runaway, Piper started to cry. She'd been holding it in too long and she just couldn't anymore. Before she knew it, Jason was hugging her, and Leo stood uncomfortably nearby, pulling Kleenex out of his tool belt.

"Your dad's in good hands," Jason said. "You did amazing."

She sobbed into his shirt. She allowed herself to be held for six deep breaths. Seven. Then she couldn't indulge herself anymore. They needed her. The helicopter pilot was already looking uncomfortable, like she was starting to wonder why she'd flown them here.

"Thank you, guys," Piper said. "I—"

She wanted to tell them how much they meant to her. They'd sacrificed everything, maybe even their quest, to help her. She couldn't repay them, couldn't even put her gratitude into words. But her friends' expressions told her they understood.

Then, right next to Jason, the air began to shimmer. At first Piper thought it was heat off the tarmac, or maybe gas fumes from the helicopter, but she'd seen

something like this before in Medea's fountain. It was an Iris message. An image appeared in the air—a dark-haired girl in silver winter camouflage, holding a bow.

Jason stumbled back in surprise. "Thalia!"

"Thank the gods," said the Hunter. The scene behind her was hard to make out, but Piper heard yelling, metal clashing on metal, and explosions.

"We've found her," Thalia said. "Where are you?"

"Oakland," he said. "Where are you?"

"The Wolf House! Oakland is good; you're not too far. We're holding off the giant's minions, but we can't hold them forever. Get here before sunset, or it's all over."

"Then it's not too late?" Piper cried. Hope surged through her, but Thalia's expression quickly dampened it.

"Not yet," Thalia said. "But Jason—it's worse than I realized. Porphyron is rising. Hurry."

"But where is the Wolf House?" he pleaded.

"Our last trip," Thalia said, her image starting to flicker. "The park. Jack London. Remember?"

This made no sense to Piper, but Jason looked like he'd been shot. He tottered, his face pale, and the Iris message disappeared.

"Bro, you all right?" Leo asked. "You know where she is?"

"Yes," Jason said. "Sonoma Valley. Not far. Not by air."

Piper turned to the ranger pilot, who'd been watching all this with an increasingly puzzled expression.

"Ma'am," Piper said with her best smile. "You don't mind helping us one more time, do you?"

"I don't mind," the pilot agreed.

"We can't take a mortal into battle," Jason said. "It's too dangerous." He turned to Leo. "Do you think you could fly this thing?"

"Um ..." Leo's expression didn't exactly reassure Piper. But then he put his hand on the side of the helicopter, concentrating hard, as if listening to the machine.

"Bell 412HP utility helicopter," Leo said. "Composite four-blade main rotor, cruising speed twenty-two knots, service ceiling twenty-thousand feet. The tank is near full. Sure, I can fly it."

Piper smiled at the ranger again. "You don't have a problem with an under-aged unlicensed kid borrowing your copter, do you? We'll return it."

"I—" The pilot nearly choked on the words, but she got them out: "I don't have a problem with that."

Leo grinned. “Hop in, kids. Uncle Leo’s gonna take you for a ride.”

LEO

FLY A HELICOPTER? SURE, WHY NOT. Leo had done plenty of crazier things that week.

The sun was going down as they flew north over the Richmond Bridge, and Leo couldn't believe the day had gone so quickly. Once again, nothing like ADHD and a good fight to the death to make time fly.

Piloting the chopper, he went back and forth between confidence and panic. If he didn't think about it, he found himself automatically flipping the right switches, checking the altimeter, easing back on the stick, and flying straight. If he allowed himself to consider what he was doing, he started freaking out. He imagined his Aunt Rosa yelling at him in Spanish, telling him he was a delinquent lunatic who was going to crash and burn. Part of him suspected she was right.

"Going okay?" Piper asked from the copilot's seat. She sounded more nervous than he was, so Leo put on a brave face.

"Aces," he said. "So what's the Wolf House?"

Jason knelt between their seats. "An abandoned mansion in the Sonoma Valley. A demigod built it—Jack London."

Leo couldn't place the name. "He an actor?"

"Writer," Piper said. "Adventure stuff, right? *Call of the Wild? White Fang?*"

"Yeah," Jason said. "He was a son of Mercury—I mean, Hermes. He was an adventurer, traveled the world. He was even a hobo for a while. Then he made a fortune writing. He bought a big ranch in the country and decided to build this huge mansion—the Wolf House."

"Named that 'cause he wrote about wolves?" Leo guessed.

"Partially," Jason said. "But the site, and the reason he wrote about wolves—he was dropping hints about his personal experience. There're a lot of holes in his life story—how he was born, who his dad was, why he wandered around so much—stuff you can only explain if you know he was a demigod."

The bay slipped behind them, and the helicopter continued north. Ahead of them, yellow hills rolled out as far as Leo could see.

“So Jack London went to Camp Half-Blood,” Leo guessed.

“No,” Jason said. “No, he didn’t.”

“Bro, you’re freaking me out with the mysterious talk. Are you remembering your past or not?”

“Pieces,” Jason said. “Only pieces. None of it good. The Wolf House is on sacred ground. It’s where London started his journey as a child—where he found out he was a demigod. That’s why he returned there. He thought he could live there, claim that land, but it wasn’t meant for him. The Wolf House was cursed. It burned in a fire a week before he and his wife were supposed to move in. A few years later, London died, and his ashes were buried on the site.”

“So,” Piper said, “how do you know all this?”

A shadow crossed Jason’s face. Probably just a cloud, but Leo could swear the shape looked like an eagle.

“I started my journey there too,” Jason said. “It’s a powerful place for demigods, a dangerous place. If Gaea can claim it, use its power to entomb Hera on the solstice and raise Porphyron—that might be enough to awaken the earth goddess fully.”

Leo kept his hand on the joystick, guiding the chopper at full speed—racing toward the north. He could see some weather ahead—a spot of darkness like a cloudbank or a storm, right where they were going.

Piper’s dad had called him a hero earlier. And Leo couldn’t believe some of the things he’d done—smacking around Cyclopes, disarming exploding doorbells, battling six-armed ogres with construction equipment. They seemed like they had happened to another person. He was just Leo Valdez, an orphaned kid from Houston. He’d spent his life running away, and part of him still wanted to run. What was he thinking, flying toward a cursed mansion to fight more evil monsters?

His mom’s voice echoed in his head: *Nothing is unfixable.*

Except the fact that you’re gone forever, Leo thought.

Seeing Piper and her dad back together had really driven that home. Even if Leo survived this quest and saved Hera, Leo wouldn’t have any happy reunions. He wouldn’t be going back to a loving family. He wouldn’t see his mom.

The helicopter shuddered. Metal creaked, and Leo could almost imagine the tapping was Morse code: *Not the end. Not the end.*

He leveled out the chopper, and the creaking stopped. He was just hearing things. He couldn’t dwell on his mom, or the idea that kept bugging him—that Gaea was bringing souls back from the Underworld—so why couldn’t he make some good come out of it? Thinking like that would drive him crazy. He had a job to do.

He let his instincts take over—just like flying the helicopter. If he thought about the quest too much, or what might happen afterward, he'd panic. The trick was not to think—just get through it.

“Thirty minutes out,” he told his friends, though he wasn't sure how he knew. “If you want to get some rest, now's a good time.”

Jason strapped himself into the back of the helicopter and passed out almost immediately. Piper and Leo stayed wide-awake.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, Leo said, “Your dad'll be fine, you know. Nobody's gonna mess with him with that crazy goat around.”

Piper glanced over, and Leo was struck by how much she'd changed. Not just physically. Her presence was stronger. She seemed more ... *here*. At Wilderness School she'd spent the semester trying not to be seen, hiding out in the back row of the classroom, the back of the bus, the corner of the lunchroom as far as possible from the loud kids. Now she would be impossible to miss. It didn't matter what she was wearing—you'd *have* to look at her.

“My dad,” she said thoughtfully. “Yeah, I know. I was thinking about Jason. I'm worried about him.”

Leo nodded. The closer they got to that bank of dark clouds, the more Leo worried, too. “He's starting to remember. That's got to make him a little edgy.”

“But what if ... what if he's a different person?”

Leo had had the same thought. If the Mist could affect their memories, could Jason's whole personality be an illusion, too? If their friend wasn't their friend, and they were heading into a cursed mansion—a dangerous place for demigods—what would happen if Jason's full memory came back in the middle of a battle?

“Nah,” Leo decided. “After all we've been through? I can't see it. We're a team. Jason can handle it.”

Piper smoothed her blue dress, which was tattered and burned from their fight on Mount Diablo. “I hope you're right. I need him ...” She cleared her throat. “I mean I need to trust him...”

“I know,” Leo said. After seeing her dad break down, Leo understood Piper couldn't afford to lose Jason as well. She'd just watched Tristan McLean, her cool suave movie star dad, reduced to near insanity. Leo could barely stand to watch that, but for *Piper*—Wow, Leo couldn't even imagine. He figured that would make her insecure about herself, too. If weakness was inherited, she'd be wondering, could *she* break down the same way her dad did?

“Hey, don't worry,” Leo said. “Piper, you're the strongest, most powerful beauty queen I've ever met. You can trust yourself. For what it's worth, you can

trust me too.”

The helicopter dipped in a wind shear, and Leo almost jumped out of his skin. He cursed and righted the chopper.

Piper laughed nervously. “Trust you, huh?”

“Ah, shut up, already.” But he grinned at her, and for a second, it felt like he was just relaxing comfortably with a friend.

Then they hit the storm clouds.

LEO

AT FIRST, LEO THOUGHT ROCKS WERE pelting the windshield. Then he realized it was sleet. Frost built up around the edges of the glass, and slushy waves of ice blotted out his view.

“An ice storm?” Piper shouted over the engine and the wind. “Is it supposed to be this cold in Sonoma?”

Leo wasn’t sure, but something about this storm seemed conscious, malevolent—like it was intentionally slamming them.

Jason woke up quickly. He crawled forward, grabbing their seats for balance. “We’ve got to be getting close.”

Leo was too busy wrestling with the stick to reply. Suddenly it wasn’t so easy to drive the chopper. Its movements turned sluggish and jerky. The whole machine shuddered in the icy wind. The helicopter probably hadn’t been prepped for cold-weather flying. The controls refused to respond, and they started to lose altitude.

Below them, the ground was a dark quilt of trees and fog. The ridge of a hill loomed in front of them and Leo yanked the stick, just clearing the treetops.

“There!” Jason shouted.

A small valley opened up before them, with the murky shape of a building in the middle. Leo aimed the helicopter straight for it. All around them were flashes of light that reminded Leo of the tracer fire at Midas’s compound. Trees cracked and exploded at the edges of the clearing. Shapes moved through the mist. Combat seemed to be everywhere.

He set down the helicopter in an icy field about fifty yards from the house and killed the engine. He was about to relax when he heard a whistling sound and saw a dark shape hurtling toward them out of the mist.

“Out!” Leo screamed.

They leaped from the helicopter and barely cleared the rotors before a massive *BOOM* shook the ground, knocking Leo off his feet and splattering ice all over him.

He got up shakily and saw that the world’s largest snowball—a chunk of snow, ice, and dirt the size of a garage—had completely flattened the Bell 412.

“You all right?” Jason ran up to him, Piper at his side. They both looked fine except for being speckled with snow and mud.

“Yeah.” Leo shivered. “Guess we owe that ranger lady a new helicopter.”

Piper pointed south. “Fighting’s over there.” Then she frowned. “No ... it’s all around us.”

She was right. The sounds of combat rang across the valley. The snow and mist made it hard to tell for sure, but there seemed to be a circle of fighting all around the Wolf House.

Behind them loomed Jack London’s dream home—a massive ruin of red and gray stones and rough-hewn timber beams. Leo could imagine how it had looked before it burned down—a combination log cabin and castle, like a billionaire lumberjack might build. But in the mist and sleet, the place had a lonely, haunted feel. Leo could totally believe the ruins were cursed.

“Jason!” a girl’s voice called.

Thalia appeared from the fog, her parka caked with snow. Her bow was in her hand, and her quiver was almost empty. She ran toward them, but made it only a few steps before a six-armed ogre—one of the Earthborn—burst out of the storm behind her, a raised club in each hand.

“Look out!” Leo yelled. They rushed to help, but Thalia had it under control. She launched herself into a flip, notching an arrow as she pivoted like a gymnast and landed in a kneeling position. The ogre got a silver arrow right between the eyes and melted into a pile of clay.

Thalia stood and retrieved her arrow, but the point had snapped off. “That was my last one.” She kicked the pile of clay resentfully. “Stupid ogre.”

“Nice shot, though,” Leo said.

Thalia ignored him as usual (which no doubt meant she thought he was as cool as ever). She hugged Jason and nodded to Piper. “Just in time. My Hunters are holding a perimeter around the mansion, but we’ll be overrun any minute.”

“By Earthborn?” Jason asked.

“*And* wolves—Lycaon’s minions.” Thalia blew a fleck of ice off her nose. “Also storm spirits—”

“But we gave them to Aeolus!” Piper protested.

“Who tried to kill us,” Leo reminded her. “Maybe he’s helping Gaea again.”

“I don’t know,” Thalia said. “But the monsters keep re-forming almost as fast as we can kill them. We took the Wolf House with no problem: surprised the guards and sent them straight to Tartarus. But then this freak snowstorm blew in. Wave after wave of monsters started attacking. Now we’re surrounded. I don’t know who or what is leading the assault, but I think they planned this. It was a

trap to kill anyone who tried to rescue Hera.”

“Where is she?” Jason asked.

“Inside,” Thalia said. “We tried to free her, but we can’t figure out how to break the cage. It’s only a few minutes until the sun goes down. Hera thinks that’s the moment when Porphyrion will be reborn. Plus, most monsters are stronger at night. If we don’t free Hera soon—”

She didn’t need to finish the thought.

Leo, Jason, and Piper followed her into the ruined mansion.

Jason stepped over the threshold and immediately collapsed.

“Hey!” Leo caught him. “None of that, man. What’s wrong?”

“This place ...” Jason shook his head. “Sorry ... It came rushing back to me.”

“So you *have* been here,” Piper said.

“We both have,” Thalia said. Her expression was grim, like she was reliving someone’s death. “This is where my mom took us when Jason was a child. She left him here, told me he was dead. He just disappeared.”

“She gave me to the wolves,” Jason murmured. “At Hera’s insistence. She gave me to Lupa.”

“That part I didn’t know.” Thalia frowned. “Who is Lupa?”

An explosion shook the building. Just outside, a blue mushroom cloud billowed up, raining snowflakes and ice like a nuclear blast made of cold instead of heat.

“Maybe this isn’t the time for questions,” Leo suggested. “Show us the goddess.”

Once inside, Jason seemed to get his bearings. The house was built in a giant U, and Jason led them between the two wings to an outside courtyard with an empty reflecting pool. At the bottom of the pool, just as Jason had described from his dream, two spires of rock and root tendrils had cracked through the foundation.

One of the spires was much bigger—a solid dark mass about twenty feet high, and to Leo it looked like a stone body bag. Underneath the mass of fused tendrils he could make out the shape of a head, wide shoulders, a massive chest and arms, like the creature was stuck waist deep in the earth. No, not stuck—*rising*.

On the opposite end of the pool, the other spire was smaller and more loosely woven. Each tendril was as thick as a telephone pole, with so little space between them that Leo doubted he could’ve gotten his arm through. Still, he could see inside. And in the center of the cage stood Tía Callida.

She looked exactly like Leo remembered: dark hair covered with a shawl, the black dress of a widow, a wrinkled face with glinting, scary eyes.

She didn't glow or radiate any sort of power. She looked like a regular mortal woman, his good old psychotic babysitter.

Leo dropped into the pool and approached the cage. "*Hola, Tía.* Little bit of trouble?"

She crossed her arms and sighed in exasperation. "Don't inspect me like I'm one of your machines, Leo Valdez. Get me out of here!"

Thalia stepped next to him and looked at the cage with distaste—or maybe she was looking at the goddess. "We tried everything we could think of, Leo, but maybe my heart wasn't in it. If it was up to me, I'd just leave her in there."

"Ohh, Thalia Grace," the goddess said. "When I get out of here, you'll be sorry you were ever born."

"Save it!" Thalia snapped. "You've been nothing but a curse to every child of Zeus for ages. You sent a bunch of intestinally challenged cows after my friend Annabeth—"

"She was disrespectful!"

"You dropped a statue on my legs."

"It was an accident!"

"*And* you took my brother!" Thalia's voice cracked with emotion. "Here—on this spot. You ruined our lives. We should leave you to Gaea!"

"Hey," Jason intervened. "Thalia—Sis—I know. But this isn't the time. You should help your Hunters."

Thalia clenched her jaw. "Fine. For you, Jason. But if you ask me, she isn't worth it."

Thalia turned, leaped out of the pool, and stormed from the building.

Leo turned to Hera with grudging respect. "Intestinally challenged cows?"

"Focus on the cage, Leo," she grumbled. "And Jason—you are wiser than your sister. I chose my champion well."

"I'm not your champion, lady," Jason said. "I'm only helping you because you stole my memories and you're better than the alternative. Speaking of which, what's going on with that?"

He nodded to the other spire that looked like the king-size granite body bag. Was Leo imagining it, or had it grown taller since they'd gotten here?

"That, Jason," Hera said, "is the king of the giants being reborn."

"Gross," Piper said.

"Indeed," Hera said. "Porphyron, the strongest of his kind. Gaea needed a great deal of power to raise him again —*my* power. For weeks I've grown weaker as my essence was used to grow him a new form."

“So you’re like a heat lamp,” Leo guessed. “Or fertilizer.”

The goddess glared at him, but Leo didn’t care. This old lady had been making his life miserable since he was a baby. He totally had rights to rag on her.

“Joke all you wish,” Hera said in a clipped tone. “But at sundown, it will be too late. The giant will awake. He will offer me a choice: marry him, or be consumed by the earth. And I cannot marry him. We will all be destroyed. And as we die, Gaea will awaken.”

Leo frowned at the giant’s spire. “Can’t we blow it up or something?”

“Without me, you do not have the power,” Hera said. “You might as well try to destroy a mountain.”

“Done that once today,” Jason said.

“Just hurry up and let me out!” Hera demanded.

Jason scratched his head. “Leo, can you do it?”

“I don’t know.” Leo tried not to panic. “Besides, if she’s a goddess, why hasn’t she busted herself out?”

Hera paced furiously around her cage, cursing in Ancient Greek. “Use your brain, Leo Valdez. I *picked* you because you’re intelligent. Once trapped, a god’s power is useless. Your own father trapped me once in a golden chair. It was humiliating! I had to beg—*beg* him for my freedom and apologize for throwing him off Olympus.”

“Sounds fair,” Leo said.

Hera gave him the godly stink-eye. “I’ve watched you since you were a child, son of Hephaestus, because I knew you could aid me at this moment. If anyone can find a way to destroy this *abomination*, it is you.”

“But it’s not a machine. It’s like Gaea thrust her hand out of the ground and ...” Leo felt dizzy. The line of their prophecy came back to him: *The forge and dove shall break the cage*. “Hold on. I do have an idea. Piper, I’m going to need your help. And we’re going to need time.”

The air turned brittle with cold. The temperature dropped so fast, Leo’s lips cracked and his breath changed to mist. Frost coated the walls of the Wolf House. *Venti* rushed in—but instead of winged men, these were shaped like horses, with dark storm-cloud bodies and manes that crackled with lightning. Some had silver arrows sticking out of their flanks. Behind them came red-eyed wolves and the six-armed Earthborn.

Piper drew her dagger. Jason grabbed an ice-covered plank off the pool floor. Leo reached into his tool belt, but he was so shaken up, all he produced was a tin of breath mints. He shoved them back in, hoping nobody had noticed, and drew a hammer instead.

One of the wolves padded forward. It was dragging a human-size statue by the leg. At the edge of the pool, the wolf opened its maw and dropped the statue for them to see—an ice sculpture of a girl, an archer with short spiky hair and a surprised look on her face.

“Thalia!” Jason rushed forward, but Piper and Leo pulled him back. The ground around Thalia’s statue was already webbed with ice. Leo feared if Jason touched her, he might freeze too.

“Who did this?” Jason yelled. His body crackled with electricity. “I’ll kill you myself!”

From somewhere behind the monsters, Leo heard a girl’s laughter, clear and cold. She stepped out of the mist in her snowy white dress, a silver crown atop her long black hair. She regarded them with those deep brown eyes Leo had thought were so beautiful in Quebec.

“*Bon soir, mes amis,*” said Khione, the goddess of snow. She gave Leo a frosty smile. “Alas, son of Hephaestus, you say you need time? I’m afraid time is one tool you do not have.”

JASON

AFTER THE FIGHT ON MOUNT DIABLO, Jason didn't think he could ever feel more afraid or devastated.

Now his sister was frozen at his feet. He was surrounded by monsters. He'd broken his golden sword and replaced it with a piece of wood. He had approximately five minutes until the king of the giants busted out and destroyed them. Jason had already pulled his biggest ace, calling down Zeus's lightning when he'd fought Enceladus, and he doubted he'd have the strength or the cooperation from above to do it again. Which meant his only assets were one whiny imprisoned goddess, one sort-of girlfriend with a dagger, and Leo, who apparently thought he could defeat the armies of darkness with breath mints.

On top of all this, Jason's worst memories were flooding back. He knew for certain he'd done many dangerous things in his life, but he'd never been closer to death than he was right now.

The enemy was beautiful. Khione smiled, her dark eyes glittering, as a dagger of ice grew in her hand.

"What've you done?" Jason demanded.

"Oh, so many things," the snow goddess purred. "Your sister's not dead, if that's what you mean. She and her Hunters will make fine toys for our wolves. I thought we'd defrost them one at a time and hunt them down for amusement. Let *them* be the prey for once."

The wolves snarled appreciatively.

"Yes, my dears." Khione kept her eyes on Jason. "Your sister almost killed their king, you know. Lycaon's off in a cave somewhere, no doubt licking his wounds, but his minions have joined us to take revenge for their master. And soon Porphyron will arise, and we shall rule the world."

"Traitor!" Hera shouted. "You meddling, D-list goddess! You aren't worthy to pour my wine, much less rule the world."

Khione sighed. "Tiresome as ever, Queen Hera. I've been wanting to shut you up for millennia."

Khione waved her hand, and ice encased the prison, sealing in the spaces between the earthen tendrils.

“That’s better,” the snow goddess said. “Now, demigods, about your death —”

“You’re the one who tricked Hera into coming here,” Jason said. “You gave Zeus the idea of closing Olympus.”

The wolves snarled, and the storm spirits whinnied, ready to attack, but Khione held up her hand. “Patience, my loves. If he wants to talk, what matter? The sun is setting, and time is on our side. Of course, Jason Grace. Like snow, my voice is quiet and gentle, and very cold. It’s easy for me to whisper to the other gods, especially when I am only confirming their own deepest fears. I also whispered in Aeolus’s ear that he should issue an order to kill demigods. It is a small service for Gaea, but I’m sure I will be well rewarded when her sons the giants come to power.”

“You could’ve killed us in Quebec,” Jason said. “Why let us live?”

Khione wrinkled her nose. “Messy business, killing you in my father’s house, especially when he insists on meeting all visitors. I did *try*, you remember. It would’ve been lovely if he’d agreed to turn you to ice. But once he’d given you guarantee of safe passage, I couldn’t openly disobey him. My father is an old fool. He lives in fear of Zeus and Aeolus, but he’s still powerful. Soon enough, when my new masters have awakened, I will depose Boreas and take the throne of the North Wind, but not just yet. Besides, my father did have a point. Your quest was suicidal. I fully expected you to fail.”

“And to help us with that,” Leo said, “you knocked our dragon out of the sky over Detroit. Those frozen wires in his head—that was *your* fault. You’re gonna pay for that.”

“You’re also the one who kept Enceladus informed about us,” Piper added. “We’ve been plagued by snowstorms the whole trip.”

“Yes, I feel so close to all of you now!” Khione said. “Once you made it past Omaha, I decided to ask Lycaon to track you down so Jason could die here, at the Wolf House.” Khione smiled at him. “You see, Jason, your blood spilled on this sacred ground will taint it for generations. Your demigod brethren will be outraged, especially when they find the bodies of these two from Camp Half-Blood. They’ll believe the Greeks have conspired with giants. It will be ... delicious.”

Piper and Leo didn’t seem to understand what she was saying. But Jason knew. His memories were returning enough for him to realize how dangerously effective Khione’s plan could be.

“You’ll set demigods against demigods,” he said.

“It’s so easy!” said Khione. “As I told you, I only encourage what you would do anyway.”

“But why?” Piper spread her hands. “Khione, you’ll tear the world apart. The giants will destroy everything. You don’t want that. Call off your monsters.”

Khione hesitated, then laughed. “Your persuasive powers are improving, girl. But I am a goddess. You can’t charm-speak me. We wind gods are creatures of chaos! I’ll overthrow Aeolus and let the storms run free. If we destroy the mortal world, all the better! They never honored me, even in Greek times. Humans and their talk of global warming. Pah! I’ll cool them down quickly enough. When we retake the ancient places, I will cover the Acropolis in snow.”

“The ancient places.” Leo’s eyes widened. “That’s what Enceladus meant about destroy the roots of the gods. He meant Greece.”

“You could join me, son of Hephaestus,” Khione said. “I know you find me beautiful. It would be enough for my plan if these other two were to die. Reject that ridiculous destiny the Fates have given you. Live and be my champion, instead. Your skills would be quite useful.”

Leo looked stunned. He glanced behind him, like Khione might be talking to somebody else. For a second Jason was worried. He figured Leo didn’t have beautiful goddesses make him offers like this every day.

Then Leo laughed so hard, he doubled over. “Yeah, join you. Right. Until you get bored of me and turn me into a Leosicle? Lady, nobody messes with my dragon and gets away with it. I can’t believe I thought you were hot.”

Khione’s face turned red. “Hot? You dare insult me? I am cold, Leo Valdez. Very, very cold.”

She shot a blast of wintry sleet at the demigods, but Leo held up his hand. A wall of fire roared to life in front of them, and the snow dissolved in a steamy cloud.

Leo grinned. “See, lady, that’s what happens to snow in Texas. It—freaking—melts.”

Khione hissed. “Enough of this. Hera is failing. Porphyron is rising. Kill the demigods. Let them be our king’s first meal!”

Jason hefted his icy wooden plank—a stupid weapon to die fighting with—and the monsters charged.

JASON

A WOLF LAUNCHED ITSELF AT JASON. He stepped back and swung his scrap wood into the beast's snout with a satisfying crack. Maybe only silver could kill it, but a good old-fashioned board could still give it a Tylenol headache.

He turned toward the sound of hooves and saw a storm spirit horse bearing down on him. Jason concentrated and summoned the wind. Just before the spirit could trample him, Jason launched himself into the air, grabbed the horse's smoky neck, and pirouetted onto its back.

The storm spirit reared. It tried to shake Jason, then tried to dissolve into mist to lose him; but somehow Jason stayed on. He willed the horse to remain in solid form, and the horse seemed unable to refuse. Jason could feel it fighting against him. He could sense its raging thoughts—complete chaos straining to break free. It took all Jason's willpower to impose his own wishes and bring the horse under control. He thought about Aeolus, overseeing thousands and thousands of spirits like this, some much worse. No wonder the Master of the Winds had gone a little mad after centuries of that pressure. But Jason had only one spirit to master, and he *had* to win.

"You're mine now," Jason said.

The horse bucked, but Jason held fast. Its mane flickered as it circled around the empty pool, its hooves causing miniature thunderstorms—tempests—whenever they touched.

"Tempest?" Jason said. "Is that your name?"

The horse spirit shook its mane, evidently pleased to be recognized.

"Fine," Jason said. "Now, let's fight."

He charged into battle, swinging his icy piece of wood, knocking aside wolves and plunging straight through other *venti*. Tempest was a strong spirit, and every time he plowed through one of his brethren, he discharged so much electricity, the other spirit vaporized into a harmless cloud of mist.

Through the chaos, Jason caught glimpses of his friends. Piper was surrounded by Earthborn, but she seemed to be holding her own. She was so impressive-looking as she fought, almost glowing with beauty, that the Earthborn stared at her in awe, forgetting that they were supposed to kill her.

They'd lower their clubs and watch dumbfounded as she smiled and charged them. They'd smile back—until she sliced them apart with her dagger, and they melted into mounds of mud.

Leo had taken on Khione herself. While fighting a goddess should've been suicide, Leo was the right man for the job. She kept summoning ice daggers to throw at him, blasts of winter air, tornadoes of snow. Leo burned through all of it. His whole body flickered with red tongues of flame like he'd been doused with gasoline. He advanced on the goddess, using two silver-tipped ball-peen hammers to smash any monsters that got in his way.

Jason realized that Leo was the only reason they were still alive. His fiery aura was heating up the whole courtyard, countering Khione's winter magic. Without him, they would've been frozen like the Hunters long ago. Wherever Leo went, ice melted off the stones. Even Thalia started to defrost a little when Leo stepped near her.

Khione slowly backed away. Her expression went from enraged to shocked to slightly panicked as Leo got closer.

Jason was running out of enemies. Wolves lay in dazed heaps. Some slunk away into the ruins, yelping from their wounds. Piper stabbed the last Earthborn, who toppled to the ground in a pile of sludge. Jason rode Tempest through the last *ventus*, breaking it into vapor. Then he wheeled around and saw Leo bearing down on the goddess of snow.

"You're too late," Khione snarled. "He's awake! And don't think you've won anything here, demigods. Hera's plan will never work. You'll be at each other's throats before you can ever stop us."

Leo set his hammers ablaze and threw them at the goddess, but she turned into snow—a white powdery image of herself. Leo's hammers slammed into the snow woman, breaking it into a steaming mound of mush.

Piper was breathing hard, but she smiled up at Jason. "Nice horse."

Tempest reared on his hind legs, arcing electricity across his hooves. A complete show-off.

Then Jason heard a cracking sound behind him. The melting ice on Hera's cage sloughed off in a curtain of slush, and the goddess called, "Oh, don't mind me! Just the queen of the heavens, dying over here!"

Jason dismounted and told Tempest to stay put. The three demigods jumped into the pool and ran to the spire.

Leo frowned. "Uh, Tía Callida, are you getting shorter?"

"No, you dolt! The earth is claiming me. Hurry!"

As much as Jason disliked Hera, what he saw inside the cage alarmed him. Not only was Hera sinking, the ground was rising around her like water in a

tank. Liquid rock had already covered her shins. “The giant wakes!” Hera warned. “You only have seconds!”

“On it,” Leo said. “Piper, I need your help. Talk to the cage.”

“What?” she said.

“Talk to it. Use everything you’ve got. Convince Gaea to sleep. Lull her into a daze. Just slow her down, try to get the tendrils to loosen while I—”

“Right!” Piper cleared her throat and said, “Hey, Gaea. Nice night, huh? Boy, I’m tired. How about you? Ready for some sleep?”

The more she talked, the more confident she sounded. Jason felt his own eyes getting heavy, and he had to force himself not to focus on her words. It seemed to have some effect on the cage. The mud was rising more slowly. The tendrils seemed to soften just a little—becoming more like tree root than rock. Leo pulled a circular saw out of his tool belt. How it fit in there, Jason had no idea. Then Leo looked at the cord and grunted in frustration. “I don’t have anywhere to plug it in!”

The spirit horse Tempest jumped into the pit and whinnied.

“Really?” Jason asked.

Tempest dipped his head and trotted over to Leo. Leo looked dubious, but he held up the plug, and a breeze whisked it into the horse’s flank. Lighting sparked, connecting with the prongs of the plug, and the circular saw whirred to life.

“Sweet!” Leo grinned. “Your horse comes with AC outlets!”

Their good mood didn’t last long. On the other side of the pool, the giant’s spire crumbled with a sound like a tree snapping in half. Its outer sheath of tendrils exploded from the top down, raining stone and wood shards as the giant shook himself free and climbed out of the earth.

Jason hadn’t thought anything could be scarier than Enceladus.

He was wrong.

Porphyron was even taller, and even more ripped. He didn’t radiate heat, or show any signs of breathing fire, but there was something more terrible about him—a kind of strength, even magnetism, as if the giant were so huge and dense he had his own gravitational field.

Like Enceladus, the giant king was humanoid from the waist up, clad in bronze armor, and from the waist down he had scaly dragon’s legs; but his skin was the color of lima beans. His hair was green as summer leaves, braided in long locks and decorated with weapons—daggers, axes, and full-size swords, some of them bent and bloody—maybe trophies taken from demigods eons before. When the giant opened his eyes, they were blank white, like polished

marble. He took a deep breath.

“Alive!” he bellowed. “Praise to Gaea!”

Jason made a heroic little whimpering sound he hoped his friends couldn’t hear. He was very sure no demigod could solo this guy. Porphyrion could lift mountains. He could crush Jason with one finger.

“Leo,” Jason said.

“Huh?” Leo’s mouth was wide open. Even Piper seemed dazed.

“You guys keep working,” Jason said. “Get Hera free!”

“What are you going to do?” Piper asked. “You can’t seriously—”

“Entertain a giant?” Jason said. “I’ve got no choice.”

“Excellent!” the giant roared as Jason approached. “An appetizer! Who are you—Hermes? Ares?”

Jason thought about going with that idea, but something told him not to.

“I’m Jason Grace,” he said. “Son of Jupiter.”

Those white eyes bored into him. Behind him, Leo’s circular saw whirred, and Piper talked to the cage in soothing tones, trying to keep the fear out of her voice.

Porphyrion threw back his head and laughed. “Outstanding!” He looked up at the cloudy night sky. “So, Zeus, you sacrifice a son to me? The gesture is appreciated, but it will not save you.”

The sky didn’t even rumble. No help from above. Jason was on his own.

He dropped his makeshift club. His hands were covered in splinters, but that didn’t matter now. He had to buy Leo and Piper some time, and he couldn’t do that without a proper weapon.

It was time to act a whole lot more confident than he felt.

“If you knew who I was,” Jason yelled up at the giant, “you’d be worried about me, not my father. I hope you enjoyed your two and a half minutes of rebirth, giant, because I’m going to send you right back to Tartarus.”

The giant’s eyes narrowed. He planted one foot outside the pool and crouched to get a better look at his opponent. “So ... we’ll start by boasting, will we? Just like old times! Very well, demigod. I am Porphyrion, king of the giants, son of Gaea. In olden times, I rose from Tatarus, the abyss of my father, to challenge the gods. To start the war, I stole Zeus’s queen.” He grinned at the goddess’s cage. “Hello, Hera.”

“My husband destroyed you once, monster!” Hera said. “He’ll do it again!”

“But he didn’t, my dear! Zeus wasn’t powerful enough to kill me. He had to rely on a puny demigod to help, and even then, we almost won. This time, we

will complete what we started. Gaea is waking. She has provisioned us with many fine servants. Our armies will shake the earth—and we will destroy you at the roots.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Hera said, but she was weakening. Jason could hear it in her voice. Piper kept whispering to the cage, and Leo kept sawing, but the earth was still rising inside Hera’s prison, covering her up to her waist.

“Oh, yes,” the giant said. “The Titans sought to attack your new home in New York. Bold, but ineffective. Gaea is wiser and more patient. And we, her greatest children, are much, much stronger than Kronos. We know how to kill you Olympians once and for all. You must be dug up completely like rotten trees—your eldest roots torn out and burned.”

The giant frowned at Piper and Leo, as if he’d just noticed them working at the cage. Jason stepped forward and yelled to get back Porphyrion’s attention.

“You said a demigod killed you,” he shouted. “How, if we’re so puny?”

“Ha! You think I would explain it to you? I was created to be Zeus’s replacement, born to destroy the lord of the sky. I shall take his throne. I shall take his wife—or, if she will not have me, I will let the earth consume her life force. What you see before you, child, is only my weakened form. I will grow stronger by the hour, until I am invincible. But I am already quite capable of smashing you to a grease spot!”

He rose to his full height and held out his hand. A twenty-foot spear shot from the earth. He grasped it, then stomped the ground with his dragon’s feet. The ruins shook. All around the courtyard, monsters started to regather—storm spirits, wolves, and Earthborn, all answering the giant king’s call.

“Great,” Leo muttered. “We needed more enemies.”

“Hurry,” Hera said.

“I know!” Leo snapped.

“Go to sleep, cage,” Piper said. “Nice, sleepy cage. Yes, I’m talking to a bunch of earthen tendrils. This isn’t weird at all.”

Porphyrion raked his spear across the top of the ruins, destroying a chimney and spraying wood and stone across the courtyard. “So, child of Zeus! I have finished my boasting. Now it’s your turn. What were you saying about destroying me?”

Jason looked at the ring of monsters, waiting impatiently for their master’s order to tear them to shreds. Leo’s circular saw kept whirring, and Piper kept talking, but it seemed hopeless. Hera’s cage was almost completely filled with earth.

“I’m the son of Jupiter!” he shouted, and just for effect, he summoned the winds, rising a few feet off the ground. “I’m a child of Rome, consul to

demigods, praetor of the First Legion.” Jason didn’t know quite what he was saying, but he rattled off the words like he’d said them many times before. He held out his arms, showing the tattoo of the eagle and SPQR, and to his surprise the giant seemed to recognize it.

For a moment, Porphyrior actually looked uneasy.

“I slew the Trojan sea monster,” Jason continued. “I toppled the black throne of Kronos, and destroyed the Titan Krios with my own hands. And now I’m going to destroy you, Porphyrior, and feed you to your own wolves.”

“Wow, dude,” Leo muttered. “You been eating red meat?”

Jason launched himself at the giant, determined to tear him apart.

The idea of fighting a forty-foot-tall immortal bare handed was so ridiculous, even the giant seemed surprised. Half flying, half leaping, Jason landed on the giant’s scaly reptilian knee and climbed up the giant’s arm before Porphyrior even realized what had happened.

“You dare?” the giant bellowed.

Jason reached his shoulders and ripped a sword out of the giant’s weapon-filled braids. He yelled, “For Rome!” and drove the sword into the nearest convenient target—the giant’s massive ear.

Lightning streaked out of the sky and blasted the sword, throwing Jason free. He rolled when he hit the ground. When he looked up, the giant was staggering. His hair was on fire, and the side of his face was blackened from lightning. The sword had splintered in his ear. Golden ichor ran down his jaw. The other weapons were sparking and smoldering in his braids.

Porphyrior almost fell. The circle of monsters let out a collective growl and moved forward—wolves and ogres fixing their eyes on Jason.

“No!” Porphyrior yelled. He regained his balance and glared at the demigod. “I will kill him myself.”

The giant raised his spear and it began to glow. “You want to play with lightning, boy? You forget. I am the bane of Zeus. I was created to destroy your father, which means I know exactly what will kill *you*.”

Something in Porphyrior’s voice told Jason he wasn’t bluffing.

Jason and his friends had had a good run. The three of them had done amazing things. Yeah, even *heroic* things. But as the giant raised his spear, Jason knew there was no way he could deflect this strike.

This was the end.

“Got it!” Leo yelled.

“Sleep!” Piper said, so forcefully, the nearest wolves fell to the ground and began snoring.

The stone and wood cage crumbled. Leo had sawed through the base of the thickest tendril and apparently cut off the cage's connection to Gaea. The tendrils turned to dust. The mud around Hera disintegrated. The goddess grew in size, glowing with power.

"Yes!" the goddess said. She threw off her black robes to reveal a white gown, her arms bedecked with golden jewelry. Her face was both terrible and beautiful, and a golden crown glowed in her long black hair. "Now I shall have my revenge!"

The giant Porphyron backed away. He said nothing, but he gave Jason one last look of hatred. His message was clear: *Another time*. Then he slammed his spear against the earth, and the giant disappeared into the ground like he'd dropped down a chute.

Around the courtyard, monsters began to panic and retreat, but there was no escape for them.

Hera glowed brighter. She shouted, "Cover your eyes, my heroes!"

But Jason was too much in shock. He understood too late.

He watched as Hera turned into a supernova, exploding in a ring of force that vaporized every monster instantly. Jason fell, light searing into his mind, and his last thought was that his body was burning.

PIPER

“JASON!”

Piper kept calling his name as she held him, though she’d almost lost hope. He’d been unconscious for two minutes now. His body was steaming, his eyes rolled back in his head. She couldn’t tell if he was even breathing.

“It’s no use, child.” Hera stood over them in her simple black robes and shawl.

Piper hadn’t seen the goddess go nuclear. Thankfully she’d closed her eyes, but she could see the aftereffects. Every vestige of winter was gone from the valley. No signs of battle, either. The monsters had been vaporized. The ruins had been restored to what they were before—still ruins, but with no evidence that they’d been overrun by a horde of wolves, storm spirits, and six-armed ogres.

Even the Hunters had been revived. Most waited at a respectful distance in the meadow, but Thalia knelt by Piper’s side, her hand on Jason’s forehead.

Thalia glared up at the goddess. “This is your fault. Do something!”

“Do not address me that way, girl. I am the queen—”

“Fix him!”

Hera’s eyes flickered with power. “I *did* warn him. I would never intentionally hurt the boy. He was to be my champion. I told them to close their eyes before I revealed my true form.”

“Um ...” Leo frowned. “True form is bad, right? So why did you do it?”

“I unleashed my power to help you, fool!” Hera cried. “I became pure energy so I could disintegrate the monsters, restore this place, and even save these miserable Hunters from the ice.”

“But mortals can’t look upon you in that form!” Thalia shouted. “You’ve killed him!”

Leo shook his head in dismay. “That’s what our prophecy meant. *Death unleash, through Hera’s rage*. Come on, lady. You’re a goddess. Do some voodoo magic on him! Bring him back.”

Piper half heard their conversation, but mostly she was focused on Jason’s face. “He’s breathing!” she announced.

“Impossible,” Hera said. “I wish it were true, child, but no mortal has ever —”

“Jason,” Piper called, putting every bit of her willpower into his name. She could *not* lose him. “Listen to me. You can do this. Come back. You’re going to be fine.”

Nothing happened. Had she imagined his breath stirring?

“Healing is not a power of Aphrodite,” Hera said regretfully. “Even I cannot fix this, girl. His mortal spirit—”

“Jason,” Piper said again, and she imagined her voice resonating through the earth, all the way down to the Underworld. “Wake up.”

He gasped, and his eyes flew open. For a moment they were full of light—glowing pure gold. Then the light faded and his eyes were normal again. “What—what happened?”

“Impossible!” Hera said.

Piper wrapped him in a hug until he groaned, “Crushing me.”

“Sorry,” she said, so relieved, she laughed while wiping a tear from her eye.

Thalia gripped her brother’s hand. “How do you feel?”

“Hot,” he muttered. “Mouth is dry. And I saw something... really terrible.”

“That was Hera,” Thalia grumbled. “Her Majesty, the Loose Cannon.”

“That’s it, Thalia Grace,” said the goddess. “I will turn you into an aardvark, so help me—”

“Stop it, you two,” Piper said. Amazingly, they both shut up.

Piper helped Jason to his feet and gave him the last nectar from their supplies.

“Now ...” Piper faced Thalia and Hera. “Hera—Your Majesty—we couldn’t have rescued you without the Hunters. And Thalia, you never would’ve seen Jason again—I wouldn’t have met him—if it weren’t for Hera. You two make nice, because we’ve got bigger problems.”

They both glared at her, and for three long seconds, Piper wasn’t sure which one of them was going to kill her first.

Finally Thalia grunted. “You’ve got spirit, Piper.” She pulled a silver card from her parka and tucked it into the pocket of Piper’s snowboarding jacket. “You ever want to be a Hunter, call me. We could use you.”

Hera crossed her arms. “Fortunately for *this* Hunter, you have a point, daughter of Aphrodite.” She assessed Piper, as if seeing her clearly for the time. “You wondered, Piper, why I chose you for this quest, why I didn’t reveal your secret in the beginning, even when I knew Enceladus was using you. I must admit, until this moment I was not sure. Something told me you would be vital to the quest. Now I see I was right. You’re even stronger than I realized. And

you are correct about the dangers to come. We must work together.”

Piper’s face felt warm. She wasn’t sure how to respond to Hera’s compliment, but Leo stepped in.

“Yeah,” he said, “I don’t suppose that Porphyryion guy just melted and died, huh?”

“No,” Hera agreed. “By saving me, and saving this place, you prevented Gaea from waking. You have bought us some time. But Porphyryion has risen. He simply knew better than to stay here, especially since he has not yet regained his full power. Giants can only be killed by a combination of god and demigod, working together. Once you freed me—”

“He ran away,” Jason said. “But to where?”

Hera didn’t answer, but a sense of dread washed over Piper. She remembered what Porphyryion had said about killing the Olympians by pulling up their roots. *Greece*. She looked at Thalia’s grim expression, and guessed the Hunter had come to the same conclusion.

“I need to find Annabeth,” Thalia said. “She has to know what’s happened here.”

“Thalia ...” Jason gripped her hand. “We never got to talk about this place, or—”

“I know.” Her expression softened. “I lost you here once. I don’t want to leave you again. But we’ll meet soon. I’ll rendezvous with you back at Camp Half-Blood.” She glanced at Hera. “You’ll see them there safely? It’s the least you can do.”

“It’s not your place to tell me—”

“Queen Hera,” Piper interceded.

The goddess sighed. “Fine. Yes. Just off with you, Hunter!”

Thalia gave Jason a hug and said her good-byes. When the Hunters were gone, the courtyard seemed strangely quiet. The dry reflecting pool showed no sign of the earthen tendrils that had brought back the giant king or imprisoned Hera. The night sky was clear and starry. The wind rustled in the redwoods. Piper thought about that night in Oklahoma when she and her dad had slept in Grandpa Tom’s front yard. She thought about the night on the Wilderness School dorm roof, when Jason had kissed her—in her Mist-altered memories, anyway.

“Jason, what happened to you here?” she asked. “I mean—I know your mom abandoned you here. But you said it was sacred ground for demigods. Why? What happened after you were on your own?”

Jason shook his head uneasily. “It’s still murky. The wolves ...”

“You were given a destiny,” Hera said. “You were given into my service.”

Jason scowled. “Because you forced my mom to do that. You couldn’t stand knowing Zeus had two children with my mom. Knowing that he’d fallen for her *twice*. I was the price you demanded for leaving the rest of my family alone.”

“It was the right choice for you as well, Jason,” Hera insisted. “The second time your mother managed to snare Zeus’s affections, it was because she imagined him in a different aspect—the aspect of Jupiter. Never before had this happened—two children, Greek and Roman, born into the same family. You *had* to be separated from Thalia. This is where all demigods of your kind start their journey.”

“Of his kind?” Piper asked.

“She means Roman,” Jason said. “Demigods are left here. We meet the she-wolf goddess, Lupa, the same immortal wolf that raised Romulus and Remus.”

Hera nodded. “And if you are strong enough, you live.”

“But ...” Leo looked mystified. “What happened after that? I mean, Jason never made it to camp.”

“Not to Camp Half-Blood, no,” Hera agreed.

Piper felt as if the sky were spiraling above her, making her dizzy. “You went somewhere else. That’s where you’ve been all these years. Somewhere else for demigods—but where?”

Jason turned to the goddess. “The memories are coming back, but not the location. You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“No,” Hera said. “That is part of your destiny, Jason. You must find your own way back. But when you do ... you will unite two great powers. You will give us hope against the giants, and more importantly—against Gaea herself.”

“You want us to help you,” Jason said, “but you’re holding back information.”

“Giving you answers would make those answers invalid,” Hera said. “That is the way of the Fates. You must forge your own path for it to mean anything. Already, you three have surprised me. I would not have thought it possible ...”

The goddess shook her head. “Suffice to say, you have performed well, demigods. But this is only the beginning. Now you must return to Camp Half-Blood, where you will begin planning for the next phase.”

“Which you won’t tell us about,” Jason grumped. “And I suppose you destroyed my nice storm spirit horse, so we’ll have to walk home?”

Hera waved aside the question. “Storm spirits are creatures of chaos. I did not destroy that one, though I have no idea where he went, or whether you’ll see him again. But there is an easier way home for you. As you have done me a great service, so I can help you—at least this once. Farewell, demigods, for

now.”

The world turned upside down, and Piper almost blacked out.

When she could see straight again, she was back at camp, in the dining pavilion, in the middle of dinner. They were standing on the Aphrodite cabin’s table, and Piper had one foot in Drew’s pizza. Sixty campers rose at once, gawking at them in astonishment.

Whatever Hera had done to shoot them across the country, it wasn’t good for Piper’s stomach. She could barely control her nausea. Leo wasn’t so lucky. He jumped off the table, ran to the nearest bronze brazier, and threw up in it—which was probably not a great burnt offering for the gods.

“Jason?” Chiron trotted forward. No doubt the old centaur had seen thousands of years’ worth of weird stuff, but even he looked totally flabbergasted. “What—How—?”

The Aphrodite campers stared up at Piper with their mouths open. Piper figured she must look awful.

“Hi,” she said, as casually as she could. “We’re back.”

PIPER

PIPER DIDN'T REMEMBER MUCH ABOUT the rest of the night. They told their story and answered a million questions from the other campers, but finally Chiron saw how tired they were and ordered them to bed.

It felt so good to sleep on a real mattress, and Piper was so exhausted, she crashed immediately, which spared her any worry about what it would be like returning to the Aphrodite cabin.

The next morning she woke in her bunk, feeling reinvigorated. The sun came through the windows along with a pleasant breeze. It might've been spring instead of winter. Birds sang. Monsters howled in the woods. Breakfast smells wafted from the dining pavilion—bacon, pancakes, and all sorts of wonderful things.

Drew and her gang were frowning down at her, their arms crossed.

“Morning.” Piper sat up and smiled. “Beautiful day.”

“You’re going to make us late for breakfast,” Drew said, “which means *you* get to clean the cabin for inspection.”

A week ago, Piper would've either punched Drew in the face, or hidden back under her covers. Now she thought about the Cyclopes in Detroit, Medea in Chicago, Midas turning her to gold in Omaha. Looking at Drew, who used to bother her, Piper laughed.

Drew's smug expression crumbled. She backed up, then remembered she was supposed to be angry. “What are you—”

“Challenging you,” Piper said. “How about noon in the arena? You can choose the weapons.”

She got out of bed, stretched leisurely, and beamed at her cabinmates. She spotted Mitchell and Lacy, who'd helped her pack for the quest. They were smiling tentatively, their eyes flitting from Piper to Drew like this might be a very interesting tennis game.

“I missed you guys!” Piper announced. “We’re going to have a great time when I’m senior counselor.”

Drew turned bug juice red. Even her closest lieutenants looked a little nervous. This wasn't in their script.

“You—” Drew spluttered. “You ugly little witch! I’ve been here the longest. You can’t just—”

“Challenge you?” Piper said. “Sure, I can. Camp rules: I’ve been claimed by Aphrodite. I’ve completed a quest, which is one more than *you’ve* completed. If I feel I can do a better job, I can challenge you. Unless you just want to step down. Did I get all that right, Mitchell?”

“Just right, Piper.” Mitchell was grinning. Lacy was bouncing up and down like she was trying to achieve liftoff.

A few of the other kids started to grin, as if they were enjoying the different colors Drew’s face was turning.

“*Step down?*” Drew shrieked. “You’re crazy!”

Piper shrugged. Then fast as a viper she pulled Katoptris from under her pillow, unsheathed the dagger, and thrust the point under Drew’s chin. Everybody else backed up fast. One guy crashed into a makeup table and sent up a plume of pink powder.

“A duel, then,” Piper said cheerfully. “If you don’t want to wait until noon, now is fine. You’ve turned this cabin into a dictatorship, Drew. Silena Beauregard knew better than that. Aphrodite is about love and beauty. *Being* loving. *Spreading* beauty. Good friends. Good times. Good deeds. Not just looking good. Silena made mistakes, but in the end she stood by her friends. That’s why she was a hero. I’m going to set things right, and I’ve got a feeling Mom will be on my side. Want to find out?”

Drew went cross-eyed looking down the blade of Piper’s dagger.

A second passed. Then two. Piper didn’t care. She was absolutely happy and confident. It must’ve shown in her smile.

“I ... step down,” Drew grumbled. “But if you think I’m ever going to forget this, McLean—”

“Oh, I hope you won’t,” Piper said. “Now, run along to the dining pavilion, and explain to Chiron why we’re late. There’s been a change of leadership.”

Drew backed to the door. Even her closest lieutenants didn’t follow her. She was about to leave when Piper said, “Oh, and Drew, honey?”

The former counselor looked back reluctantly.

“In case you think I’m not a true daughter of Aphrodite,” Piper said, “don’t even *look* at Jason Grace. He may not know it yet, but he’s *mine*. If you even try to make a move, I will load you into a catapult and shoot you across Long Island Sound.”

Drew turned around so fast, she ran into the doorframe. Then she was gone.

The cabin was silent. The other campers stared at Piper. This was the part she was unsure of. She didn’t want to rule by fear. She wasn’t like Drew, but she

didn't know if they'd accept her.

Then, spontaneously, the Aphrodite campers cheered so loudly, they must've been heard all across camp. They herded Piper out of the cabin, raised her on their shoulders, and carried her all the way to the dining pavilion—still in her pajamas, her hair still a mess, but she didn't care. She'd never felt better.

By afternoon, Piper had changed into comfortable camp clothes and led the Aphrodite cabin through their morning activities. She was ready for free time.

Some of the buzz of her victory had faded because she had an appointment at the Big House.

Chiron met her on the front porch in human form, compacted into his wheelchair. "Come inside, my dear. The video conference is ready."

The only computer at camp was in Chiron's office, and the whole room was shielded in bronze plating.

"Demigods and technology don't mix," Chiron explained. "Phone calls, texting, even browsing the Internet—all these things can attract monsters. Why, just this fall at a school in Cincinnati, we had to rescue a young hero who Googled the gorgons and got a little more than he bargained for, but never mind that. Here at camp, you're protected. Still ... we try to be cautious. You'll only be able to talk for a few minutes."

"Got it," Piper said. "Thank you, Chiron."

He smiled and wheeled himself out of the office. Piper hesitated before clicking the call button. Chiron's office had a cluttered, cozy feel. One wall was covered with T-shirts from different conventions—party ponies '09 vegas, party ponies '10 honolulu, et cetera. Piper didn't know who the Party Ponies were, but judging from the stains, scorch marks, and weapon holes in the T-shirts, they must've had some pretty wild meetings. On the shelf over Chiron's desk sat an old-fashioned boom box with cassette tapes labeled "Dean Martin" and "Frank Sinatra" and "Greatest Hits of the 40s." Chiron was so old, Piper wondered if that meant 1940s, 1840s, or maybe just A.D. 40.

But most of the office's wall space was plastered with photos of demigods, like a hall of fame. One of the newer shots showed a teenage guy with dark hair and green eyes. Since he stood arm in arm with Annabeth, Piper assumed the guy must be Percy Jackson. In some of the older photos, she recognized famous people: businessmen, athletes, even some actors that her dad knew.

"Unbelievable," she muttered.

Piper wondered if her photo would go on that wall someday. For the first time, she felt like she was part of something bigger than herself. Demigods had been around for centuries. Whatever she did, she did for all of them.

She took a deep breath and made the call. The video screen popped up.

Gleeson Hedge grinned at her from her dad's office. "Seen the news?"

"Kind of hard to miss," Piper said. "I hope you know what you're doing."

Chiron had shown her a newspaper at lunch. Her dad's mysterious return from nowhere had made the front page. His personal assistant Jane had been fired for covering up his disappearance and failing to notify the police. A new staff had been hired and personally vetted by Tristan McLean's "life coach," Gleeson Hedge. According to the paper, Mr. McLean claimed to have no memory of the last week, and the media was totally eating up the story. Some thought it was a clever marketing ploy for a movie—maybe McLean was going to play an amnesiac? Some thought he'd been kidnapped by terrorists, or rabid fans, or had heroically escaped from ransom seekers using his incredible King of Sparta fighting skills. Whatever the truth, Tristan McLean was more famous than ever.

"It's going great," Hedge promised. "But don't worry. We're going to keep him out of the public eye for the next month or so until things cool down. Your dad's got more important things to do—like resting, and talking to his daughter."

"Don't get too comfortable out there in Hollywood, Gleeson," Piper said.

Hedge snorted. "You kidding? These people make Aeolus look sane. I'll be back as soon as I can, but your dad's gotta get back on his feet first. He's a good guy. Oh, and by the way, I took care of that other little matter. The Park Service in the Bay Area just got an anonymous gift of a new helicopter. And that ranger pilot who helped us? She's got a very lucrative offer to fly for Mr. McLean."

"Thanks, Gleeson," Piper said. "For everything."

"Yeah, well. I don't try to be awesome. It just comes natural. Speaking of Aeolus's place, meet your dad's new assistant."

Hedge was nudged out of the way, and a pretty young lady grinned into the camera.

"Mellie?" Piper stared, but it was definitely her: the *aura* who'd helped them escape from Aeolus's fortress. "You're working for my dad now?"

"Isn't it great?"

"Does he know you're a—you know—wind spirit?"

"Oh, no. But I love this job. It's—um—a breeze."

Piper couldn't help but laugh. "I'm glad. That's awesome. But where—"

"Just a sec." Mellie kissed Gleeson on the cheek. "Come on, you old goat. Stop hogging the screen."

"What?" Hedge demanded. But Mellie steered him away and called, "Mr. McLean? She's on!"

A second later, Piper's dad appeared.

He broke into a huge grin. “Pipes!”

He looked great—back to normal, with his sparkling brown eyes, his half-day beard, his confident smile, and his newly trimmed hair like he was ready to shoot a scene. Piper was relieved, but she also felt a little sad. Back to normal wasn’t necessarily what she’d wanted.

In her mind, she started the clock. On a normal call like this, on a workday, she hardly ever got her dad’s attention for longer than thirty seconds.

“Hey,” she said weakly. “You feeling okay?”

“Honey, I’m so sorry to worry you with this disappearance business. I don’t know ...” His smile wavered, and she could tell he was trying to remember—grasping for a memory that should have been there, but wasn’t. “I’m not sure what happened, honestly. But I’m fine. Coach Hedge has been a godsend.”

“A godsend,” she repeated. Funny choice of words.

“He told me about your new school,” Dad said. “I’m sorry the Wilderness School didn’t work out, but you were right. Jane was wrong. I was a fool to listen to her.”

Ten seconds left, maybe. But at least her dad sounded sincere, like he really did feel remorseful.

“You don’t remember anything?” she said, a bit wistfully.

“Of course I do,” he said.

A chill went down her neck. “You do?”

“I remember that I love you,” he said. “And I’m proud of you. Are you happy at your new school?”

Piper blinked. She wasn’t going to cry now. After all she’d been through, that would be ridiculous. “Yeah, Dad. It’s more like a camp, not a school, but ... Yeah, I think I’ll be happy here.”

“Call me as often as you can,” he said. “And come home for Christmas. And Pipes ...”

“Yes?”

He touched the screen as if trying to reach through with his hand. “You’re a wonderful young lady. I don’t tell you that often enough. You remind me so much of your mother. She’d be proud. And Grandpa Tom”—he chuckled—“he always said you’d be the most powerful voice in our family. You’re going to outshine me some day, you know. They’re going to remember me as Piper McLean’s father, and that’s the best legacy I can imagine.”

Piper tried to answer, but she was afraid she’d break down. She just touched his fingers on the screen and nodded.

Mellie said something in the background, and her dad sighed. “Studio

calling. I'm sorry, honey." And he did sound genuinely annoyed to go.

"It's okay, Dad," she managed. "Love you."

He winked. Then the video call went black.

Forty-five seconds? Maybe a full minute.

Piper smiled. A small improvement, but it was progress.

At the commons area, she found Jason relaxing on a bench, a basketball between his feet. He was sweaty from working out, but he looked great in his orange tank top and shorts. His various scars and bruises from the quest were healing, thanks to some medical attention from the Apollo cabin. His arms and legs were well muscled and tan—distracting as always. His close-cropped blond hair caught the afternoon light so it looked like it was turning to gold, Midas style.

"Hey," he said. "How did it go?"

It took her a second to focus on his question. "Hmm? Oh, yeah. Fine."

She sat next to him and they watched the campers going back and forth. A couple of Demeter girls were playing tricks on two of the Apollo guys—making grass grow around their ankles as they shot baskets. Over at the camp store, the Hermes kids were putting up a sign that read: flying shoes, slightly used, 50% off today! Ares kids were lining their cabin with fresh barbed wire. The Hypnos cabin was snoring away. A normal day at camp.

Meanwhile, the Aphrodite kids were watching Piper and Jason, and trying to pretend they weren't. Piper was pretty sure she saw money change hands, like they were placing bets on a kiss.

"Get any sleep?" she asked him.

He looked at her as if she'd been reading his thoughts. "Not much. Dreams."

"About your past?"

He nodded.

She didn't push him. If he wanted to talk, that was fine, but she knew him better than to press the subject. She didn't even worry that her knowledge of him was mostly based on three months of false memories. *You can sense possibilities*, her mother had said. And Piper was determined to make those possibilities a reality.

Jason spun his basketball. "It's not good news," he warned. "My memories aren't good for—for any of us."

Piper was pretty sure he'd been about to say *for us*—as in the two of them, and she wondered if he'd remembered a girl from his past. But she didn't let it bother her. Not on a sunny winter day like this, with Jason next to her.

"We'll figure it out," she promised.

He looked at her hesitantly, like he wanted very much to believe her. “Annabeth and Rachel are coming in for the meeting tonight. I should probably wait until then to explain ...”

“Okay.” She plucked a blade of grass by her foot. She knew there were dangerous things in store for both of them. She would have to compete with Jason’s past, and they might not even survive their war against the giants. But right now, they were both alive, and she was determined to enjoy this moment.

Jason studied her warily. His forearm tattoo was faint blue in the sunlight. “You’re in a good mood. How can you be so sure things will work out?”

“Because you’re going to lead us,” she said simply. “I’d follow you anywhere.”

Jason blinked. Then slowly, he smiled. “Dangerous thing to say.”

“I’m a dangerous girl.”

“That, I believe.”

He got up and brushed off his shorts. He offered her a hand. “Leo says he’s got something to show us out in the woods. You coming?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” She took his hand and stood up.

For a moment, they kept holding hands. Jason tilted his head. “We should get going.”

“Yep,” she said. “Just a sec.”

She let go of his hand, and took a card from her pocket—the silver calling card that Thalia had given her for the Hunters of Artemis. She dropped it into a nearby eternal fire and watched it burn. There would be no breaking hearts in Aphrodite cabin from now on. That was one rite of passage they didn’t need.

Across the green, her cabinmates looking disappointed that they hadn’t witnessed a kiss. They started cashing in their bets.

But that was all right. Piper was patient, and she could see lots of good possibilities.

“Let’s go,” she told Jason. “We’ve got adventures to plan.”

LEO

LEO HADN'T FELT THIS JUMPY SINCE HE offered tofu burgers to the werewolves. When he got to the limestone cliff in the forest, he turned to the group and smiled nervously. "Here we go."

He willed his hand to catch fire, and set it against the door.

His cabinmates gasped.

"Leo!" Nyssa cried. "You're a fire user!"

"Yeah, thanks," he said. "I know."

Jake Mason, who was out of his body cast but still on crutches, said, "Holy Hephaestus. That means—it's so rare that—"

The massive stone door swung open, and everyone's mouth dropped. Leo's flaming hand seemed insignificant now. Even Piper and Jason looked stunned, and they'd seen enough amazing things lately.

Only Chiron didn't look surprised. The centaur knit his bushy eyebrows and stroked his beard, as if the group was about to walk through a minefield.

That made Leo even more nervous, but he couldn't change his mind now. His instincts told him he was meant to share this place—at least with the Hephaestus cabin—and he couldn't hide it from Chiron or his two best friends.

"Welcome to Bunker Nine," he said, as confidently as he could. "C'mon in."

The group was silent as they toured the facility. Everything was just as Leo had left it—giant machines, worktables, old maps and schematics. Only one thing had changed. Festus's head was sitting on the central table, still battered and scorched from his final crash in Omaha.

Leo went over to it, a bitter taste in his mouth, and stroked the dragon's forehead. "I'm sorry, Festus. But I won't forget you."

Jason put a hand on Leo's shoulder. "Hephaestus brought it here for you?"

Leo nodded.

"But you can't repair him," Jason guessed.

"No way," Leo said. "But the head is going to be reused. Festus will be going with us."

Piper came over and frowned. “What do you mean?”

Before Leo could answer, Nyssa cried out, “Guys, look at this!”

She was standing at one of the worktables, flipping through a sketchbook—diagrams for hundreds of different machines and weapons.

“I’ve never seen anything like these,” Nyssa said. “There are more amazing ideas here than in Daedalus’s workshop. It would take a century just to prototype them all.”

“Who built this place?” Jake Mason said. “And why?”

Chiron stayed silent, but Leo focused on the wall map he’d seen during his first visit. It showed Camp Half-Blood with a line of triremes in the Sound, catapults mounted in the hills around the valley, and spots marked for traps, trenches, and ambush sites.

“It’s a wartime command center,” he said. “The camp was attacked once, wasn’t it?”

“In the Titan War?” Piper asked.

Nyssa shook her head. “No. Besides, that map looks *really* old. The date ... does that say 1864?”

They all turned to Chiron.

The centaur’s tail swished fretfully. “This camp has been attacked many times,” he admitted. “That map is from the last Civil War.”

Apparently, Leo wasn’t the only one confused. The other Hephaestus campers looked at each other and frowned.

“Civil War ...” Piper said. “You mean the American Civil War, like a hundred and fifty years ago?”

“Yes and no,” Chiron said. “The two conflicts—mortal and demigod—mirrored each other, as they usually do in Western history. Look at any civil war or revolution from the fall of Rome onward, and it marks a time when demigods also fought one another. But *that* Civil War was particularly horrible. For American mortals, it is still their bloodiest conflict of all time—worse than their casualties in the two World Wars. For demigods, it was equally devastating. Even back then, this valley was Camp Half-Blood. There was a horrible battle in these woods lasting for days, with terrible losses on both sides.”

“Both sides,” Leo said. “You mean the camp split apart?”

“No,” Jason spoke up. “He means two different groups. Camp Half-Blood was one side in the war.”

Leo wasn’t sure he wanted an answer, but he asked, “Who was the other?”

Chiron glanced up at the tattered bunker 9 banner, as if remembering the day it was raised.

“The answer is dangerous,” he warned. “It is something I swore upon the

River Styx never to speak of. After the American Civil War, the gods were so horrified by the toll it took on their children, that they swore it would never happen again. The two groups were separated. The gods bent all their will, wove the Mist as tightly as they could, to make sure the enemies never remembered each other, never met on their quests, so that bloodshed could be avoided. This map is from the final dark days of 1864, the last time the two groups fought. We've had several close calls since then. The nineteen sixties were particularly dicey. But we've managed to avoid another civil war—at least so far. Just as Leo guessed, this bunker was a command center for the Hephaestus cabin. In the last century, it has been reopened a few times, usually as a hiding place in times of great unrest. But coming here is dangerous. It stirs old memories, awakens the old feuds. Even when the Titans threatened last year, I did not think it worth the risk to use this place.”

Suddenly Leo's sense of triumph turned to guilt. “Hey, look, this place found *me*. It was meant to happen. It's a good thing.”

“I hope you're right,” Chiron said.

“I am!” Leo pulled the old drawing out of his pocket and spread it on the table for everyone to see.

“There,” he said proudly. “Aeolus returned that to me. I drew it when I was five. That's my destiny.”

Nyssa frowned. “Leo, it's a crayon drawing of a boat.”

“Look.” He pointed at the largest schematic on the bulletin board—the blueprint showing a Greek trireme. Slowly, his cabinmates' eyes widened as they compared the two designs. The number of masts and oars, even the decorations on the shields and sails were exactly the same as on Leo's drawing.

“That's impossible,” Nyssa said. “That blueprint has to be a century old at least.”

“*Prophecy—Unclear—Flight,*” Jake Mason read from the notes on the blueprint. “It's a diagram for a flying ship. Look, that's the landing gear. And weaponry—Holy Hephaestus: rotating ballista, mounted crossbows, Celestial bronze plating. That thing would be one spankin' hot war machine. Was it ever made?”

“Not yet,” Leo said. “Look at the masthead.”

There was no doubt—the figure at the front of the ship was the head of a dragon. A very particular dragon.

“Festus,” Piper said. Everyone turned and looked at the dragon's head sitting on the table.

“He's meant to be our masthead,” Leo said. “Our good luck charm, our eyes at sea. I'm supposed to build this ship.”

I'm gonna call it the *Argo II*. And guys, I'll need your help."

"The *Argo II*." Piper smiled. "After Jason's ship."

Jason looked a little uncomfortable, but he nodded. "Leo's right. That ship is just what we need for our journey."

"What journey?" Nyssa said. "You just got back!"

Piper ran her fingers over the old crayon drawing. "We've got to confront Porphyron, the giant king. He said he would destroy the gods at their roots."

"Indeed," Chiron said. "Much of Rachel's Great Prophecy is still a mystery to me, but one thing is clear. You three—Jason, Piper, and Leo—are among the seven demigods who must take on that quest. You must confront the giants in their homeland, where they are strongest. You must stop them before they can wake Gaea fully, before they destroy Mount Olympus."

"Um ..." Nyssa shifted. "You don't mean Manhattan, do you?"

"No," Leo said. "The original Mount Olympus. We have to sail to Greece."

LEO

IT TOOK A FEW MINUTES FOR THAT TO settle in. Then the other Hephaestus campers started asking questions all at once. Who were the other four demigods? How long would it take to build the boat? Why didn't everyone get to go to Greece?

"Heroes!" Chiron struck his hoof on the floor. "All the details are not clear yet, but Leo is correct. He will need your help to build the *Argo II*. It is perhaps the greatest project Cabin Nine has even undertaken, even greater than the bronze dragon."

"It'll take a year at least," Nyssa guessed. "Do we have that much time?"

"You have six months at most," Chiron said. "You should sail by summer solstice, when the gods' power is strongest. Besides, we evidently cannot trust the wind gods, and the summer winds are the least powerful and easiest to navigate. You dare not sail any later, or you may be too late to stop the giants. You must avoid ground travel, using only air and sea, so this vehicle is perfect. Jason being the son of the sky god ..."

His voice trailed off, but Leo figured Chiron was thinking about his missing student, Percy Jackson, the son of Poseidon. He would've been good on this voyage, too.

Jake Mason turned to Leo. "Well, one thing's for sure. *You* are now senior counselor. This is the biggest honor the cabin has ever had. Anyone object?"

Nobody did. All his cabinmates smiled at him, and Leo could almost feel their cabin's curse breaking, their sense of hopelessness melting away.

"It's official, then," Jake said. "You're the man."

For once, Leo was speechless. Ever since his mom died, he'd spent his life on the run. Now he'd found a home and a family. He'd found a job to do. And as scary as it was, Leo wasn't tempted to run—not even a little.

"Well," he said at last, "if you guys elect me leader, you must be even crazier than I am. So let's build a spankin' hot war machine!"

JASON

JASON WAITED ALONE IN CABIN ONE.

Annabeth and Rachel were due any minute for the head counselors' meeting, and Jason needed time to think.

His dreams the night before had been worse than he'd wanted to share—even with Piper. His memory was still foggy, but bits and pieces were coming back. The night Lupa had tested him at the Wolf House, to decide if he would be a pup or food. Then the long trip south to ... he couldn't remember, but he had flashes of his old life. The day he'd gotten his tattoo. The day he'd been raised on a shield and proclaimed a praetor. His friends' faces: Dakota, Gwendolyn, Hazel, Bobby. And Reyna. Definitely there'd been a girl named Reyna. He wasn't sure what she'd meant to him, but the memory made him question what he felt about Piper—and wonder if he was doing something wrong. The problem was, he liked Piper a lot.

Jason moved his stuff to the corner alcove where his sister had once slept. He put Thalia's photograph back on the wall so he didn't feel alone. He stared up at the frowning statue of Zeus, mighty and proud, but the statue didn't scare him anymore. It just made him feel sad.

"I know you can hear me," Jason said to the statue.

The statue said nothing. Its painted eyes seemed to stare at him.

"I wish I could talk with you in person," Jason continued, "but I understand you can't do that. The Roman gods don't like to interact with mortals so much, and—well, you're the king. You've got to set an example."

More silence. Jason had hoped for something—a bigger than usual rumble of thunder, a bright light, a smile. No, never mind. A smile would've been creepy.

"I remember some things," he said. The more he talked, the less self-conscious he felt. "I remember that it's hard being a son of Jupiter. Everyone is always looking at me to be a leader, but I always feel alone. I guess you feel the same way up on Olympus. The other gods challenge your decisions. Sometimes you've got to make hard choices, and the others criticize you. And you can't

come to my aid like other gods might. You've got to keep me at a distance so it doesn't look like you're playing favorites. I guess I just wanted to say ..."

Jason took a deep breath. "I understand all that. It's okay. I'm going to try to do my best. I'll try to make you proud. But I could really use some guidance, Dad. If there's anything you can do—help me so I can help my friends. I'm afraid I'll get them killed. I don't know how to protect them."

The back of his neck tingled. He realized someone was standing behind him. He turned and found a woman in a black hooded robe, with a goatskin cloak over her shoulders and a sheathed Roman sword—a *gladius*—in her hands.

"Hera," he said.

She pushed back her hood. "To you, I have always been Juno. And your father has already sent you guidance, Jason. He sent you Piper and Leo. They're not just your responsibility. They are also your friends. Listen to them, and you will do well."

"Did Jupiter send you here to tell me that?"

"No one sends me anywhere, hero," she said. "I am not a messenger."

"But you got me into this. Why did you send me to this camp?"

"I think you know," Juno said. "An exchange of leaders was necessary. It was the only way to bridge the gap."

"I didn't agree to it."

"No. But Zeus gave your life to me, and I am helping you fulfill your destiny."

Jason tried to control his anger. He looked down at his orange camp shirt and the tattoos on his arm, and he knew these things should not go together. He had become a contradiction—a mixture as dangerous as anything Medea could cook up.

"You're not giving me all my memories," he said. "Even though you promised."

"Most will return in time," Juno said. "But you must find your own way back. You need these next months with your new friends, your new home. You're gaining their trust. By the time you sail in your ship, you will be a leader at this camp. And you will be ready to be a peacemaker between two great powers."

"What if you're not telling the truth?" he asked. "What if you're doing this to cause another civil war?"

Juno's expression was impossible to read—amusement? Disdain? Affection? Possibly all three. As much as she appeared human, Jason knew she was not. He could still see that blinding light—the true form of the goddess that

had seared itself into his brain. She was Juno and Hera. She existed in many places at once. Her reasons for doing something were never simple.

“I am the goddess of family,” she said. “My family has been divided for too long.”

“They divided us so we don’t kill each other,” Jason said. “That seems like a pretty good reason.”

“The prophecy demands that we change. The giants will rise. Each can only be killed by a god and demigod working together. Those demigods must be the seven greatest of the age. As it stands, they are divided between two places. If we remain divided, we cannot win. Gaea is counting on this. You must unite the heroes of Olympus and sail together to meet the giants on the ancient battlegrounds of Greece. Only then will the gods be convinced to join you. It will be the most dangerous quest, the most important voyage, ever attempted by the children of the gods.”

Jason looked up again at the glowering statue of his father.

“It’s not fair,” Jason said. “I could ruin everything.”

“You could,” Juno agreed. “But gods need heroes. We always have.”

“Even you? I thought you hated heroes.”

The goddess gave him a dry smile. “I have that reputation. But if you want the truth, Jason, I often envy other gods their mortal children. You demigods can span both worlds. I think this helps your godly parents—even Jupiter, curse him—to understand the mortal world better than I.”

Juno sighed so unhappily that despite his anger, Jason almost felt sorry for her.

“I am the goddess of marriage,” she said. “It is not in my nature to be faithless. I have only two godly children—Ares and Hephaestus—both of whom are disappointments. I have no mortal heroes to do my bidding, which is why I am so often bitter toward demigods—Heracles, Aeneas, all of them. But it is also why I favored the first Jason, a pure mortal, who had no godly parent to guide him. And why I am glad Zeus gave you to me. You will be my champion, Jason. You will be the greatest of heroes, and bring unity to the demigods, and thus to Olympus.”

Her words settled over him, as heavy as sandbags. Two days ago, he’d been terrified by the idea of leading demigods into a Great Prophecy, sailing off to battle the giants and save the world.

He was still terrified, but something had changed. He no longer felt alone. He had friends now, and a home to fight for. He even had a patron goddess looking out for him, which had to count for something, even if she seemed a little untrustworthy.

Jason had to stand up and accept his destiny, just as he had done when he faced Porphyron with his bare hands. Sure, it seemed impossible. He might die. But his friends were counting on him.

“And if I fail?” he asked.

“Great victory requires great risk,” she admitted. “Fail, and there will be bloodshed like we have never seen. Demigods will destroy one another. The giants will overrun Olympus. Gaea will wake, and the earth will shake off everything we have built over five millennia. It will be the end of us all.”

“Great. Just great.”

Someone pounded on the cabin doors.

Juno pulled her hood back over her face. Then she handed Jason the sheathed *gladius*. “Take this for the weapon you lost. We will speak again. Like it or not, Jason, I am your sponsor, and your link to Olympus. We need each other.”

The goddess vanished as the doors creaked open, and Piper walked in.

“Annabeth and Rachel are here,” she said. “Chiron has summoned the council.”

JASON

THE COUNCIL WAS NOTHING LIKE Jason imagined. For one thing, it was in the Big House rec room, around a Ping-Pong table, and one of the satyrs was serving nachos and sodas. Somebody had brought Seymour the leopard head in from the living room and hung him on the wall. Every once in a while, a counselor would toss him a Snausage.

Jason looked around the room and tried to remember everyone's name. Thankfully, Leo and Piper were sitting next to him—it was their first meeting as senior counselors. Clarisse, leader of the Ares cabin, had her boots on the table, but nobody seemed to care. Clovis from Hypnos cabin was snoring in the corner while Butch from Iris cabin was seeing how many pencils he could fit in Clovis's nostrils. Travis Stoll from Hermes was holding a lighter under a Ping-Pong ball to see if it would burn, and Will Solace from Apollo was absently wrapping and unwrapping an Ace bandage around his wrist. The counselor from Hecate cabin, Lou Ellen something-or-other, was playing "got-your-nose" with Miranda Gardiner from Demeter, except that Lou Ellen really *had* magically disconnected Miranda's nose, and Miranda was trying to get it back.

Jason had hoped Thalia would show. She'd promised, after all—but she was nowhere to be seen. Chiron had told him not to worry about it. Thalia often got sidetracked fighting monsters or running quests for Artemis, and she would probably arrive soon. But still, Jason worried.

Rachel Dare, the oracle, sat next to Chiron at the head of the table. She was wearing her Clarion Academy school uniform dress, which seemed a bit odd, but she smiled at Jason.

Annabeth didn't look so relaxed. She wore armor over her camp clothes, with her knife at her side and her blond hair pulled back in a ponytail. As soon as Jason walked in, she fixed him with an expectant look, as if she were trying to extract information out of him by sheer willpower.

"Let's come to order," Chiron said. "Lou Ellen, please give Miranda her nose back. Travis, if you'd kindly extinguish the flaming Ping-Pong ball, and Butch, I think twenty pencils is really too many for any human nostril. Thank you. Now, as you can see, Jason, Piper, and Leo have returned successfully..."

more or less. Some of you have heard parts of their story, but I will let them fill you in.”

Everyone looked at Jason. He cleared his throat and began the story. Piper and Leo chimed in from time to time, filling in the details he forgot.

It only took a few minutes, but it seemed like longer with everyone watching him. The silence was heavy, and for so many ADHD demigods to sit still listening for that long, Jason knew the story must have sounded pretty wild. He ended with Hera’s visit right before the meeting.

“So Hera was *here*,” Annabeth said. “Talking to you.”

Jason nodded. “Look, I’m not saying I trust her—”

“That’s smart,” Annabeth said.

“—but she isn’t making this up about another group of demigods. That’s where I came from.”

“Romans.” Clarisse tossed Seymour a Snausage. “You expect us to believe there’s another camp with demigods, but they follow the Roman forms of the gods. And we’ve never even heard of them.”

Piper sat forward. “The gods have kept the two groups apart, because every time they see each other, they try to kill each other.”

“I can respect that,” Clarisse said. “Still, why haven’t we ever run across each other on quests?”

“Oh, yes,” Chiron said sadly. “You have, many times. It’s always a tragedy, and always the gods do their best to wipe clean the memories of those involved. The rivalry goes all the way back to the Trojan War, Clarisse. The Greeks invaded Troy and burned it to the ground. The Trojan hero Aeneas escaped, and eventually made his way to Italy, where he founded the race that would someday become Rome. The Romans grew more and more powerful, worshipping the same gods but under different names, and with slightly different personalities.”

“More warlike,” Jason said. “More united. More about expansion, conquest, and discipline.”

“Yuck,” Travis put in.

Several of the others looked equally uncomfortable, though Clarisse shrugged like it sounded okay to her.

Annabeth twirled her knife on the table. “And the Romans hated the Greeks. They took revenge when they conquered the Greek isles, and made them part of the Roman Empire.”

“Not exactly *hated* them,” Jason said. “The Romans admired Greek culture, and were a little jealous. In return, the Greeks thought the Romans were barbarians, but they respected their military power. So during Roman times, demigods started to divide—either Greek or Roman.”

“And it’s been that way ever since,” Annabeth guessed. “But this is crazy. Chiron, where were the Romans during the Titan War? Didn’t they want to help?”

Chiron tugged at his beard. “They *did* help, Annabeth. While you and Percy were leading the battle to save Manhattan, who do think conquered Mount Othrys, the Titans’ base in California?”

“Hold on,” Travis said. “You said Mount Othrys just crumbled when we beat Kronos.”

“No,” Jason said. He remembered flashes of the battle—a giant in starry armor and a helm mounted with ram’s horns. He remembered his army of demigods scaling Mount Tam, fighting through hordes of snake monsters. “It didn’t just fall. We destroyed their palace. I defeated the Titan Krios myself.”

Annabeth’s eyes were as stormy as a *ventus*. Jason could almost see her thoughts moving, putting the pieces together. “The Bay Area. We demigods were always told to stay away from it because Mount Othrys was there. But that wasn’t the only reason, was it? The Roman camp—it’s got to be somewhere near San Francisco. I bet it was put there to keep watch on the Titans’ territory. Where is it?”

Chiron shifted in his wheelchair. “I cannot say. Honestly, even *I* have never been trusted with that information. My counterpart, Lupa, is not exactly the sharing type. Jason’s memory, too, has been burned away.”

“The camp’s heavily veiled with magic,” Jason said. “And heavily guarded. We could search for years and never find it.”

Rachel Dare laced her fingers. Of all the people in the room, only she didn’t seem nervous about the conversation. “But you’ll try, won’t you? You’ll build Leo’s boat, the *Argo II*. And before you make for Greece, you’ll sail for the Roman camp. You’ll need their help to confront the giants.”

“Bad plan,” Clarisse warned. “If those Romans see a warship coming, they’ll assume we’re attacking.”

“You’re probably right,” Jason agreed. “But we have to try. I was sent here to learn about Camp Half-Blood, to try to convince you the two camps don’t have to be enemies. A peace offering.”

“Hmm,” Rachel said. “Because Hera is convinced we need both camps to win the war with the giants. Seven heroes of Olympus—some Greek, some Roman.”

Annabeth nodded. “Your Great Prophecy—what’s the last line?”

“*And foes bear arms to the Doors of Death.*”

“Gaea has opened the Doors of Death,” Annabeth said. “She’s letting out the worst villains of the Underworld to fight us. Medea, Midas—there’ll be

more, I'm sure. Maybe the line means that the Roman and Greek demigods will unite, and find the doors, and close them."

"Or it could mean they fight each other at the doors of death," Clarisse pointed out. "It doesn't say we'll cooperate."

There was silence as the campers let that happy thought sink in.

"I'm going," Annabeth said. "Jason, when you get this ship built, let me go with you."

"I was hoping you'd offer," Jason said. "You of all people—we'll need you."

"Wait." Leo frowned. "I mean that's cool with me and all. But why Annabeth of all people?"

Annabeth and Jason studied one another, and Jason knew she had put it together. She saw the dangerous truth.

"Hera said my coming here was an exchange of leaders," Jason said. "A way for the two camps to learn of each other's existence."

"Yeah?" Leo said. "So?"

"An exchange goes two ways," Jason said. "When I got here, my memory was wiped. I didn't know who I was or where I belonged. Fortunately, you guys took me in and I found a new home. I know you're not my enemy. The Roman camp—they're not so friendly. You prove your worth quickly, or you don't survive. They may not be so nice to him, and if they learn where he comes from, he's going to be in serious trouble."

"Him?" Leo said. "Who are you talking about?"

"My boyfriend," Annabeth said grimly. "He disappeared around the same time Jason appeared. If Jason came to Camp Half-Blood—"

"Exactly," Jason agreed. "Percy Jackson is at the other camp, and he probably doesn't even remember who he is."

Gods in *The Lost Hero*

Aeolus The Greek god of the winds. Roman form: Aeolus

Aphrodite The Greek goddess of love and beauty. She was married to Hephaestus, but she loved Ares, the god of war. Roman form: Venus

Apollo The Greek god of the sun, prophecy, music, and healing; the son of Zeus, and the twin of Artemis. Roman form: Apollo

Ares The Greek god of war; the son of Zeus and Hera, and half brother to Athena. Roman form: Mars

Artemis The Greek goddess of the hunt and the moon; the daughter of Zeus and the twin of Apollo. Roman form: Diana

Boreas The Greek god of the north wind, one of the four directional *anemoi* (wind gods); the god of winter; father of Khione. Roman form: Aquilon

Demeter The Greek goddess of agriculture, a daughter of the Titans Rhea and Kronos. Roman form: Ceres

Dionysus The Greek god of wine; the son of Zeus. Roman form: Bacchus

Gaea The Greek personification of Earth. Roman form: Terra

Hades According to Greek mythology, ruler of the Underworld and god of the dead. Roman form: Pluto

Hecate The Greek goddess of magic; the only child of the Titans Perses and Asteria. Roman form: Trivia

Hephaestus The Greek god of fire and crafts and of blacksmiths; the son of Zeus and Hera, and married to Aphrodite. Roman form: Vulcan

Hera The Greek goddess of marriage; Zeus's wife and sister. Roman form: Juno

Hermes The Greek god of travelers, communication, and thieves; son of Zeus. Roman form: Mercury

Hypnos The Greek god of sleep; the (fatherless) son of Nyx (Night) and brother of Thanatos (Death). Roman form: Somnus

Iris The Greek goddess of the rainbow, and a messenger of the gods; the daughter of Thaumas and Electra. Roman form: Iris

Janus The Roman god of gates, doors, and doorways, as well as beginnings and endings.

Khione The Greek goddess of snow; daughter of Boreas **Notus** The Greek god of the south wind, one of the four directional *anemoi* (wind gods). Roman form: Favonius

Ouranos The Greek personification of the sky. Roman form: Uranus

Pan The Greek god of the wild; the son of Hermes. Roman form: Faunus

Pompona The Roman goddess of plenty

Poseidon The Greek god of the sea; son of the Titans Kronos and Rhea, and brother of Zeus and Hades. Roman form: Neptune

Zeus The Greek god of the sky and king of the gods. Roman form: Jupiter

Coming Fall 2011
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—*Shelf Awareness*

About the Author

Rick Riordan is the author of the *New York Times* #1 bestselling *The Kane Chronicles*, Book One: *The Red Pyramid*, as well as all the books in the *New York Times* #1 best-selling Percy Jackson and the Olympians series: *The Lightning Thief*; *The Sea of Monsters*; *The Titan's Curse*; *The Battle of the Labyrinth*; and *The Last Olympian*. His previous novels for adults include the hugely popular Tres Navarre series, winner of the top three awards in the mystery genre. He lives in San Antonio, Texas, with his wife and two sons. To learn more about Rick, visit his Web site at www.rickriordan.com.

THE HEROES



OF OLYMPUS

THE LOST HERO



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THE SON OF NEPTUNE



NEW YORK TIMES #1 BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

RICK RIORDAN

THE HEROES  OF OLYMPUS

THE SON OF NEPTUNE

RICK RIORDAN

Disney • HYPERION BOOKS
NEW YORK

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ISBN 978-1-4231-4059-7

Map illustration on pp. viii–ix by Kayley LeFaiver

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Also by Rick Riordan

Percy Jackson and the Olympians, Book One:

The Lightning Thief

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The Sea of Monsters

Percy Jackson and the Olympians, Book Three:

The Titan's Curse

Percy Jackson and the Olympians, Book Four:

The Battle of the Labyrinth

Percy Jackson and the Olympians, Book Five:

The Last Olympian

The Kane Chronicles, Book One:

The Red Pyramid

The Kane Chronicles, Book Two:

The Throne of Fire

The Heroes of Olympus, Book One:

The Lost Hero

To Becky, who shares my sanctuary in New Rome. Even Hera could never make me forget you.

PERCY

THE SNAKE-HAIRED LADIES WERE starting to annoy Percy.

They should have died three days ago when he dropped a crate of bowling balls on them at the Napa Bargain Mart. They should have died two days ago when he ran over them with a police car in Martinez. They *definitely* should have died this morning when he cut off their heads in Tilden Park.

No matter how many times Percy killed them and watched them crumble to powder, they just kept re-forming like large evil dust bunnies. He couldn't even seem to outrun them.

He reached the top of the hill and caught his breath. How long since he'd last killed them? Maybe two hours. They never seemed to stay dead longer than that.

The past few days, he'd hardly slept. He'd eaten whatever he could scrounge—vending machine gummi bears, stale bagels, even a Jack in the Crack burrito, which was a new personal low. His clothes were torn, burned, and splattered with monster slime.

He'd only survived this long because the two snake-haired-ladies—*gorgons*, they called themselves—couldn't seem to kill him either. Their claws didn't cut his skin. Their teeth broke whenever they tried to bite him. But Percy couldn't keep going much longer. Soon he'd collapse from exhaustion, and then—as hard as he was to kill, he was pretty sure the gorgons would find a way.

Where to run?

He scanned his surroundings. Under different circumstances, he might've enjoyed the view. To his left, golden hills rolled inland, dotted with lakes, woods, and a few herds of cows. To his right, the flatlands of Berkeley and Oakland marched west—a vast checkerboard of neighborhoods, with several million people who probably did not want their morning interrupted by two monsters and a filthy demigod.

Farther west, San Francisco Bay glittered under a silvery haze. Past that, a wall of fog had swallowed most of San Francisco, leaving just the tops of skyscrapers and the towers of the Golden Gate Bridge.

A vague sadness weighed on Percy's chest. Something told him he'd been to San Francisco before. The city had some connection to Annabeth—the only person he could remember from his past. His memory of her was frustratingly dim. The wolf had promised he would see her again and regain his memory—if he succeeded in his journey.

Should he try to cross the bay?

It was tempting. He could feel the power of the ocean just over the horizon. Water always revived him. Salt water was the best. He'd discovered that two days ago when he had strangled a sea monster in the Carquinez Strait. If he could reach the bay, he might be able to make a last stand. Maybe he could even drown the gorgons. But the shore was at least two miles away. He'd have to cross an entire city.

He hesitated for another reason. The she-wolf Lupa had taught him to sharpen his senses—to trust the instincts that had been guiding him south. His homing radar was tingling like crazy now. The end of his journey was close—almost right under his feet. But how could that be? There was nothing on the hilltop.

The wind changed. Percy caught the sour scent of reptile. A hundred yards down the slope, something rustled through the woods—snapping branches, crunching leaves, hissing.

Gorgons.

For the millionth time, Percy wished their noses weren't so good. They had always said they could *smell* him because he was a demigod—the half-blood son of some old Roman god. Percy had tried rolling in mud, splashing through creeks, even keeping air-freshener sticks in his pockets so he'd have that new car smell; but apparently demigod stink was hard to mask.

He scrambled to the west side of the summit. It was too steep to descend. The slope plummeted eighty feet, straight to the roof of an apartment complex built into the hillside. Fifty feet below that, a highway emerged from the hill's base and wound its way toward Berkeley.

Great. No other way off the hill. He'd managed to get himself cornered.

He stared at the stream of cars flowing west toward San Francisco and

wished he were in one of them. Then he realized the highway must cut through the hill. There must be a tunnel...right under his feet.

His internal radar went nuts. He *was* in the right place, just too high up. He had to check out that tunnel. He needed a way down to the highway—fast.

He slung off his backpack. He'd managed to grab a lot of supplies at the Napa Bargain Mart: a portable GPS, duct tape, lighter, superglue, water bottle, camping roll, a Comfy Panda Pillow Pet (as seen on TV), and a Swiss army knife—pretty much every tool a modern demigod could want. But he had nothing that would serve as a parachute or a sled.

That left him two options: jump eighty feet to his death, or stand and fight. Both options sounded pretty bad.

He cursed and pulled his pen from his pocket.

The pen didn't look like much, just a regular cheap ballpoint, but when Percy uncapped it, it grew into a glowing bronze sword. The blade balanced perfectly. The leather grip fit his hand like it had been custom designed for him. Etched along the guard was an Ancient Greek word Percy somehow understood: *Anaklusmos*—Riptide.

He'd woken up with this sword his first night at the Wolf House—two months ago? More? He'd lost track. He'd found himself in the courtyard of a burned-out mansion in the middle of the woods, wearing shorts, an orange T-shirt, and a leather necklace with a bunch of strange clay beads. Riptide had been in his hand, but Percy had had no idea how he'd gotten there, and only the vaguest idea who he was. He'd been barefoot, freezing, and confused. And then the wolves came....

Right next to him, a familiar voice jolted him back to the present: “There you are!”

Percy stumbled away from the gorgon, almost falling off the edge of the hill.

It was the smiley one—Beano.

Okay, her name wasn't really Beano. As near as Percy could figure, he was dyslexic, because words got twisted around when he tried to read. The first time he'd seen the gorgon, posing as a Bargain Mart greeter with a big green button that read: *Welcome! My name is STHENO*, he'd thought it said BEANO.

She was still wearing her green Bargain Mart employee vest over a flower-print dress. If you looked just at her body, you might think she was somebody's dumpy old grandmother—until you looked down and realized she had rooster

feet. Or you looked up and saw bronze boar tusks sticking out of the corners of her mouth. Her eyes glowed red, and her hair was a writhing nest of bright green snakes.

The most horrible thing about her? She was still holding her big silver platter of free samples: Crispy Cheese 'n' Wieners. Her platter was dented from all the times Percy had killed her, but those little samples looked perfectly fine. Stheno just kept toting them across California so she could offer Percy a snack before she killed him. Percy didn't know why she kept doing that, but if he ever needed a suit of armor, he was going to make it out of Crispy Cheese 'n' Wieners. They were indestructible.

"Try one?" Stheno offered.

Percy fended her off with his sword. "Where's your sister?"

"Oh, put the sword away," Stheno chided. "You know by now that even Celestial bronze can't kill us for long. Have a Cheese 'n' Wiener! They're on sale this week, and I'd hate to kill you on an empty stomach."

"Stheno!" The second gorgon appeared on Percy's right so fast, he didn't have time to react. Fortunately she was too busy glaring at her sister to pay him much attention. "I told you to sneak up on him and kill him!"

Stheno's smile wavered. "But, Euryale..." She said the name so it rhymed with *Muriel*. "Can't I give him a sample first?"

"No, you imbecile!" Euryale turned toward Percy and bared her fangs.

Except for her hair, which was a nest of coral snakes instead of green vipers, she looked exactly like her sister. Her Bargain Mart vest, her flowery dress, even her tusks were decorated with 50% off stickers. Her name badge read: *Hello! My name is DIE, DEMIGOD SCUM!*

"You've led us on quite a chase, Percy Jackson," Euryale said. "But now you're trapped, and we'll have our revenge!"

"The Cheese 'n' Wieners are only \$2.99," Stheno added helpfully. "Grocery department, aisle three." Euryale snarled. "Stheno, the Bargain Mart was a *front!*

You're going native! Now, put down that ridiculous tray and help me kill this demigod. Or have you forgotten that he's the one who vaporized Medusa?"

Percy stepped back. Six more inches, and he'd be tumbling through thin air. "Look, ladies, we've been over this. I don't even *remember* killing Medusa. I don't remember anything! Can't we just call a truce and talk about your weekly specials?"

Stheno gave her sister a pouty look, which was hard to do with giant bronze tusks. “Can we?”

“No!” Euryale’s red eyes bored into Percy. “I don’t care what you remember, son of the sea god. I can smell Medusa’s blood on you. It’s faint, yes, several years old, but *you* were the last one to defeat her. She *still* has not returned from Tartarus. It’s your fault!”

Percy didn’t really get that. The whole “dying then returning from Tartarus” concept gave him a headache. Of course, so did the idea that a ballpoint pen could turn into a sword, or that monsters could disguise themselves with something called the Mist, or that Percy was the son of a barnacle-encrusted god from five thousand years ago. But he *did* believe it. Even though his memory was erased, he knew he was a demigod the same way he knew his name was Percy Jackson. From his very first conversation with Lupa the wolf, he’d accepted that this crazy messed-up world of gods and monsters was his reality. Which pretty much sucked.

“How about we call it a draw?” he said. “I can’t kill you. You can’t kill me. If you’re Medusa’s sisters—like *the* Medusa who turned people to stone—shouldn’t I be petrified by now?”

“Heroes!” Euryale said with disgust. “They always bring that up, just like our mother! ‘Why can’t you turn people to stone? Your *sister* can turn people to stone.’ Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you, boy! That was Medusa’s curse alone. *She* was the most hideous one in the family. She got all the luck!”

Stheno looked hurt. “Mother said *I* was the most hideous.”

“Quiet!” Euryale snapped. “As for you, Percy Jackson, it’s true you bear the mark of Achilles. That makes you a little tougher to kill. But don’t worry. We’ll find a way.”

“The mark of what?”

“Achilles,” Stheno said cheerfully. “Oh, he was *gorgeous*! Dipped in the River Styx as a child, you know, so he was invulnerable except for a tiny spot on his ankle. That’s what happened to you, dear. Someone must’ve dumped you in the Styx and made your skin like iron. But not to worry. Heroes like you always have a weak spot. We just have to find it, and then we can kill you. Won’t that be lovely? Have a Cheese ’n’ Wiener!”

Percy tried to think. He didn’t remember any dip in the Styx. Then again, he didn’t remember much of anything. His skin didn’t feel like iron, but it would explain how he’d held out so long against the gorgons.

Maybe if he just fell down the mountain...would he survive? He didn't want to risk it—not without something to slow the fall, or a sled, or...

He looked at Stheno's large silver platter of free samples.

Hmm...

"Reconsidering?" Stheno asked. "Very wise, dear. I added some gorgon's blood to these, so your death will be quick and painless."

Percy's throat constricted. "You added your blood to the Cheese 'n' Wieners?"

"Just a little." Stheno smiled. "A tiny nick on my arm, but you're sweet to be concerned. Blood from our right side can cure anything, you know, but blood from our left side is deadly—"

"You dimwit!" Euryale screeched. "You're not supposed to tell him that! He won't eat the wieners if you tell him they're poisoned!"

Stheno looked stunned. "He won't? But I said it would be quick and painless."

"Never mind!" Euryale's fingernails grew into claws. "We'll kill him the hard way—just keep slashing until we find the weak spot. Once we defeat Percy Jackson, we'll be more famous than Medusa! Our patron will reward us greatly!"

Percy gripped his sword. He'd have to time his move perfectly—a few seconds of confusion, grab the platter with his left hand...

Keep them talking, he thought.

"Before you slash me to bits," he said, "who's this patron you mentioned?"

Euryale sneered. "The goddess Gaea, of course! The one who brought us back from oblivion! You won't live long enough to meet her, but your friends below will soon face her wrath. Even now, her armies are marching south. At the Feast of Fortune, she'll awaken, and the demigods will be cut down like—like —"

"Like our low prices at Bargain Mart!" Stheno suggested.

"Gah!" Euryale stormed toward her sister. Percy took the opening. He grabbed Stheno's platter, scattering poisoned Cheese 'n' Wieners, and slashed Riptide across Euryale's waist, cutting her in half.

He raised the platter, and Stheno found herself facing her own greasy reflection.

"Medusa!" she screamed.

Her sister Euryale had crumbled to dust, but she was already starting to reform, like a snowman un-melting. “Stheno, you fool!” she gurgled as her half-made face rose from the mound of dust. “That’s just your own reflection! Get him!”

Percy slammed the metal tray on top of Stheno’s head, and she passed out cold.

He put the platter behind his butt, said a silent prayer to whatever Roman god oversaw stupid sledding tricks, and jumped off the side of the hill.

PERCY

THE THING ABOUT PLUMMETING DOWNHILL at fifty miles an hour on a snack platter—if you realize it’s a bad idea when you’re halfway down, it’s too late.

Percy narrowly missed a tree, glanced off a boulder, and spun a three-sixty as he shot toward the highway. The stupid snack tray did not have power steering. He heard the gorgon sisters screaming and caught a glimpse of Euryale’s coral-snake hair at the top of the hill, but he didn’t have time to worry about it. The roof of the apartment building loomed below him like the prow of a battleship. Head-on collision in ten, nine, eight...

He managed to swivel sideways to avoid breaking his legs on impact. The snack platter skittered across the roof and sailed through the air. The platter went one way. Percy went the other.

As he fell toward the highway, a horrible scenario flashed through his mind: his body smashing against an SUV’s windshield, some annoyed commuter trying to push him off with the wipers. *Stupid sixteen-year-old kid falling from the sky! I’m late!*

Miraculously, a gust of wind blew him to one side—just enough to miss the highway and crash into a clump of bushes. It wasn’t a soft landing, but it was better than asphalt.

Percy groaned. He wanted to lie there and pass out, but he had to keep moving.

He struggled to his feet. His hands were scratched up, but no bones seemed to be broken. He still had his backpack. Somewhere on the sled ride he’d lost his sword, but Percy knew it would eventually reappear in his pocket in pen form. That was part of its magic.

He glanced up the hill. The gorgons were hard to miss, with their colorful snake hair and their bright green Bargain Mart vests. They were picking their

way down the slope, going slower than Percy but with a lot more control. Those chicken feet must've been good for climbing. Percy figured he had maybe five minutes before they reached him.

Next to him, a tall chain-link fence separated the highway from a neighborhood of winding streets, cozy houses, and talleucalyptus trees. The fence was probably there to keep people from getting onto the highway and doing stupid things—like sledding into the fast lane on snack trays—but the chain-link was full of big holes. Percy could easily slip through into the neighborhood. Maybe he could find a car and drive west to the ocean. He didn't like stealing cars, but over the past few weeks, in life-and-death situations, he'd "borrowed" several, including a police cruiser. He'd meant to return them, but they never seemed to last very long.

He glanced east. Just as he'd figured, a hundred yards uphill the highway cut through the base of the cliff. Two tunnel entrances, one for each direction of traffic, stared down at him like eye sockets of a giant skull. In the middle, where the nose would have been, a cement wall jutted from the hillside, with a metal door like the entrance to a bunker.

It might have been a maintenance tunnel. That's probably what mortals thought, if they noticed the door at all. But they couldn't see through the Mist. Percy knew the door was more than that.

Two kids in armor flanked the entrance. They wore a bizarre mix of plumed Roman helmets, breastplates, scabbards, blue jeans, purple T-shirts, and white athletic shoes. The guard on the right looked like a girl, though it was hard to tell for sure with all the armor. The one on the left was a stocky guy with a bow and quiver on his back. Both kids held long wooden staffs with iron spear tips, like old-fashioned harpoons.

Percy's internal radar was pinging like crazy. After so many horrible days, he'd finally reached his goal. His instincts told him that if he could make it inside that door, he might find safety for the first time since the wolves had sent him south.

So why did he feel such dread?

Farther up the hill, the gorgons were scrambling over the roof of the apartment complex. Three minutes away—maybe less.

Part of him wanted to run to the door in the hill. He'd have to cross to the median of the highway, but then it would be a short sprint. He could make it before the gorgons reached him.

Part of him wanted to head west to the ocean. That's where he'd be safest. That's where his power would be greatest. Those Roman guards at the door made him uneasy. Something inside him said: *This isn't my territory. This is dangerous.*

"You're right, of course," said a voice next to him.

Percy jumped. At first he thought Beano had managed to sneak up on him again, but the old lady sitting in the bushes was even more repulsive than a gorgon. She looked like a hippie who'd been kicked to the side of the road maybe forty years ago, where she'd been collecting trash and rags ever since. She wore a dress made of tie-dyed cloth, ripped-up quilts, and plastic grocery bags. Her frizzy mop of hair was gray-brown, like root-beer foam, tied back with a peace-sign headband. Warts and moles covered her face. When she smiled, she showed exactly three teeth.

"It isn't a maintenance tunnel," she confided. "It's the entrance to camp."

A jolt went up Percy's spine. *Camp*. Yes, that's where he was from. A camp. Maybe this was his home. Maybe Annabeth was close by.

But something felt wrong.

The gorgons were still on the roof of the apartment building. Then Stheno shrieked in delight and pointed in Percy's direction.

The old hippie lady raised her eyebrows. "Not much time, child. You need to make your choice."

"Who are you?" Percy asked, though he wasn't sure he wanted to know. The last thing he needed was another harmless mortal who turned out to be a monster.

"Oh, you can call me June." The old lady's eyes sparkled as if she'd made an excellent joke. "It is June, isn't it? They named the month after me!"

"Okay...Look, I should go. Two gorgons are coming. I don't want them to hurt you."

June clasped her hands over her heart. "How sweet! But that's part of your choice!"

"My choice..." Percy glanced nervously toward the hill. The gorgons had taken off their green vests. Wings sprouted from their backs—small bat wings, which glinted like brass.

Since when did they have *wings*? Maybe they were ornamental. Maybe they were too small to get a gorgon into the air. Then the two sisters leaped off the

apartment building and soared toward him.

Great. Just great.

“Yes, a choice,” June said, as if she were in no hurry. “You could leave me here at the mercy of the gorgons and go to the ocean. You’d make it there safely, I guarantee. The gorgons will be quite happy to attack me and let you go. In the sea, no monster would bother you. You could begin a new life, live to a ripe old age, and escape a great deal of pain and misery that is in your future.”

Percy was pretty sure he wasn’t going to like the second option. “Or?”

“Or you could do a good deed for an old lady,” she said. “Carry me to the camp with you.”

“Carry you?” Percy hoped she was kidding. Then June hiked up her skirts and showed him her swollen purple feet.

“I can’t get there by myself,” she said. “Carry me to camp—across the highway, through the tunnel, across the river.”

Percy didn’t know what river she meant, but it didn’t sound easy. June looked pretty heavy.

The gorgons were only fifty yards away now—leisurely gliding toward him as if they knew the hunt was almost over.

Percy looked at the old lady. “And I’d carry you to this camp because—?”

“Because it’s a kindness!” she said. “And if you don’t, the gods will die, the world we know will perish, and everyone from your old life will be destroyed. Of course, you wouldn’t remember them, so I suppose it won’t matter. You’d be safe at the bottom of the sea....”

Percy swallowed. The gorgons shrieked with laughter as they soared in for the kill.

“If I go to the camp,” he said, “will I get my memory back?”

“Eventually,” June said. “But be warned, you will sacrifice much! You’ll lose the mark of Achilles. You’ll feel pain, misery, and loss beyond anything you’ve ever known. But you might have a chance to save your old friends and family, to reclaim your old life.”

The gorgons were circling right overhead. They were probably studying the old woman, trying to figure out who the new player was before they struck.

“What about those guards at the door?” Percy asked.

June smiled. “Oh, they’ll let you in, dear. You can trust those two. So, what do you say? Will you help a defenseless old woman?”

Percy doubted June was defenseless. At worst, this was a trap. At best, it was some kind of test.

Percy hated tests. Since he'd lost his memory, his whole life was one big fill-in-the-blank. He was _____, from _____. He felt like _____, and if the monsters caught him, he'd be _____.

Then he thought about Annabeth, the only part of his old life he was sure about. He *had* to find her.

"I'll carry you." He scooped up the old woman.

She was lighter than he expected. Percy tried to ignore her sour breath and her calloused hands clinging to his neck. He made it across the first lane of traffic. A driver honked. Another yelled something that was lost in the wind. Most just swerved and looked irritated, as if they had to deal with a lot of ratty teenagers carrying old hippie women across the freeway here in Berkeley.

A shadow fell over him. Stheno called down gleefully, "Clever boy! Found a goddess to carry, did you?"

A goddess?

June cackled with delight, muttering, "Whoops!" as a car almost killed them.

Somewhere off to his left, Euryale screamed, "Get them! Two prizes are better than one!"

Percy bolted across the remaining lanes. Somehow he made it to the median alive. He saw the gorgons swooping down, cars swerving as the monsters passed overhead. He wondered what the mortals saw through the Mist—giant pelicans? Off-course hang gliders? The wolf Lupa had told him that mortal minds could believe just about anything—except the truth.

Percy ran for the door in the hillside. June got heavier with every step. Percy's heart pounded. His ribs ached.

One of the guards yelled. The guy with the bow nocked an arrow. Percy shouted, "Wait!"

But the boy wasn't aiming at him. The arrow flew over Percy's head. A gorgon wailed in pain. The second guard readied her spear, gesturing frantically at Percy to hurry.

Fifty feet from the door. Thirty feet.

"Gotcha!" shrieked Euryale. Percy turned as an arrow thudded into her forehead. Euryale tumbled into the fast lane. A truck slammed into her and

carried her backward a hundred yards, but she just climbed over the cab, pulled the arrow out of her head, and launched back into the air.

Percy reached the door. “Thanks,” he told the guards. “Good shot.”

“That should’ve killed her!” the archer protested.

“Welcome to my world,” Percy muttered.

“Frank,” the girl said. “Get them inside, quick! Those are gorgons.”

“Gorgons?” The archer’s voice squeaked. It was hard to tell much about him under the helmet, but he looked stout like a wrestler, maybe fourteen or fifteen. “Will the door hold them?”

In Percy’s arms, June cackled. “No, no it won’t. Onward, Percy Jackson! Through the tunnel, over the river!”

“Percy Jackson?” The female guard was darker-skinned, with curly hair sticking out the sides of her helmet. She looked younger than Frank—maybe thirteen. Her sword scabbard came down almost to her ankle. Still, she sounded like she was the one in charge. “Okay, you’re obviously a demigod. But who’s the—?” She glanced at June. “Never mind. Just get inside. I’ll hold them off.”

“Hazel,” the boy said. “Don’t be crazy.”

“Go!” she demanded.

Frank cursed in another language—was that Latin?—and opened the door. “Come on!”

Percy followed, staggering under the weight of the old lady, who was *definitely* getting heavier. He didn’t know how that girl Hazel would hold off the gorgons by herself, but he was too tired to argue.

The tunnel cut through solid rock, about the width and height of a school hallway. At first, it looked like a typical maintenance tunnel, with electric cables, warning signs, and fuse boxes on the walls, lightbulbs in wire cages along the ceiling. As they ran deeper into the hillside, the cement floor changed to tiled mosaic. The lights changed to reed torches, which burned but didn’t smoke. A few hundred yards ahead, Percy saw a square of daylight.

The old lady was heavier now than a pile of sandbags. Percy’s arms shook from the strain. June mumbled a song in Latin, like a lullaby, which didn’t help Percy concentrate.

Behind them, the gorgons’ voices echoed in the tunnel. Hazel shouted. Percy was tempted to dump June and run back to help, but then the entire tunnel shook with the rumble of falling stone. There was a squawking sound, just like the

gorgons had made when Percy had dropped a crate of bowling balls on them in Napa. He glanced back. The west end of the tunnel was now filled with dust.

“Shouldn’t we check on Hazel?” he asked.

“She’ll be okay—I hope,” Frank said. “She’s good underground. Just keep moving! We’re almost there.”

“Almost where?”

June chuckled. “All roads lead there, child. You should know that.”

“Detention?” Percy asked.

“Rome, child,” the old woman said. “Rome.”

Percy wasn’t sure he’d heard her right. True, his memory was gone. His brain hadn’t felt right since he had woken up at the Wolf House. But he was pretty sure Rome wasn’t in California.

They kept running. The glow at the end of the tunnel grew brighter, and finally they burst into sunlight.

Percy froze. Spread out at his feet was a bowl-shaped valley several miles wide. The basin floor was rumped with smaller hills, golden plains, and stretches of forest. A small clear rivercut a winding course from a lake in the center and around the perimeter, like a capital G.

The geography could’ve been anywhere in northern California—live oaks and eucalyptus trees, gold hills and blue skies. That big inland mountain—what was it called, Mount Diablo?—rose in the distance, right where it should be.

But Percy felt like he’d stepped into a secret world. In the center of the valley, nestled by the lake, was a small city of white marble buildings with red-tiled roofs. Some had domes and columned porticoes, like national monuments. Others looked like palaces, with golden doors and large gardens. He could see an open plaza with freestanding columns, fountains, and statues. A five-story-tall Roman coliseum gleamed in the sun, next to a long oval arena like a racetrack.

Across the lake to the south, another hill was dotted with even more impressive buildings—temples, Percy guessed. Several stone bridges crossed the river as it wound through the valley, and in the north, a long line of brickwork arches stretched from the hills into the town. Percy thought it looked like an elevated train track. Then he realized it must be an aqueduct.

The strangest part of the valley was right below him. About two hundred yards away, just across the river, was some sort of military encampment. It was about a quarter mile square, with earthen ramparts on all four sides, the tops

lined with sharpened spikes. Outside the walls ran a dry moat, also studded with spikes. Wooden watchtowers rose at each corner, manned by sentries with oversized, mounted crossbows. Purple banners hung from the towers. A wide gateway opened on the far side of camp, leading toward the city. A narrower gate stood closed on the riverbank side. Inside, the fortress bustled with activity: dozens of kids going to and from barracks, carrying weapons, polishing armor. Percy heard the clank of hammers at a forge and smelled meat cooking over a fire.

Something about this place felt very familiar, yet not quite right.

“Camp Jupiter,” Frank said. “We’ll be safe once—”

Footsteps echoed in the tunnel behind them. Hazel burst into the light. She was covered with stone dust and breathing hard. She’d lost her helmet, so her curly brown hair fell around her shoulders. Her armor had long slash marks in front from the claws of a gorgon. One of the monsters had tagged her with a 50% off sticker.

“I slowed them down,” she said. “But they’ll be here any second.”

Frank cursed. “We have to get across the river.”

June squeezed Percy’s neck tighter. “Oh, yes, please. I can’t get my dress wet.”

Percy bit his tongue. If this lady was a goddess, she must’ve been the goddess of smelly, heavy, useless hippies. But he’d come this far. He’d better keep lugging her along.

It’s a kindness, she’d said. And if you don’t, the gods will die, the world we know will perish, and everyone from your old life will be destroyed.

If this was a test, he couldn’t afford to get an F.

He stumbled a few times as they ran for the river. Frank and Hazel kept him on his feet.

They reached the riverbank, and Percy stopped to catch his breath. The current was fast, but the river didn’t look deep. Only a stone’s throw across stood the gates of the fort.

“Go, Hazel.” Frank nocked two arrows at once. “Escort Percy so the sentries don’t shoot him. It’s my turn to hold off the baddies.”

Hazel nodded and waded into the stream.

Percy started to follow, but something made him hesitate. Usually he loved the water, but this river seemed...powerful, and not necessarily friendly.

“The Little Tiber,” said June sympathetically. “It flows with the power of the original Tiber, river of the empire. This is your last chance to back out, child. The mark of Achilles is a Greek blessing. You can’t retain it if you cross into Roman territory. The Tiber will wash it away.”

Percy was too exhausted to understand all that, but he got the main point. “If I cross, I won’t have iron skin anymore?”

June smiled. “So what will it be? Safety, or a future of pain and possibility?”

Behind him, the gorgons screeched as they flew from the tunnel. Frank let his arrows fly.

From the middle of the river, Hazel yelled, “Percy, come on!”

Up on the watchtowers, horns blew. The sentries shouted and swiveled their crossbows toward the gorgons.

Annabeth, Percy thought. He forged into the river. It was icy cold, much swifter than he’d imagined, but that didn’t bother him. New strength surged through his limbs. His senses tingled like he’d been injected with caffeine. He reached the other side and put the old woman down as the camp’s gates opened. Dozens of kids in armor poured out.

Hazel turned with a relieved smile. Then she looked over Percy’s shoulder, and her expression changed to horror. “Frank!”

Frank was halfway across the river when the gorgons caught him. They swooped out of the sky and grabbed him by either arm. He screamed in pain as their claws dug into his skin.

The sentries yelled, but Percy knew they couldn’t get a clear shot. They’d end up killing Frank. The other kids drew swords and got ready to charge into the water, but they’d be too late.

There was only one way.

Percy thrust out his hands. An intense tugging sensation filled his gut, and the Tiber obeyed his will. The river surged. Whirlpools formed on either side of Frank. Giant watery hands erupted from the stream, copying Percy’s movements. The giant hands grabbed the gorgons, who dropped Frank in surprise. Then the hands lifted the squawking monsters in a liquid vise grip.

Percy heard the other kids yelping and backing away, but he stayed focused on his task. He made a smashing gesture with his fists, and the giant hands plunged the gorgons into the Tiber. The monsters hit bottom and broke into dust. Glittering clouds of gorgon essence struggled to re-form, but the river pulled

them apart like a blender. Soon every trace of the gorgons was swept downstream. The whirlpools vanished, and the current returned to normal.

Percy stood on the riverbank. His clothes and his skin steamed as if the Tiber's waters had given him an acid bath. He felt exposed, raw...vulnerable.

In the middle of the Tiber, Frank stumbled around, looking stunned but perfectly fine. Hazel waded out and helped him ashore. Only then did Percy realize how quiet the other kids had become.

Everyone was staring at him. Only the old lady June looked unfazed.

"Well, that was a lovely trip," she said. "Thank you, Percy Jackson, for bringing me to Camp Jupiter."

One of the girls made a choking sound. "Percy...Jackson?"

She sounded as if she recognized his name. Percy focused on her, hoping to see a familiar face.

She was obviously a leader. She wore a regal purple cloak over her armor. Her chest was decorated with medals. She must have been about Percy's age, with dark, piercing eyes and long black hair. Percy didn't recognize her, but the girl stared at him as if she'd seen him in her nightmares.

June laughed with delight. "Oh, yes. You'll have such fun together!"

Then, just because the day hadn't been weird enough already, the old lady began to glow and change form. She grew until she was a shining, seven-foot-tall goddess in a blue dress, with a cloak that looked like goat's skin over her shoulders. Her face was stern and stately. In her hand was a staff topped with a lotus flower.

If it was possible for the campers to look more stunned, they did. The girl with the purple cloak knelt. The others followed her lead. One kid got down so hastily he almost impaled himself on his sword.

Hazel was the first to speak. "Juno."

She and Frank also fell to their knees, leaving Percy the only one standing. He knew he should probably kneel too, but after carrying the old lady so far, he didn't feel like showing her that much respect.

"Juno, huh?" he said. "If I passed your test, can I have my memory and my life back?"

The goddess smiled. "In time, Percy Jackson, if you succeed here at camp. You've done well today, which is a good start. Perhaps there's hope for you yet."

She turned to the other kids. “Romans, I present to you the son of Neptune. For months he has been slumbering, but now he is awake. His fate is in your hands. The Feast of Fortune comes quickly, and Death must be unleashed if you are to stand any hope in the battle. Do not fail me!”

Juno shimmered and disappeared. Percy looked at Hazel and Frank for some kind of explanation, but they seemed just as confused as he was. Frank was holding something Percy hadn’t noticed before—two small clay flasks with cork stoppers, like potions, one in each hand. Percy had no idea where they’d come from, but he saw Frank slip them into his pockets. Frank gave him a look like: *We’ll talk about it later.*

The girl in the purple cloak stepped forward. She examined Percy warily, and Percy couldn’t shake the feeling that she wanted to run him through with her dagger.

“So,” she said coldly, “a son of Neptune, who comes to us with the blessing of Juno.”

“Look,” he said, “my memory’s a little fuzzy. Um, it’s *gone*, actually. Do I know you?”

The girl hesitated. “I am Reyna, praetor of the Twelfth Legion. And...no, I don’t know you.”

That last part was a lie. Percy could tell from her eyes. But he also understood that if he argued with her about it here, in front of her soldiers, she wouldn’t appreciate it.

“Hazel,” said Reyna, “bring him inside. I want to question him at the *principia*. Then we’ll send him to Octavian. We must consult the auguries before we decide what to do with him.”

“What do you mean,” Percy asked, “‘decide what to do with’ me?”

Reyna’s hand tightened on her dagger. Obviously she was not used to having her orders questioned. “Before we accept anyone into camp, we must interrogate them and read the auguries. Juno said your fate is in our hands. We have to know whether the goddess has brought us as a new recruit....”

Reyna studied Percy as if she found that doubtful.

“Or,” she said more hopefully, “if she’s brought us an enemy to kill.”

PERCY

PERCY WASN'T SCARED OF GHOSTS, which was lucky. Half the people in camp were dead.

Shimmering purple warriors stood outside the armory, polishing ethereal swords. Others hung out in front of the barracks. A ghostly boy chased a ghostly dog down the street. And at the stables, a big glowing red dude with the head of a wolf guarded a herd of...Were those unicorns?

None of the campers paid the ghosts much attention, but as Percy's entourage walked by, with Reyna in the lead and Frank and Hazel on either side, all the spirits stopped what they were doing and stared at Percy. A few looked angry. The little boy ghost shrieked something like "Greggus!" and turned invisible.

Percy wished he could turn invisible too. After weeks on his own, all this attention made him uneasy. He stayed between Hazel and Frank and tried to look inconspicuous.

"Am I seeing things?" he asked. "Or are those—"

"Ghosts?" Hazel turned. She had startling eyes, like fourteen-karat gold. "They're Lares. House gods."

"House gods," Percy said. "Like...smaller than real gods, but larger than apartment gods?"

"They're ancestral spirits," Frank explained. He'd removed his helmet, revealing a babyish face that didn't go with his military haircut or his big burly frame. He looked like a toddler who'd taken steroids and joined the Marines.

"The Lares are kind of like mascots," he continued. "Mostly they're harmless, but I've never seen them so agitated."

"They're staring at me," Percy said. "That ghost kid called me Greggus. My name isn't Greg."

“*Graecus*,” Hazel said. “Once you’ve been here awhile, you’ll start understanding Latin. Demigods have a natural sense for it. *Graecus* means Greek.”

“Is that bad?” Percy asked.

Frank cleared his throat. “Maybe not. You’ve got that type of complexion, the dark hair and all. Maybe they think you’re actually Greek. Is your family from there?”

“Don’t know. Like I said, my memory is gone.”

“Or maybe...” Frank hesitated.

“What?” Percy asked.

“Probably nothing,” Frank said. “Romans and Greeks have an old rivalry. Sometimes Romans use *graecus* as an insult for someone who’s an outsider—an enemy. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

He sounded pretty worried.

They stopped at the center of camp, where two wide stone-paved roads met at a **T**.

A street sign labeled the road to the main gates as *via praetoria*. The other road, cutting across the middle of camp, was labeled *via principalis*. Under those markers were hand-painted signs like *berkeley 5 miles*; *NEW ROME 1 MILE*; *OLD ROME 7280 MILES*; *HADES 2310 MILES (pointing straight down)*; *RENO 208 MILES*, AND *CERTAIN DEATH: YOU ARE HERE!*

For certain death, the place looked pretty clean and orderly. The buildings were freshly whitewashed, laid out in neat grids like the camp had been designed by a fussy math teacher. The barracks had shady porches, where campers lounged in hammocks or played cards and drank sodas. Each dorm had a different collection of banners out front displaying Roman numerals and various animals—eagle, bear, wolf, horse, and something that looked like a hamster.

Along the *Via Praetoria*, rows of shops advertised food, armor, weapons, coffee, gladiator equipment, and toga rentals. A chariot dealership had a big advertisement out front: *CAESAR XLS W/ANTILOCK BRAKES, NO DENARII DOWN!*

At one corner of the crossroads stood the most impressive building—a two-story wedge of white marble with a columned portico like an old-fashioned bank. Roman guards stood out front. Over the doorway hung a big purple banner with the gold letters *SPQR* embroidered inside a laurel wreath.

“Your headquarters?” Percy asked.

Reyna faced him, her eyes still cold and hostile. “It’s called the *principia*.”

She scanned the mob of curious campers who had followed them from the river. “Everyone back to your duties. I’ll give you an update at evening muster. Remember, we have war games after dinner.”

The thought of dinner made Percy’s stomach rumble. The scent of barbecue from the dining hall made his mouth water. The bakery down the street smelled pretty wonderful too, but he doubted Reyna would let him get an order to go.

The crowd dispersed reluctantly. Some muttered comments about Percy’s chances.

“He’s dead,” said one.

“Would be *those* two who found him,” said another.

“Yeah,” muttered another. “Let him join the Fifth Cohort. Greeks and geeks.”

Several kids laughed at that, but Reyna scowled at them, and they cleared off.

“Hazel,” Reyna said. “Come with us. I want your report on what happened at the gates.”

“Me too?” Frank said. “Percy saved my life. We’ve got to let him—”

Reyna gave Frank such a harsh look, he stepped back.

“I’d remind you, Frank Zhang,” she said, “you are on *probatio* yourself. You’ve caused enough trouble this week.”

Frank’s ears turned red. He fiddled with a little tablet on a cord around his neck. Percy hadn’t paid much attention to it, but it looked like a name tag made out of lead.

“Go to the armory,” Reyna told him. “Check our inventory. I’ll call you if I need you.”

“But—” Frank caught himself. “Yes, Reyna.”

He hurried off.

Reyna waved Hazel and Percy toward the headquarters. “Now, Percy Jackson, let’s see if we can improve your memory.”

The *principia* was even more impressive inside. On the ceiling glittered a mosaic of Romulus and Remus under their adopted mama she-wolf (Lupa had told Percy that story a million times). The floor was polished marble. The walls were

draped in velvet, so Percy felt like he was inside the world's most expensive camping tent. Along the back wall stood a display of banners and wooden poles studded with bronze medals—military symbols, Percy guessed. In the center was one empty display stand, as if the main banner had been taken down for cleaning or something.

In the back corner, a stairwell led down. It was blocked by a row of iron bars like a prison door. Percy wondered what was down there—monsters? Treasure? Amnesiac demigods who had gotten on Reyna's bad side?

In the center of the room, a long wooden table was cluttered with scrolls, notebooks, tablet computers, daggers, and a large bowl filled with jelly beans, which seemed kind of out of place. Two life-sized statues of greyhounds—one silver, one gold—flanked the table. Reyna walked behind the table and sat in one of two high-backed chairs. Percy wished he could sit in the other, but Hazel remained standing. Percy got the feeling he was supposed to also.

“So...” he started to say.

The dog statues bared their teeth and growled.

Percy froze. Normally he liked dogs, but these glared at him with ruby eyes. Their fangs looked sharp as razors.

“Easy, guys,” Reyna told the greyhounds.

They stopped growling, but kept eyeing Percy as though they were imagining him in a doggie bag.

“They won't attack,” Reyna said, “unless you try to steal something, or unless I tell them to. That's Argentum and Aurum.”

“Silver and Gold,” Percy said. The Latin meanings popped into his head like Hazel had said they would. He almost asked which dog was which. Then he realized that that was a stupid question.

Reyna set her dagger on the table. Percy had the vague feeling he'd seen her before. Her hair was black and glossy as volcanic rock, woven in a single braid down her back. She had the poise of a sword fighter—relaxed yet vigilant, as if ready to spring into action at any moment. The worry lines around her eyes made her look older than she probably was.

“We *have* met,” he decided. “I don't remember when. Please, if you can tell me anything—”

“First things first,” Reyna said. “I want to hear your story. What *do* you remember? How did you get here? And don't lie. My dogs don't like liars.”

Argentum and Aurum snarled to emphasize the point.

Percy told his story—how he'd woken up at the ruined mansion in the woods of Sonoma. He described his time with Lupa and her pack, learning their language of gestures and expressions, learning to survive and fight.

Lupa had taught him about demigods, monsters, and gods. She'd explained that she was one of the guardian spirits of Ancient Rome. Demigods like Percy were still responsible for carrying on Roman traditions in modern times—fighting monsters, serving the gods, protecting mortals, and upholding the memory of the empire. She'd spent weeks training him, until he was as strong and tough and vicious as a wolf. When she was satisfied with his skills, she'd sent him south, telling him that if he survived the journey, he might find a new home and regain his memory.

None of it seemed to surprise Reyna. In fact, she seemed to find it pretty ordinary—except for one thing.

“No memory at all?” she asked. “You *still* remember nothing?”

“Fuzzy bits and pieces.” Percy glanced at the greyhounds. He didn't want to mention Annabeth. It seemed too private, and he was still confused about where to find her. He was sure they'd met at a camp—but this one didn't feel like the right place.

Also, he was reluctant to share his one clear memory: Annabeth's face, her blond hair and gray eyes, the way she laughed, threw her arms around him, and gave him a kiss whenever he did something stupid.

She must have kissed me a lot, Percy thought.

He feared that if he spoke about that memory to anyone, it would evaporate like a dream. He couldn't risk that.

Reyna spun her dagger. “Most of what you're describing is normal for demigods. At a certain age, one way or another, we find our way to the Wolf House. We're tested and trained.

If Lupa thinks we're worthy, she sends us south to join the legion. But I've never heard of someone losing his memory. How did you find Camp Jupiter?”

Percy told her about the last three days—the gorgons who wouldn't die, the old lady who turned out to be a goddess, and finally meeting Hazel and Frank at the tunnel in the hill.

Hazel took the story from there. She described Percy as brave and heroic, which made him uncomfortable. All he'd done was carry a hippie bag lady.

Reyna studied him. “You’re old for a recruit. You’re what, sixteen?”

“I think so,” Percy said.

“If you spent that many years on your own, without training or help, you should be dead. A son of Neptune? You’d have a powerful aura that would attract all kinds of monsters.”

“Yeah,” Percy said. “I’ve been told that I smell.”

Reyna almost cracked a smile, which gave Percy hope. Maybe she was human after all.

“You must’ve been somewhere before the Wolf House,” she said.

Percy shrugged. Juno had said something about him slumbering, and he *did* have a vague feeling that he’d been asleep—maybe for a long time. But that didn’t make sense.

Reyna sighed. “Well, the dogs haven’t eaten you, so I suppose you’re telling the truth.”

“Great,” Percy said. “Next time, can I take a polygraph?”

Reyna stood. She paced in front of the banners. Her metal dogs watched her go back and forth.

“Even if I accept that you’re not an enemy,” she said, “you’re not a typical recruit. The Queen of Olympus simply doesn’t appear at camp, announcing a new demigod. The last time a major god visited us in person like that...” She shook her head. “I’ve only heard legends about such things. And a son of Neptune...that’s not a good omen. Especially now.”

“What’s wrong with Neptune?” Percy asked. “And what do you mean, ‘especially now’?”

Hazel shot him a warning look.

Reyna kept pacing. “You’ve fought Medusa’s sisters, who haven’t been seen in thousands of years. You’ve agitated our Lares, who are calling you a *graecus*. And you wear strange symbols—that shirt, the beads on your necklace. What do they mean?”

Percy looked down at his tattered orange T-shirt. It might have had words on it at one point, but they were too faded to read. He should have thrown the shirt away weeks ago. It was worn to shreds, but he couldn’t bear to get rid of it. He just kept washing it in streams and water fountains as best he could and putting it back on.

As for the necklace, the four clay beads were each decorated with a different

symbol. One showed a trident. Another displayed a miniature Golden Fleece. The third was etched with the design of a maze, and the last had an image of a building—maybe the Empire State Building?—with names Percy didn't recognize engraved around it. The beads felt important, like pictures from a family album, but he couldn't remember what they meant.

"I don't know," he said.

"And your sword?" Reyna asked.

Percy checked his pocket. The pen had reappeared as it always did. He pulled it out, but then realized he'd never shown Reyna the sword. Hazel and Frank hadn't seen it either. How had Reyna known about it?

Too late to pretend it didn't exist....He uncapped the pen. Riptide sprang to full form. Hazel gasped. The greyhounds barked apprehensively.

"What is that?" Hazel asked. "I've never seen a sword like that."

"I have," Reyna said darkly. "It's very old—a Greek design. We used to have a few in the armory before..." She stopped herself. "The metal is called Celestial bronze. It's deadly to monsters, like Imperial gold, but even rarer."

"Imperial gold?" Percy asked.

Reyna unsheathed her dagger. Sure enough, the blade was gold. "The metal was consecrated in ancient times, at the Pantheon in Rome. Its existence was a closely guarded secret of the emperors—a way for their champions to slay monsters that threatened the empire. We used to have more weapons like this, but now...well, we scrape by. I use this dagger. Hazel has a *spatha*, a cavalry sword. Most legionnaires use a shorter sword called a *gladius*. But that weapon of yours is not Roman at all. It's another sign you're not a typical demigod. And your arm..."

"What about it?" Percy asked.

Reyna held up her own forearm. Percy hadn't noticed before, but she had a tattoo on the inside: the letters SPQR, a crossed sword and torch, and under that, four parallel lines like score marks.

Percy glanced at Hazel.

"We all have them," she confirmed, holding up her arm. "All full members of the legion do."

Hazel's tattoo also had the letters SPQR, but she only had one score mark, and her emblem was different: a black glyph like a cross with curved arms and a head:



Percy looked at his own arms. A few scrapes, some mud, and a fleck of Crispy Cheese 'n' Wiener, but no tattoos.

“So you’ve never been a member of the legion,” Reyna said. “These marks can’t be removed. I thought perhaps...” She shook her head, as if dismissing an idea.

Hazel leaned forward. “If he’s survived as a loner all this time, maybe he’s seen Jason.” She turned to Percy. “Have you ever met a demigod like us before? A guy in a purple shirt, with marks on his arm—”

“Hazel.” Reyna’s voice tightened. “Percy’s got enough to worry about.”

Percy touched the point of his sword, and Riptide shrank back into a pen. “I haven’t seen anyone like you guys before. Who’s Jason?”

Reyna gave Hazel an irritated look. “He is...he *was* my colleague.” She waved her hand at the second empty chair. “The legion normally has two elected praetors. Jason Grace, son of Jupiter, was our other praetor until he disappeared last October.”

Percy tried to calculate. He hadn’t paid much attention to the calendar out in the wilderness, but Juno had mentioned that it was now June. “You mean he’s been gone eight months, and you haven’t replaced him?”

“He might not be dead,” Hazel said. “We haven’t given up.”

Reyna grimaced. Percy got the feeling this guy Jason might’ve been more to her than just a colleague.

“Elections only happen in two ways,” Reyna said. “Either the legion raises someone on a shield after a major success on the battlefield—and we haven’t had any major battles—or we hold a ballot on the evening of June 24, at the Feast of Fortuna. That’s in five days.”

Percy frowned. “You have a feast for *tuna*?”

“*Fortuna*,” Hazel corrected. “She’s the goddess of luck. Whatever happens on her feast day can affect the entire rest of the year. She can grant the camp good luck...or *really* bad luck.”

Reyna and Hazel both glanced at the empty display stand, as if thinking about what was missing.

A chill went down Percy’s back. “The Feast of Fortune...The gorgons mentioned that. So did Juno. They said the camp was going to be attacked on

that day, something about a big bad goddess named Gaea, and an army, and Death being unleashed. You're telling me that day is this *week*?"

Reyna's fingers tightened around the hilt of her dagger.

"You will say nothing about that outside this room," she ordered. "I will not have you spreading more panic in the camp."

"So it's true," Percy said. "Do you know what's going to happen? Can we stop it?"

Percy had just met these people. He wasn't sure he even liked Reyna. But he wanted to help. They were demigods, the same as him. They had the same enemies. Besides, Percy remembered what Juno had told him: it wasn't just this camp at risk. His old life, the gods, and the entire world might be destroyed. Whatever was coming down, it was huge.

"We've talked enough for now," Reyna said. "Hazel, take him to Temple Hill. Find Octavian. On the way you can answer Percy's questions. Tell him about the legion."

"Yes, Reyna."

Percy still had so many questions, his brain felt like it would melt. But Reyna made it clear the audience was over. She sheathed her dagger. The metal dogs stood and growled, inching toward Percy.

"Good luck with the augury, Percy Jackson," she said. "If Octavian lets you live, perhaps we can compare notes...about your past."

PERCY

ON THE WAY OUT OF CAMP, Hazel bought him an espresso drink and a cherry muffin from Bombilo the two-headed coffee merchant.

Percy inhaled the muffin. The coffee was great. Now, Percy thought, if he could just get a shower, a change of clothes, and some sleep, he'd be golden. Maybe even Imperial golden.

He watched a bunch of kids in swimsuits and towels head into a building that had steam coming out of a row of chimneys. Laughter and watery sounds echoed from inside, like it was an indoor pool—Percy's kind of place.

"Bath house," Hazel said. "We'll get you in there before dinner, hopefully. You haven't lived until you've had a Roman bath." Percy sighed with anticipation.

As they approached the front gate, the barracks got bigger and nicer. Even the ghosts looked better—with fancier armor and shinier auras. Percy tried to decipher the banners and symbols hanging in front of the buildings.

"You guys are divided into different cabins?" he asked.

"Sort of." Hazel ducked as a kid riding a giant eagle swooped overhead. "We have five cohorts of about forty kids each. Each cohort is divided into barracks of ten—like roommates, kind of."

Percy had never been great at math, but he tried to multiply. "You're telling me there's two hundred kids at camp?"

"Roughly."

"And *all* of them are children of the gods? The gods have been busy."

Hazel laughed. "Not all of them are children of *majorgods*. There are hundreds of minor Roman gods. Plus, a lot of the campers are legacies—second or third generation. Maybe their parents were demigods. Or their grandparents."

Percy blinked. “Children of demigods?”

“Why? Does that surprise you?”

Percy wasn’t sure. The last few weeks he’d been so worried about surviving day to day. The idea of living long enough to be an adult and have kids of his own—that seemed like an impossible dream.

“These Legos—”

“Legacies,” Hazel corrected.

“They have powers like a demigod?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes not. But they can be trained. All the best Roman generals and emperors—you know, they all claimed to be descended from gods. Most of the time, they were telling the truth. The camp augur we’re going to meet, Octavian, he’s a legacy, descendant of Apollo. He’s got the gift of prophecy, supposedly.”

“Supposedly?”

Hazel made a sour face. “You’ll see.”

That didn’t make Percy feel so great, if this dude Octavian had Percy’s fate in his hands.

“So the divisions,” he asked, “the cohorts, whatever—you’re divided according to who your godly parent is?”

Hazel stared at him. “What a horrible idea! No, the officers decide where to assign recruits. If we were divided according to god, the cohorts would be all uneven. I’d be alone.”

Percy felt a twinge of sadness, like he’d been in that situation. “Why? What’s your ancestry?”

Before she could answer, someone behind them yelled, “Wait!”

A ghost ran toward them—an old man with a medicine-ball belly and toga so long he kept tripping on it. He caught up to them and gasped for air, his purple aura flickering around him.

“This is him?” the ghost panted. “A new recruit for the Fifth, perhaps?”

“Vitellius,” Hazel said, “we’re sort of in a hurry.”

The ghost scowled at Percy and walked around him, inspecting him like a used car. “I don’t know,” he grumbled. “We need only the best for the cohort. Does he have all his teeth? Can he fight? Does he clean stables?”

“Yes, yes, and no,” Percy said. “Who are you?”

“Percy, this is Vitellius.” Hazel’s expression said: *Just humor him*. “He’s one of our Lares; takes an interest in new recruits.”

On a nearby porch, other ghosts snickered as Vitellius paced back and forth, tripping over his toga and hiking up his sword belt.

“Yes,” Vitellius said, “back in Caesar’s day—that’s *Julius* Caesar, mind you—the Fifth Cohort was something! Twelfth Legion Fulminata, pride of Rome! But these days? Disgraceful what we’ve come to. Look at Hazel here, using a *spatha*. Ridiculous weapon for a Roman legionnaire—that’s for cavalry! And you, boy—you smell like a Greek sewer. Haven’t you had a bath?”

“I’ve been a little busy fighting gorgons,” Percy said.

“Vitellius,” Hazel interrupted, “we’ve got to get Percy’s augury before he can join. Why don’t you check on Frank? He’s in the armory doing inventory. You *know* how much he values your help.”

The ghost’s furry purple eyebrows shot up. “Mars Almighty! They let the *probatio* check the armor? We’ll be ruined!”

He stumbled off down the street, stopping every few feet to pick up his sword or rearrange his toga.

“O-h-h-kay,” Percy said.

“Sorry,” Hazel said. “He’s eccentric, but he’s one of the oldest Lares. Been around since the legion was founded.”

“He called the legion...*Fulminata*?” Percy said.

“‘Armed with Lightning,’” Hazel translated. “That’s our motto. The Twelfth Legion was around for the entire Roman Empire. When Rome fell, a lot of legions just disappeared. We went underground, acting on secret orders from Jupiter himself: stay alive, recruit demigods and their children, keep Rome going. We’ve been doing that ever since, moving around to wherever Roman influence was strongest. The last few centuries, we’ve been in America.”

As bizarre as that sounded, Percy had no trouble believing it. In fact, it sounded familiar, like something he’d always known.

“And you’re in the Fifth Cohort,” he guessed, “which maybe isn’t the most popular?”

Hazel scowled. “Yeah. I joined up last September.”

“So...just a few weeks before that guy Jason disappeared.”

Percy knew he’d hit a sore spot. Hazel looked down. She was silent long enough to count every paving stone.

“Come on,” she said at last. “I’ll show you my favorite view.”

They stopped outside the main gates. The fort was situated on the highest point in the valley, so they could see pretty much everything.

The road led down to the river and divided. One path led south across a bridge, up to the hill with all the temples. The other road led north into the city, a miniature version of Ancient Rome. Unlike the military camp, the city looked chaotic and colorful, with buildings crowded together at haphazard angles. Even from this far away, Percy could see people gathered in the plaza, shoppers milling around an open-air market, parents with kids playing in the parks.

“You’ve got families here?” he asked.

“In the city, absolutely,” Hazel said. “When you’re accepted into the legion, you do ten years of service. After that, you can muster out whenever you want. Most demigods go into the mortal world. But for some—well, it’s pretty dangerous out there. This valley is a sanctuary. You can go to college in the city, get married, have kids, retire when you get old. It’s the only safe place on earth for people like us. So yeah, a lot of veterans make their homes there, under the protection of the legion.”

Adult demigods. Demigods who could live without fear, get married, raise a family. Percy couldn’t quite wrap his mind around that. It seemed too good to be true. “But if this valley is attacked?”

Hazel pursed her lips. “We have defenses. The borders are magical. But our strength isn’t what it used to be. Lately, the monster attacks have been increasing. What you said about the gorgons not dying...we’ve noticed that too, with other monsters.”

“Do you know what’s causing it?”

Hazel looked away. Percy could tell that she was holding something back—something she wasn’t supposed to say.

“It’s—it’s complicated,” she said. “My brother says Death isn’t—”

She was interrupted by an elephant.

Someone behind them shouted, “Make way!”

Hazel dragged Percy out of the road as a demigod rode past on a full-grown pachyderm covered in black Kevlar armor. The word elephant was printed on the side of his armor, which seemed a little obvious to Percy.

The elephant thundered down the road and turned north, heading toward a

big open field where some fortifications were under construction.

Percy spit dust out of his mouth. “What the—?”

“Elephant,” Hazel explained.

“Yeah, I read the sign. Why do you have an elephant in a bulletproof vest?”

“War games tonight,” Hazel said. “That’s Hannibal. If we didn’t include him, he’d get upset.”

“We can’t have that.”

Hazel laughed. It was hard to believe she’d looked so moody a moment ago. Percy wondered what she’d been about to say. She had a brother. Yet she had claimed she’d be alone if the camp sorted her by her godly parent.

Percy couldn’t figure her out. She seemed nice and easy going, mature for somebody who couldn’t have been more than thirteen. But she also seemed to be hiding a deep sadness, like she felt guilty about something.

Hazel pointed south across the river. Dark clouds were gathering over Temple Hill. Red flashes of lightning washed the monuments in blood-colored light.

“Octavian is busy,” Hazel said. “We’d better get over there.”

On the way, they passed some goat-legged guys hanging out on the side of the road.

“Hazel!” one of them cried.

He trotted over with a big grin on his face. He wore a faded Hawaiian shirt and nothing for pants except thick brown goat fur. His massive Afro jiggled. His eyes were hidden behind little round rainbow-tinted glasses. He held a cardboard sign that read: WILL WORK SING TALK go away for denarii.

“Hi, Don,” Hazel said. “Sorry, we don’t have time—”

“Oh, that’s cool! That’s cool!” Don trotted along with them. “Hey, this guy’s new!” He grinned at Percy. “Do you have three denarii for the bus? Because I left my wallet at home, and I’ve got to get to work, and—”

“Don,” Hazel chided. “Fauns don’t have wallets. Or jobs. Or homes. And we don’t have buses.”

“Right,” he said cheerfully, “but do you have denarii?”

“Your name is Don the Faun?” Percy asked.

“Yeah. So?”

“Nothing.” Percy tried to keep a straight face. “Why don’t fauns have jobs? Shouldn’t they work for the camp?”

Don bleated. “Fauns! Work for the camp! Hilarious!”

“Fauns are, um, free spirits,” Hazel explained. “They hang out here because, well, it’s a safe place to hang out and beg. We tolerate them, but—”

“Oh, Hazel is awesome,” Don said. “She’s so nice! All the other campers are like, ‘Go away, Don.’ But she’s like, ‘Please go away, Don.’ I love her!”

The faun seemed harmless, but Percy still found him unsettling. He couldn’t shake the feeling that fauns should be more than just homeless guys begging for denarii.

Don looked at the ground in front of them and gasped. “Score!”

He reached for something, but Hazel screamed, “Don, no!”

She pushed him out of the way and snatched up a small shiny object. Percy caught a glimpse of it before Hazel slipped it into her pocket. He could have sworn it was a diamond.

“Come on, Hazel,” Don complained. “I could’ve bought a year’s worth of doughnuts with that!”

“Don, please,” Hazel said. “Go away.”

She sounded shaken, like she’d just saved Don from a charging bulletproof elephant.

The faun sighed. “Aw, I can’t stay mad at you. But I swear, it’s like you’re good luck. Every time you walk by—”

“Good-bye, Don,” Hazel said quickly. “Let’s go, Percy.”

She started jogging. Percy had to sprint to catch up.

“What was that about?” Percy asked. “That diamond in the road—”

“Please,” she said. “Don’t ask.”

They walked in uneasy silence the rest of the way to Temple Hill. A crooked stone path led past a crazy assortment of tiny altars and massive domed vaults. Statues of gods seemed to follow Percy with their eyes.

Hazel pointed out the Temple of Bellona. “Goddess of war,” she said. “That’s Reyna’s mom.” Then they passed a massive red crypt decorated with human skulls on iron spikes.

“Please tell me we’re not going in there,” Percy said.

Hazel shook her head. “That’s the Temple of Mars Ultor.”

“Mars ... Ares, the war god?”

“That’s his Greek name,” Hazel said. “But, yeah, same guy. Ultor means ‘the Avenger.’ He’s the second-most important god of Rome.”

Percy wasn’t thrilled to hear that. For some reason, just looking at the ugly red building made him feel angry.

He pointed toward the summit. Clouds swirled over the largest temple, a round pavilion with a ring of white columns supporting a domed roof. “I’m guessing that’s Zeus—uh, I mean, Jupiter’s? That’s where we’re heading?”

“Yeah.” Hazel sounded edgy. “Octavian reads auguries there—the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus.”

Percy had to think about it, but the Latin words clicked into English. “Jupiter...the best and the greatest?”

“Right.”

“What’s Neptune’s title?” Percy asked. “The coolest and most awesome?”

“Um, not quite.” Hazel gestured to a small blue building the size of a toolshed. A cobweb-covered trident was nailed above the door.

Percy peeked inside. On a small altar sat a bowl with three dried-up, moldy apples.

His heart sank. “Popular place.”

“I’m sorry, Percy,” Hazel said. “It’s just...Romans were always scared of the sea. They only used ships if they *had* to. Even in modern times, having a child of Neptune around has always been a bad omen. The last time one joined the legion ...well, it was 1906, when Camp Jupiter was located across the bay in San Francisco. There was this huge earthquake—”

“You’re telling me a child of Neptune caused that?”

“So they say.” Hazel looked apologetic. “Anyway...

Romans fear Neptune, but they don’t love him much.” Percy stared at the cobwebs on the trident. Great, he thought. Even if he joined the camp, he would never be loved. His best hope was to be scary to his new campmates. Maybe if he did really well, they’d give him some moldy apples.

Still...standing at Neptune’s altar, he felt something stirring inside him, like waves rippling through his veins.

He reached in his backpack and dug out the last bit of food from his trip—a stale bagel. It wasn’t much, but he set it on the altar.

“Hey...uh, Dad.” He felt pretty stupid talking to a bowl of fruit. “If you can hear me, help me out, okay? Give me my memory back. Tell me—tell me what to do.”

His voice cracked. He hadn’t meant to get emotional, but he was exhausted and scared, and he’d been lost for so long, he would’ve given anything for some guidance. He wanted to know something about his life for sure, without grabbing for missing memories.

Hazel put her hand on his shoulder. “It’ll be okay. You’re here now. You’re one of us.”

He felt awkward, depending on an eighth-grade girl he barely knew for comfort, but he was glad she was there.

Above them, thunder rumbled. Red lightning lit up the hill.

“Octavian’s almost done,” Hazel said. “Let’s go.”

Compared to Neptune’s tool shed, Jupiter’s temple was definitely *optimus* and *maximus*.

The marble floor was etched with fancy mosaics and Latin inscriptions. Sixty feet above, the domed ceiling sparkled gold. The whole temple was open to the wind.

In the center stood a marble altar, where a kid in a toga was doing some sort of ritual in front of a massive golden statue of the big dude himself: Jupiter the sky god, dressed in a silk XXXL purple toga, holding a lightning bolt.

“It doesn’t look like that,” Percy muttered.

“What?” Hazel asked.

“The master bolt,” Percy said.

“What are you *talking* about?”

“I—” Percy frowned. For a second, he’d thought he remembered something. Now it was gone. “Nothing, I guess.”

The kid at the altar raised his hands. More red lightning flashed in the sky, shaking the temple. Then he put his hands down, and the rumbling stopped. The clouds turned from gray to white and broke apart.

A pretty impressive trick, considering the kid didn’t look like much. He was tall and skinny, with straw-colored hair, oversized jeans, a baggy T-shirt, and a drooping toga. He looked like a scarecrow wearing a bed sheet.

“What’s he doing?” Percy murmured.

The guy in the toga turned. He had a crooked smile and a slightly crazy look in his eyes, like he'd just been playing an intense video game. In one hand he held a knife. In the other hand was something like a dead animal. That didn't make him look any less crazy.

"Percy," Hazel said, "this is Octavian."

"The *graecus!*" Octavian announced. "How interesting."

"Uh, hi," Percy said. "Are you killing small animals?"

Octavian looked at the fuzzy thing in his hand and laughed. "No, no. Once upon a time, yes. We used to read the will of the gods by examining animal guts—chickens, goats, that sort of thing. Nowadays, we use these."

He tossed the fuzzy thing to Percy. It was a disemboweled teddy bear. Then Percy noticed that there was a whole pile of mutilated stuffed animals at the foot of Jupiter's statue.

"Seriously?" Percy asked.

Octavian stepped off the dais. He was probably about eighteen, but so skinny and sickly pale, he could've passed for younger. At first he looked harmless, but as he got closer, Percy wasn't so sure. Octavian's eyes glittered with harsh curiosity, like he might gut Percy just as easily as a teddy bear if he thought he could learn something from it.

Octavian narrowed his eyes. "You seem nervous."

"You remind me of someone," Percy said. "I can't remember who."

"Possibly my namesake, Octavian—Augustus Caesar. Everyone says I bear a remarkable resemblance."

Percy didn't think that was it, but he couldn't pin down the memory. "Why did you call me 'the Greek'?"

"I saw it in the auguries." Octavian waved his knife at the pile of stuffing on the altar. "The message said: *The Greek has arrived*. Or possibly: *The goose has cried*. I'm thinking the first interpretation is correct. You seek to join the legion?"

Hazel spoke for him. She told Octavian everything that had happened since they met at the tunnel—the gorgons, the fight at the river, the appearance of Juno, their conversation with Reyna.

When she mentioned Juno, Octavian looked surprised.

"Juno," he mused. "We call her Juno Moneta. Juno the Warner. She appears in times of crisis, to counsel Rome about great threats."

He glanced at Percy, as if to say: *like mysterious Greeks, for instance.*

“I hear the Feast of Fortuna is this week,” Percy said. “The gorgons warned there’d be an invasion on that day. Did you see that in your stuffing?”

“Sadly, no.” Octavian sighed. “The will of the gods is hard to discern. And these days, my vision is even darker.”

“Don’t you have...I don’t know,” Percy said, “an oracle or something?”

“An oracle!” Octavian smiled. “What a cute idea. No, I’m afraid we’re fresh out of oracles. Now, if we’d gone questing for the Sibylline books, like I recommended—”

“The Siba-what?” Percy asked.

“Books of prophecy,” Hazel said, “which Octavian is *obsessed* with. Romans used to consult them when disasters happened. Most people believe they burned up when Rome fell.”

“*Some* people believe that,” Octavian corrected. “Unfortunately our present leadership won’t authorize a quest to look for them—”

“Because Reyna isn’t stupid,” Hazel said.

“—so we have only a few remaining scraps from the books,” Octavian continued. “A few mysterious predictions, like these.”

He nodded to the inscriptions on the marble floor. Percy stared at the lines of words, not really expecting to understand them. He almost choked.

“That one.” He pointed, translating as he read aloud: “*Seven half-bloods shall answer the call. To storm or fire the world must fall—*”

“Yes, yes.” Octavian finished it without looking: “*An oath to keep with a final breath, and foes bear arms to the Doors of Death.*”

“I—I know that one.” Percy thought thunder was shaking the temple again. Then he realized his whole body was trembling. “That’s *important.*”

Octavian arched an eyebrow. “Of course it’s important. We call it the Prophecy of Seven, but it’s several thousand years old. We don’t know what it means. Every time someone tries to interpret it...Well, Hazel can tell you. Bad things happen.”

Hazel glared at him. “Just read the augury for Percy. Can he join the legion or not?”

Percy could almost see Octavian’s mind working, calculating whether or not Percy would be useful. He held out his hand for Percy’s backpack. “That’s a beautiful specimen. May I?”

Percy didn't understand what he meant, but Octavian snatched the Bargain Mart panda pillow that was sticking out of the top of his pack. It was just a silly stuffed toy, but Percy had carried it a long way. He was kind of fond of it. Octavian turned toward the altar and raised his knife.

"Hey!" Percy protested.

Octavian slashed open the panda's belly and poured its stuffing over the altar. He tossed the panda carcass aside, muttered a few words over the fluff, and turned with a big smile on his face.

"Good news!" he said. "Percy may join the legion. We'll assign him a cohort at evening muster. Tell Reyna that I approve."

Hazel's shoulders relaxed. "Uh...great. Come on, Percy."

"Oh, and Hazel," Octavian said. "I'm happy to welcome Percy into the legion. But when the election for praetor comes up, I hope you'll remember—"

"Jason *isn't* dead," Hazel snapped. "You're the augur. You're supposed to be looking for him!"

"Oh, I am!" Octavian pointed at the pile of gutted stuffed animals. "I consult the gods every day! Alas, after eight months, I've found nothing. Of course, I'm still looking. But if Jason doesn't return by the Feast of Fortuna, we must act. We can't have a power vacuum any longer. I hope you'll support me for praetor. It would mean so much to me."

Hazel clenched her fists. "Me. Support. You?"

Octavian took off his toga, setting it and his knife on the altar. Percy noticed seven lines on Octavian's arm—seven years of camp, Percy guessed. Octavian's mark was a harp, the symbol of Apollo.

"After all," Octavian told Hazel, "I might be able to help you. It would be a shame if those awful rumors about you kept circulating...or, gods forbid, if they turned out to be true."

Percy slipped his hand into his pocket and grabbed his pen. This guy was blackmailing Hazel. That was obvious. One sign from Hazel, and Percy was ready to bust out Riptide and see how Octavian liked being at the other end of a blade.

Hazel took a deep breath. Her knuckles were white. "I'll think about it."

"Excellent," Octavian said. "By the way, your brother is here."

Hazel stiffened. "My brother? Why?"

Octavian shrugged. "Why does your brother do *anything*? He's waiting for

you at your father's shrine. Just...ah, don't invite him to stay too long. He has a disturbing effect on the others. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to keep searching for our poor lost friend, Jason. Nice to meet you, Percy."

Hazel stormed out of the pavilion, and Percy followed. He was sure he'd never been so glad to leave a temple in his life.

As Hazel marched down the hill, she cursed in Latin. Percy didn't understand all of it, but he got *son of a gorgon, power-hungry snake*, and a few choice suggestions about where Octavian could stick his knife.

"I *hate* that guy," she muttered in English. "If I had my way—"

"He won't really get elected praetor, will he?" Percy asked.

"I wish I could be certain. Octavian has a lot of friends, most of them *bought*. The rest of the campers are afraid of him."

"Afraid of that skinny little guy?"

"Don't underestimate him. Reyna's not so bad by herself, but if Octavian shares her power..." Hazel shuddered. "Let's go see my brother. He'll want to meet you."

Percy didn't argue. He wanted to meet this mysterious brother, maybe learn something about Hazel's background—who her dad was, what secret she was hiding. Percy couldn't believe she'd done anything to be guilty about. She seemed too nice. But Octavian had acted like he had some first-class dirt on her.

Hazel led Percy to a black crypt built into the side of the hill. Standing in front was a teenage boy in black jeans and an aviator jacket.

"Hey," Hazel called. "I've brought a friend."

The boy turned. Percy had another one of those weird flashes: like this was somebody he should know. The kid was almost as pale as Octavian, but with dark eyes and messy black hair. He didn't look anything like Hazel. He wore a silver skull ring, a chain for a belt, and a black T-shirt with skull designs. At his side hung a pure-black sword.

For a microsecond when he saw Percy, the boy seemed shocked—panicked even, like he'd been caught in a searchlight.

"This is Percy Jackson," Hazel said. "He's a good guy. Percy, this is my brother, the son of Pluto."

The boy regained his composure and held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you," he said. "I'm Nico di Angelo."

HAZEL

HAZEL FELT LIKE SHE'D JUST INTRODUCED two nuclear bombs. Now she was waiting to see which one exploded first.

Until that morning, her brother Nico had been the most powerful demigod she knew. The others at Camp Jupiter saw him as a traveling oddball, about as harmless as the fauns. Hazel knew better. She hadn't grown up with Nico, hadn't even known him very long. But she knew Nico was more dangerous than Reyna, or Octavian, or maybe even Jason.

Then she'd met Percy.

At first, when she saw him stumbling up the highway with the old lady in his arms, Hazel had thought he might be a god in disguise. Even though he was beat up, dirty, and stooped with exhaustion, he'd had an aura of power. He had the good looks of a Roman god, with sea-green eyes and wind-blown black hair.

She'd ordered Frank not to fire on him. She thought the gods might be testing them. She'd heard myths like that: a kid with an old lady begs for shelter, and when the rude mortals refuse—*boom*, they get turned into banana slugs.

Then Percy had controlled the river and destroyed the gorgons. He'd turned a pen into a bronze sword. He'd stirred up the whole camp with talk about the *graecus*.

A son of the sea god...

Long ago, Hazel had been told that a descendant of Neptune would save her. But could Percy really take away her curse? It seemed too much to hope for.

Percy and Nico shook hands. They studied each other warily, and Hazel fought the urge to run. If these two busted out the magic swords, things could get ugly.

Nico didn't appear scary. He was skinny and sloppy in his rumpled black clothes. His hair, as always, looked like he'd just rolled out of bed.

Hazel remembered when she'd met him. The first time she'd seen him draw that black sword of his, she'd almost laughed. The way he called it "Stygian iron," all serious-like—he'd looked ridiculous. This scrawny white boy was no fighter. She certainly hadn't believed they were related.

She had changed her mind about that quick enough.

Percy scowled. "I—I know you."

Nico raised his eyebrows. "Do you?" He looked at Hazel for explanation.

Hazel hesitated. Something about her brother's reaction wasn't right. He was trying hard to act casual, but when he had first seen Percy, Hazel had noticed his momentary look of panic. Nico already knew Percy. She was sure of it. Why was he pretending otherwise?

Hazel forced herself to speak. "Um...Percy's lost his memory." She told her brother what had happened since Percy had arrived at the gates.

"So, Nico..." she continued carefully, "I thought...you know, you travel all over. Maybe you've met demigods like Percy before, or..."

Nico's expression turned as dark as Tartarus. Hazel didn't understand why, but she got the message: *Drop it.*

"This story about Gaea's army," Nico said. "You warned Reyna?"

Percy nodded. "Who is Gaea, anyway?"

Hazel's mouth went dry. Just hearing that name...It was all she could do to keep her knees from buckling. She remembered a woman's soft sleepy voice, a glowing cave, and feeling her lungs fill with black oil.

"She's the earth goddess." Nico glanced at the ground as if it might be listening. "The oldest goddess of all. She's in a deep sleep most of the time, but she hates the gods and their children."

"Mother Earth...is evil?" Percy asked.

"Very," Nico said gravely. "She convinced her son, the Titan Kronos—um, I mean, Saturn—to kill his dad, Uranus, and take over the world. The Titans ruled for a long time. Then the Titans' children, the Olympian gods, overthrew them."

"That story seems familiar," Percy sounded surprised, like an old memory had partially surfaced. "But I don't think I ever heard the part about Gaea."

Nico shrugged. "She got mad when the gods took over. She took a new husband—Tartarus, the spirit of the abyss—and gave birth to a race of giants. They tried to destroy Mount Olympus, but the gods finally beat them. At least... the first time."

“The first time?” Percy repeated.

Nico glanced at Hazel. He probably wasn’t meaning to make her feel guilty, but she couldn’t help it. If Percy knew the truth about her, and the horrible things she’d done...

“Last summer,” Nico continued, “Saturn tried to make a comeback. There was a second Titan war. The Romans at Camp Jupiter stormed his headquarters on Mount Othrys, across the bay, and destroyed his throne. Saturn disappeared —” He hesitated, watching Percy’s face. Hazel got the feeling her brother was nervous that more of Percy’s memory might come back.

“Um, anyway,” Nico continued, “Saturn probably faded back to the abyss. We all thought the war was over. Now it looks like the Titans’ defeat stirred up Gaea. She’s starting to wake. I’ve heard reports of giants being reborn. If they mean to challenge the gods again, they’ll probably start by destroying the demigods....”

“You’ve told Reyna this?” Percy asked.

“Of course.” Nico’s jaw tensed. “The Romans don’t trust me. That’s why I was hoping she’d listen to you. Children of Pluto...well, no offense, but they think we’re even worse than children of Neptune. We’re bad luck.”

“They let Hazel stay here,” Percy noted.

“That’s different,” Nico said.

“Why?”

“Percy,” Hazel cut in, “look, the giants aren’t the worst problem. Even ... even *Gaea* isn’t the worst problem. The thing you noticed about the gorgons, how they wouldn’t die, *that’s* our biggest worry.” She looked at Nico. She was getting dangerously close to her own secret now, but for some reason Hazel trusted Percy. Maybe because he was also an outsider, maybe because he’d saved Frank at the river. He deserved to know what they were facing.

“Nico and I,” she said carefully, “we think that what’s happening is...Death isn’t—”

Before she could finish, a shout came from down the hill.

Frank jogged toward them, wearing his jeans, purple camp shirt, and denim jacket. His hands were covered with grease from cleaning weapons.

As it did every time she saw Frank, Hazel’s heart performed a little skip-beat tap-dance—which *really* irritated her. Sure, he was a good friend—one of the only people at camp who didn’t treat her as if she had a contagious disease. But

she didn't like him in *that* way.

He was three years older than she was, and he wasn't exactly Prince Charming, with that strange combination of baby face and bulky wrestler's body. He looked like a cuddly koala bear with muscles. The fact that everyone always tried to pair them up—*the two biggest losers at camp! You guys are perfect for each other*—just made Hazel more determined not to like him.

But her heart wasn't with the program. It went nuts whenever Frank was around. She hadn't felt like that since ... well, since Sammy.

Stop it, she thought. You're here for one reason—and it isn't to get a new boyfriend.

Besides, Frank didn't know her secret. If he knew, he wouldn't be so nice to her.

He reached the shrine. "Hey, Nico..."

"Frank." Nico smiled. He seemed to find Frank amusing, maybe because Frank was the only one at camp who wasn't uneasy around the children of Pluto.

"Reyna sent me to get Percy," Frank said. "Did Octavian accept you?"

"Yeah," Percy said. "He slaughtered my panda."

"He...Oh. The augury? Yeah, teddy bears must have nightmares about that guy. But you're in! We need to get you cleaned up before evening muster."

Hazel realized the sun was getting low over the hills. How had the day gone so fast? "You're right," she said. "We'd better—"

"Frank," Nico interrupted, "why don't you take Percy down? Hazel and I will be along soon."

Uh-oh, Hazel thought. She tried not to look anxious.

"That's—that's a good idea," she managed. "Go ahead, guys. We'll catch up."

Percy looked at Nico one more time, as though he was still trying to place a memory. "I'd like to talk with you some more. I can't shake the feeling—"

"Sure," Nico agreed. "Later. I'll be staying overnight."

"You will?" Hazel blurted. The campers were going to love that—the son of Neptune and the son of Pluto arriving on the same day. Now all they needed was some black cats and broken mirrors.

"Go on, Percy," Nico said. "Settle in." He turned to Hazel, and she got the sense that the worst part of her day was yet to come. "My sister and I need to

talk.”

“You know him, don’t you,” Hazel said.

They sat on the roof of Pluto’s shrine, which was covered with bones and diamonds. As far as Hazel knew, the bones had always been there. The diamonds were her fault. If she sat anywhere too long, or just got anxious, they started popping up all around her like mushrooms after a rain. Several million dollars’ worth of stones glittered on the roof, but fortunately the other campers wouldn’t touch them. They knew better than to steal from temples—especially Pluto’s—and the fauns never came up here.

Hazel shuddered, remembering her close call with Don that afternoon. If she hadn’t moved quickly and snatched that diamond off the road...She didn’t want to think about it. She didn’t need another death on her conscience.

Nico swung his feet like a little kid. His Stygian iron sword lay by his side, next to Hazel’s *spatha*. He gazed across the valley, where construction crews were working in the Field of Mars, building fortifications for tonight’s games.

“Percy Jackson.” He said the name like an incantation. “Hazel, I have to be careful what I say. Important things are at work here. Some secrets need to stay secret. You of all people—you should understand that.”

Hazel’s cheeks felt hot. “But he’s not like...like me?”

“No,” Nico said. “I’m sorry I can’t tell you more. I can’t interfere. Percy has to find his own way at this camp.”

“Is he dangerous?” she asked.

Nico managed a dry smile. “Very. To his enemies. But he’s not a threat to Camp Jupiter. You can trust him.”

“Like I trust you,” Hazel said bitterly.

Nico twisted his skull ring. Around him, bones began to quiver as if they were trying to form a new skeleton. Whenever he got moody, Nico had that effect on the dead, kind of like Hazel’s curse. Between them, they represented Pluto’s two spheres of control: death and riches. Sometimes Hazel thought Nico had gotten the better end of the deal.

“Look, I know this is hard,” Nico said. “But you have a second chance. You can make things right.”

“Nothing about this is right,” Hazel said. “If they find out the truth about me
—”

“They won’t,” Nico promised. “They’ll call a quest soon. They have to. You’ll make me proud. Trust me, Bi—”

He caught himself, but Hazel knew what he’d almost called her: *Bianca*. Nico’s *real* sister—the one he’d grown up with. Nico might care about Hazel, but she’d never be Bianca. Hazel was the simply the next best thing Nico could manage—a consolation prize from the Underworld.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Hazel’s mouth tasted like metal, as if gold nuggets were popping up under her tongue. “Then it’s true about Death? Is Alcyoneus to blame?”

“I think so,” Nico said. “It’s getting bad in the Underworld. Dad’s going crazy trying to keep things under control. From what Percy said about the gorgons, things are getting worse up here, too. But look, that’s why you’re here. All that stuff in your past—you can make something *good* come out of it.

You belong at Camp Jupiter.”

That sounded so ridiculous, Hazel almost laughed. She didn’t belong in this place. She didn’t even belong in this century.

She should have known better than to focus on the past, but she remembered the day when her old life had been shattered. The blackout hit her so suddenly, she didn’t even have time to say, *Uh-oh*. She shifted back in time. Not a dream or a vision. The memory washed over her with such perfect clarity, she felt she was actually there.

Her most recent birthday. She’d just turned thirteen. But not *last* December—December 17, 1941, the last day she had lived in New Orleans.

HAZEL

HAZEL WAS WALKING HOME ALONE from the riding stables. Despite the cold evening, she was buzzing with warmth. Sammy had just kissed her on the cheek.

The day had been full of ups and downs. Kids at school had teased her about her mother, calling her a witch and a lot of other names. That had been going on for a long time, of course, but it was getting worse. Rumors were spreading about Hazel's curse. The school was called St. Agnes Academy for Colored Children and Indians, a name that hadn't changed in a hundred years. Just like its name, the place masked a whole lot of cruelty under a thin veneer of kindness.

Hazel didn't understand how other black kids could be so mean. They should've known better, since they themselves had to put up with name-calling all the time. But they yelled at her and stole her lunch, always asking for those famous jewels: "Where's those cursed diamonds, girl? Gimme some or I'll hurt you!" They pushed her away at the water fountain, and threw rocks at her if she tried to approach them on the playground.

Despite how horrible they were, Hazel never gave them diamonds or gold. She didn't hate anyone *that* much. Besides, she had one friend—Sammy—and that was enough.

Sammy liked to joke that he was the perfect St. Agnes student. He was Mexican American, so he considered himself colored *and* Indian. "They should give me a *double* scholarship," he said.

He wasn't big or strong, but he had a crazy smile and he made Hazel laugh.

That afternoon he'd taken her to the stables where he worked as a groom. It was a "whites only" riding club, of course, but it was closed on weekdays, and with the war on, there was talk that the club might have to shut down completely until the Japanese were whipped and the soldiers came back home. Sammy could usually sneak Hazel in to help take care of the horses. Once in a while

they'd go riding.

Hazel loved horses. They seemed to be the only living things that weren't scared of her. People hated her. Cats hissed. Dogs growled. Even the stupid hamster in Miss Finley's classroom squeaked in terror when she gave it a carrot. But horses didn't mind. When she was in the saddle, she could ride so fast that there was no chance of gemstones cropping up in her wake. She almost felt free of her curse.

That afternoon, she'd taken out a tan roan stallion with a gorgeous black mane. She galloped into the fields so swiftly, she left Sammy behind. By the time he caught up, he and his horse were both winded.

"What are you running from?" He laughed. "I'm not *that* ugly, am I?"

It was too cold for a picnic, but they had one anyway, sitting under a magnolia tree with the horses tethered to a split-rail fence. Sammy had brought her a cupcake with a birthday candle, which had gotten smashed on the ride but was still the sweetest thing Hazel had ever seen. They broke it in half and shared it.

Sammy talked about the war. He wished he were old enough to go. He asked Hazel if she would write him letters if he were a soldier going overseas.

"Course, dummy," she said.

He grinned. Then, as if moved by a sudden impulse, he lurched forward and kissed her on the cheek. "Happy birthday, Hazel."

It wasn't much. Just one kiss, and not even on the lips. But Hazel felt like she was floating. She hardly remembered the ride back to the stables, or telling Sammy good-bye. He said, "See you tomorrow," like he always did. But she would never see him again.

By the time she got back to the French Quarter, it was getting dark. As she approached home, her warm feeling faded, replaced by dread.

Hazel and her mother—Queen Marie, she liked to be called—lived in an old apartment above a jazz club. Despite the beginning of the war, there was a festive mood in the air. New recruits would roam the streets, laughing and talking about fighting the Japanese. They'd get tattoos in the parlors or propose to their sweethearts right on the sidewalk. Some would go upstairs to Hazel's mother to have their fortunes read or to buy charms from Marie Levesque, the famous *grisgris* queen.

"Did you hear?" one would say. "Two bits for this good-luck charm. I took it

to a guy I know, and he says it's a real silver nugget. Worth twenty dollars! That voodoo woman is crazy!"

For a while, that kind of talk brought Queen Marie a lot of business. Hazel's curse had started out slowly. At first it seemed like a blessing. The precious stones and gold only appeared once in a while, never in huge quantities. Queen Marie paid her bills. They ate steak for dinner once a week. Hazel even got a new dress. But then stories started spreading. The locals began to realize how many horrible things happened to people who bought those good-luck charms or got paid with Queen Marie's treasure. Charlie Gasceaux lost his arm in a harvester while wearing a gold bracelet. Mr. Henry at the general store dropped dead from a heart attack after Queen Marie settled her tab with a ruby.

Folks started whispering about Hazel—how she could find cursed jewels just by walking down the street. These days only out-of-towners came to visit her mother, and not so many of them, either. Hazel's mom had become short-tempered. She gave Hazel resentful looks.

Hazel climbed the stairs as quietly as she could, in case her mother had a customer. In the club downstairs, the band was tuning their instruments. The bakery next door had started making beignets for tomorrow morning, filling the stairwell with the smell of melting butter.

When she got to the top, Hazel thought she heard two voices inside the apartment. But when she peeked into the parlor, her mother was sitting alone at the séance table, her eyes closed, as if in a trance.

Hazel had seen her that way many times, pretending to talk to spirits for her clients—but not ever when she was by herself. Queen Marie had always told Hazel her *gris-gris* was “bunk and hokum.” She didn't really believe in charms or fortune telling or ghosts. She was just a performer, like a singer or an actress, doing a show for money.

But Hazel knew her mother *did* believe in some magic. Hazel's curse wasn't hokum. Queen Marie just didn't want to think it was her fault—that somehow she had made Hazel the way she was.

“It was your blasted father,” Queen Marie would grumble in her darker moods. “Coming here in his fancy silver-and black suit. The one time I *actually* summon a spirit, and what do I get? Fulfills my wish and ruins my life. I should've been a *real* queen. It's *his* fault you turned out this way.”

She would never explain what she meant, and Hazel had learned not to ask about her father. It just made her mother angrier.

As Hazel watched, Queen Marie muttered something to herself. Her face was calm and relaxed. Hazel was struck by how beautiful she looked, without her scowl and the creases in her brow. She had a lush mane of gold-brown hair like Hazel's, and the same dark complexion, brown as a roasted coffee bean. She wasn't wearing the fancy saffron robes or gold bangles she wore to impress clients—just a simple white dress. Still, she had a regal air, sitting straight and dignified in her gilded chair as if she really were a queen.

“You'll be safe there,” she murmured. “Far from the gods.”

Hazel stifled a scream. The voice coming from her mother's mouth wasn't *hers*. It sounded like an older woman's. The tone was soft and soothing, but also commanding—like a hypnotist giving orders.

Queen Marie tensed. She grimaced in her trance, then spoke in her normal voice: “It's too far. Too cold. Too dangerous. He told me not to.”

The other voice responded: “What has he ever done for you? He gave you a poisoned child! But we can use her gift for good. We can strike back at the gods. You will be under my protection in the north, far from the gods' domain. I'll make my son your protector. You'll live like a queen at last.”

Queen Marie winced. “But what about Hazel...”

Then her face contorted in a sneer. Both voices spoke in unison, as if they'd found something to agree on: “A poisoned child.”

Hazel fled down the stairs, her pulse racing.

At the bottom, she ran into a man in a dark suit. He gripped her shoulders with strong, cold fingers.

“Easy, child,” the man said.

Hazel noticed the silver skull ring on his finger, then the strange fabric of his suit. In the shadows, the solid black wool seemed to shift and boil, forming images of faces in agony, as if lost souls were trying to escape from the folds of his clothes.

His tie was black with platinum stripes. His shirt was tombstone gray. His face—Hazel's heart nearly leaped out of her throat. His skin was so white it looked almost blue, like cold milk. He had a flap of greasy black hair. His smile was kind enough, but his eyes were fiery and angry, full of mad power. Hazel had seen that look in the newsreels at the movie theater. This man looked like that awful Adolf Hitler. He had no mustache, but otherwise he could've been Hitler's twin—or his father.

Hazel tried to pull away. Even when the man let go, she couldn't seem to move. His eyes froze her in place.

"Hazel Levesque," he said in a melancholy voice. "You've grown."

Hazel started to tremble. At the base of the stairs, the cement stoop cracked under the man's feet. A glittering stone popped up from the concrete like the earth had spit out a watermelon seed. The man looked at it, unsurprised. He bent down.

"Don't!" Hazel cried. "It's cursed!"

He picked up the stone—a perfectly formed emerald. "Yes, it is. But not to me. So beautiful...worth more than this building, I imagine." He slipped the emerald in his pocket. "I'm sorry for your fate, child. I imagine you hate me."

Hazel didn't understand. The man sounded sad, as if he were personally responsible for her life. Then the truth hither: a spirit in silver and black, who'd fulfilled her mother's wishes and ruined her life.

Her eyes widened. "You? You're my..."

He cupped his hand under her chin. "I am Pluto. Life is never easy for my children, but you have a special burden. Now that you're thirteen, we must make provisions—"

She pushed his hand away.

"You *did* this to me?" she demanded. "You cursed me and my mother? You left us alone?"

Her eyes stung with tears. This rich white man in a fine suit was her *father*? Now that she was thirteen, he showed up for the first time and said he was sorry?

"You're evil!" she shouted. "You ruined our lives!"

Pluto's eyes narrowed. "What has your mother told you, Hazel? Has she never explained her wish? Or told you why you were born under a curse?"

Hazel was too angry to speak, but Pluto seemed to read the answers in her face.

"No..." He sighed. "I suppose she wouldn't. Much easier to blame me."

"What do you mean?"

Pluto sighed. "Poor child. You were born too soon. I cannot see your future clearly, but someday you will find your place. A descendant of Neptune will wash away your curse and give you peace. I fear, though, that is not for many years...."

Hazel didn't follow any of that. Before she could respond, Pluto held out his hand. A sketchpad and a box of colored pencils appeared in his palm.

"I understand you enjoy art and horseback riding," he said. "These are for your art. As for the horse..." His eyes gleamed. "That, you'll have to manage yourself. Now I must speak with your mother. Happy birthday, Hazel."

He turned and headed up the stairs—just like that, as if he'd checked Hazel off his "to do" list and had already forgotten her. *Happy birthday. Go draw a picture. See you in another thirteen years.*

She was so stunned, so angry, so upside-down confused that she just stood paralyzed at the base of the steps. She wanted to throw down the colored pencils and stomp on them. She wanted to charge after Pluto and kick him. She wanted to run away, find Sammy, steal a horse, leave town and never come back. But she didn't do any of those things.

Above her, the apartment door opened, and Pluto stepped inside.

Hazel was still shivering from his cold touch, but she crept up the stairs to see what he would do. What would he say to Queen Marie? Who would speak back—Hazel's mother, or that awful voice?

When she reached the doorway, Hazel heard arguing. She peeked in. Her mother seemed back to normal—screaming and angry, throwing things around the parlor while Pluto tried to reason with her.

"Marie, it's insanity," he said. "You'll be far beyond my power to protect you."

"Protect me?" Queen Marie yelled. "When have you ever protected me?"

Pluto's dark suit shimmered, as if the souls trapped in the fabric were getting agitated.

"You have no idea," he said. "I've kept you alive, you and the child. My enemies are everywhere among gods and men. Now with the war on, it will only get worse. You *must* stay where I can—"

"The police think I'm a murderer!" Queen Marie shouted. "My clients want to hang me as a witch! And Hazel—her curse is getting worse. Your *protection* is killing us."

Pluto spread his hands in a pleading gesture. "Marie, please—"

"No!" Queen Marie turned to the closet, pulled out a leather valise, and threw it on the table. "We're leaving," she announced. "You can keep your protection. We're going north."

“Marie, it’s a trap,” Pluto warned. “Whoever’s whispering in your ear, whoever’s turning you against me—”

“*You* turned me against you!” She picked up a porcelain vase and threw it at him. It shattered on the floor, and precious stones spilled everywhere—emeralds, rubies, diamonds. Hazel’s entire collection.

“You won’t survive,” Pluto said. “If you go north, you’ll both die. I can foresee that clearly.”

“Get out!” she said.

Hazel wished Pluto would stay and argue. Whatever her mother was talking about, Hazel didn’t like it. But her father slashed his hand across the air and dissolved into shadows...like he really *was* a spirit.

Queen Marie closed her eyes. She took a deep breath. Hazel was afraid the strange voice might possess her again. But when she spoke, she was her regular self.

“Hazel,” she snapped, “come out from behind that door.”

Trembling, Hazel obeyed. She clutched the sketchpad and colored pencils to her chest.

Her mother studied her like she was a bitter disappointment. *A poisoned child*, the voices had said.

“Pack a bag,” she ordered. “We’re moving.”

“Wh-where?” Hazel asked.

“Alaska,” Queen Marie answered. “You’re going to make yourself useful. We’re going to start a new life.”

The way her mother said that, it sounded as if they were going to create a “new life” for someone else—or *something* else.

“What did Pluto mean?” Hazel asked. “Is he really my father? He said you made a wish—”

“Go to your room!” her mother shouted. “Pack!”

Hazel fled, and suddenly she was ripped out of the past.

Nico was shaking her shoulders. “You did it again.”

Hazel blinked. They were still sitting on the roof of Pluto’s shrine. The sun was lower in the sky. More diamonds had surfaced around her, and her eyes stung from crying.

“S-sorry,” she murmured.

“Don’t be,” Nico said. “Where were you?”

“My mother’s apartment. The day we moved.”

Nico nodded. He understood her history better than most people could. He was also a kid from the 1940s. He’d been born only a few years after Hazel, and had been locked away in a magic hotel for decades. But Hazel’s past was much worse than Nico’s. She’d caused so much damage and misery....

“You have to work on controlling those memories,” Nico warned. “If a flashback like that happens when you’re in combat—”

“I know,” she said. “I’m trying.”

Nico squeezed her hand. “It’s okay. I think it’s a side effect from...you know, your time in the Underworld. Hopefully it’ll get easier.”

Hazel wasn’t so sure. After eight months, the blackouts seemed to be getting worse, as if her soul were attempting to live in two different time periods at once. No one had ever come back from the dead before—at least, not the way *she* had. Nico was trying to reassure her, but neither of them knew what would happen.

“I can’t go north again,” Hazel said. “Nico, if I have to go back to where it happened—”

“You’ll be fine,” he promised. “You’ll have friends this time. Percy Jackson—he’s got a role to play in this. You can sense that, can’t you? He’s a good person to have at your side.”

Hazel remembered what Pluto told her long ago: *A descendant of Neptune will wash away your curse and give you peace.*

Was Percy the one? Maybe, but Hazel sensed it wouldn’t be so easy. She wasn’t sure even Percy could survive what was waiting in the north.

“Where did he come from?” she asked. “Why do the ghosts call him the Greek?”

Before Nico could respond, horns blew across the river. The legionnaires were gathering for evening muster.

“We’d better get down there,” Nico said. “I have a feeling tonight’s war games are going to be interesting.”

HAZEL

ON THE WAY BACK, HAZEL TRIPPED OVER A GOLD BAR.

She should have known not to run so fast, but she was afraid of being late for muster. The Fifth Cohort had the nicest centurions in camp. Still, even *they* would have to punish her if she was tardy. Roman punishments were harsh: scrubbing the streets with a toothbrush, cleaning the bull pens at the coliseum, getting sewn inside a sack full of angry weasels and dumped into the Little Tiber—the options were not great.

The gold bar popped out of the ground just in time for her foot to hit it. Nico tried to catch her, but she took a spill and scraped her hands.

“You okay?” Nico knelt next to her and reached for the bar of gold.

“Don’t!” Hazel warned.

Nico froze. “Right. Sorry. It’s just...jeez. That thing is *huge*.” He pulled a flask of nectar from his aviator jacket and poured a little on Hazel’s hands. Immediately the cuts started to heal. “Can you stand?”

He helped her up. They both stared at the gold. It was the size of a bread loaf, stamped with a serial number and the words u.s. treasury.

Nico shook his head. “How in Tartarus—?”

“I don’t know,” Hazel said miserably. “It could’ve been buried there by robbers or dropped off a wagon a hundred years ago. Maybe it migrated from the nearest bank vault. Whatever’s in the ground, anywhere close to me—it just pops up. And the more valuable it is—”

“The more dangerous it is.” Nico frowned. “Should we cover it up? If the fauns find it...”

Hazel imagined a mushroom cloud billowing up from the road, char-broiled fauns tossed in every direction. It was too horrible to consider. “It *should* sink

back underground after I leave, eventually, but just to be sure...”

She’d been practicing this trick, but never with something so heavy and dense. She pointed at the gold bar and tried to concentrate.

The gold levitated. She channeled her anger, which wasn’t hard—she hated that gold, she hated her curse, she hated thinking about her past and all the ways she’d failed. Her fingers tingled. The gold bar glowed with heat.

Nico gulped. “Um, Hazel, are you sure...?”

She made a fist. The gold bent like putty. Hazel forced it to twist into a giant, lumpy ring. Then she flicked her hand toward the ground. Her million-dollar doughnut slammed into the earth. It sank so deep, nothing was left but a scar of fresh dirt.

Nico’s eyes widened. “That was...terrifying.”

Hazel didn’t think it was so impressive compared to the powers of a guy who could reanimate skeletons and bring people back from the dead, but it felt good to surprise *him* for a change.

Inside the camp, horns blew again. The cohorts would be starting roll call, and Hazel had no desire to be sewn into a sack of weasels.

“Hurry!” she told Nico, and they ran for the gates.

The first time Hazel had seen the legion assemble, she’d been so intimidated, she’d almost slunk back to the barracks to hide. Even after being at camp for nine months, she still found it an impressive sight.

The first four cohorts, each forty kids strong, stood in rows in front of their barracks on either side of the Via Praetoria. The Fifth Cohort assembled at the very end, in front of the *principia*, since their barracks were tucked in the back corner of camp next to the stables and the latrines. Hazel had to run right down the middle of the legion to reach her place.

The campers were dressed for war. Their polished chain mail and greaves gleamed over purple T-shirts and jeans. Sword-and-skull designs decorated their helmets. Even their leather combat boots looked ferocious with their iron cleats, great for marching through mud or stomping on faces.

In front of the legionnaires, like a line of giant dominoes, stood their red and gold shields, each the size of a refrigerator door. Every legionnaire carried a harpoonlike spear called a *pilum*, a *gladius*, a dagger, and about a hundred pounds of other equipment. If you were out of shape when you came to the

legion, you didn't stay that way for long. Just walking around in your armor was a full-body workout.

Hazel and Nico jogged down the street as everyone was coming to attention, so their entrance was *really* obvious. Their footsteps echoed on the stones. Hazel tried to avoid eye contact, but she caught Octavian at the head of the First Cohort smirking at her, looking smug in his plumed centurion's helmet with a dozen medals pinned on his chest.

Hazel was still seething from his blackmail threats earlier. Stupid augur and his gift of prophecy—of all the people at camp to discover her secrets, why did it have to be *him*? She was sure he would have told on her weeks ago, except that he knew her secrets were worth more to him as leverage. She wished she'd kept that bar of gold so she could hit him in the face with it.

She ran past Reyna, who was cantering back and forth on her pegasus Scipio—nicknamed Skippy because he was the color of peanut butter. The metal dogs Aurum and Argentum trotted at her side. Her purple officer's cape billowed behind her.

"Hazel Levesque," she called, "so glad you could join us."

Hazel knew better than to respond. She was missing most of her equipment, but she hurried to her place in line next to Frank and stood at attention. Their lead centurion, a big seventeen-year-old guy named Dakota, was just calling her name—the last one on the roll.

"Present!" she squeaked.

Thank the gods. Technically, she wasn't late.

Nico joined Percy Jackson, who was standing off to one side with a couple of guards. Percy's hair was wet from the baths. He'd put on fresh clothes, but he still looked uncomfortable. Hazel couldn't blame him. He was about to be introduced to two hundred heavily armed kids.

The Lares were the last ones to fall in. Their purple forms flickered as they jockeyed for places. They had an annoying habit of standing halfway inside living people, so that the ranks looked like a blurry photograph, but finally the centurions got them sorted out.

Octavian shouted, "Colors!"

The standard-bearers stepped forward. They wore lion-skincapes and held poles decorated with each cohort's emblems. The last to present his standard was Jacob, the legion's eagle bearer. He held a long pole with absolutely nothing on

top. The job was supposed to be a big honor, but Jacob obviously hated it. Even though Reyna insisted on following tradition, every time the eagleless pole was raised, Hazel could feel embarrassment rippling through the legion.

Reyna brought her pegasus to a halt.

“Romans!” she announced. “You’ve probably heard about the incursion today. Two gorgons were swept into the river by this newcomer, Percy Jackson. Juno herself guided him here, and proclaimed him a son of Neptune.”

The kids in the back rows craned their necks to see Percy. He raised his hand and said, “Hi.”

“He seeks to join the legion,” Reyna continued. “What do the auguries say?”

“I have read the entrails!” Octavian announced, as if he’d killed a lion with his bare hands rather than ripping up a stuffed panda pillow. “The auguries are favorable. He is qualified to serve!”

The campers gave a shout: “*Ave!*” *Hail!*

Frank was a little late with his “*ave,*” so it came out as a high-pitched echo. The other legionnaires snickered.

Reyna motioned the senior officers forward—one from each cohort. Octavian, as the most senior centurion, turned to Percy.

“Recruit,” he asked, “do you have credentials? Letters of reference?”

Hazel remembered this from her own arrival. A lot of kids brought letters from older demigods in the outside world, adults who were veterans of the camp. Some recruits had rich and famous sponsors. Some were third- or fourth-generation campers. A good letter could get you a position in the better cohorts, sometimes even special jobs like legion messenger, which made you exempt from the grunt work like digging ditches or conjugating Latin verbs.

Percy shifted. “Letters? Um, no.”

Octavian wrinkled his nose.

Unfair! Hazel wanted to shout. Percy had carried a goddess into camp. What better recommendation could you want?

But Octavian’s family had been sending kids to camp for over a century. He loved reminding recruits that they were less important than he was.

“No letters,” Octavian said regretfully. “Will any legionnaires stand for him?”

“I will!” Frank stepped forward. “He saved my life!”

Immediately there were shouts of protest from the other cohorts. Reyna raised her hand for quiet and glared at Frank.

“Frank Zhang,” she said, “for the second time today, I remind you that you are on *probatio*. Your godly parent has not even claimed you yet. You’re not eligible to stand for another camper until you’ve earned your first stripe.”

Frank looked like he might die of embarrassment.

Hazel couldn’t leave him hanging. She stepped out of line and said, “What Frank means is that Percy saved *both* our lives. I am a full member of the legion. I will stand for Percy Jackson.”

Frank glanced at her gratefully, but the other campers started to mutter. Hazel was barely eligible. She’d only gotten her stripe a few weeks ago, and the “act of valor” that earned it for her had been mostly an accident. Besides, she was a daughter of Pluto, and a member of the disgraced Fifth Cohort. She wasn’t doing Percy much of a favor by giving him her support.

Reyna wrinkled her nose, but she turned to Octavian. The augur smiled and shrugged, like the idea amused him.

Why not? Hazel thought. Putting Percy in the Fifth would make him less of a threat, and Octavian liked to keep all his enemies in one place.

“Very well,” Reyna announced. “Hazel Levesque, you may stand for the recruit. Does your cohort accept him?”

The other cohorts started coughing, trying not to laugh. Hazel knew what they were thinking: *Another loser for the Fifth.*

Frank pounded his shield against the ground. The other members of the Fifth followed his lead, though they didn’t seem very excited. Their centurions, Dakota and Gwen, exchanged pained looks, like: *Here we go again.*

“My cohort has spoken,” Dakota said. “We accept the recruit.”

Reyna looked at Percy with pity. “Congratulations, Percy Jackson. You stand on *probatio*. You will be given a tablet with your name and cohort. In one year’s time, or as soon as you complete an act of valor, you will become a full member of the Twelfth Legion Fulminata. Serve Rome, obey the rules of the legion, and defend the camp with honor. *Senatus Populusque Romanus!*”

The rest of the legion echoed the cheer.

Reyna wheeled her pegasus away from Percy, like she was glad to be done with him. Skippy spread his beautiful wings. Hazel couldn’t help feeling a pang of envy. She’d give anything for a horse like that, but it would never happen.

Horses were for officers only, or barbarian cavalry, not for Roman legionnaires.

“Centurions,” Reyna said, “you and your troops have one hour for dinner. Then we will meet on the Field of Mars. The First and Second Cohorts will defend. The Third, Fourth, and Fifth will attack. Good fortune!”

A bigger cheer went up—for the war games and for dinner. The cohorts broke ranks and ran for the mess hall.

Hazel waved at Percy, who made his way through the crowd with Nico at his side. To Hazel’s surprise, Nico was beaming at her.

“Good job, Sis,” he said. “That took guts, standing for him.”

He had never called her *Sis* before. She wondered if that was what he had called Bianca.

One of the guards had given Percy his *probatio* nameplate. Percy strung it on his leather necklace with the strange beads.

“Thanks, Hazel,” he said. “Um, what exactly does it mean—your standing for me?”

“I guarantee your good behavior,” Hazel explained. “I teach you the rules, answer your questions, make sure you don’t disgrace the legion.”

“And...if I do something wrong?”

“Then I get killed along with you,” Hazel said. “Hungry? Let’s eat.”

HAZEL

AT LEAST THE CAMP FOOD WAS GOOD. Invisible wind spirits—*aurae*—waited on the campers and seemed to know exactly what everyone wanted. They blew plates and cups around so quickly, the mess hall looked like a delicious hurricane. If you got up too fast, you were likely to get beamed by beans or potted by a pot roast.

Hazel got shrimp gumbo—her favorite comfort food. It made her think about being a little girl in New Orleans, before her curse set in and her mom got so bitter. Percy got a cheeseburger and a strange-looking soda that was bright blue. Hazel didn't understand that, but Percy tried it and grinned.

“This makes me happy,” he said. “I don't know why...but it does.”

Just for a moment, one of the *aurae* became visible—an elfin girl in a white silk dress. She giggled as she topped off Percy's glass, then disappeared in a gust.

The mess hall seemed especially noisy tonight. Laughter echoed off the walls. War banners rustled from cedar ceiling beams as *aurae* blew back and forth, keeping everyone's plates full. The campers dined Roman style, sitting on couches around low tables. Kids were constantly getting up and trading places, spreading rumors about who liked whom and all the other gossip.

As usual, the Fifth Cohort took the place of *least* honor. Their tables were at the back of the dining hall next to the kitchen. Hazel's table was always the least crowded. Tonight it was she and Frank, as usual, with Percy and Nico and their centurion Dakota, who sat there, Hazel figured, because he felt obligated to welcome the new recruit.

Dakota reclined glumly on his couch, mixing sugar into his drink and chugging it. He was a beefy guy with curly black hair and eyes that didn't quite line up straight, so Hazel felt like the world was leaning whenever she looked at

him. It wasn't a good sign that he was drinking so much so early in the night.

"So." He burped, waving his goblet. "Welcome to the Percy, party." He frowned. "Party, Percy. Whatever."

"Um, thanks," Percy said, but his attention was focused on Nico. "I was wondering if we could talk, you know...about where I might have seen you before."

"Sure," Nico said a little too quickly. "The thing is, I spend most of my time in the Underworld. So unless I met you there somehow—"

Dakota belched. "Ambassador from Pluto, they call him. Reyna's never sure what to do with this guy when he visits.

You should have seen her face when he showed up with Hazel, asking Reyna to take her in. Um, no offense."

"None taken." Nico seemed relieved to change the topic. "Dakota was really helpful, standing for Hazel."

Dakota blushed. "Yeah, well...She seemed like a good kid. Turned out I was right. Last month, when she saved me from, uh, you know."

"Oh, man!" Frank looked up from his fish and chips. "Percy, you should have seen her! That's how Hazel got her stripe. The unicorns decided to stampede—"

"It was nothing," Hazel said.

"Nothing?" Frank protested. "Dakota would've gotten trampled! You stood right in front of them, shooed them away, saved his hide. I've never seen anything like it."

Hazel bit her lip. She didn't like to talk about it, and she felt uncomfortable, the way Frank made her sound like a hero. In truth, she'd been mostly afraid that the unicorns would hurt themselves in their panic. Their horns were precious metal—silver and gold—so she'd managed to turn them aside simply by concentrating, steering the animals by their horns and guiding them back to the stables. It had gotten her a full place in the legion, but it had also started rumors about her strange powers—rumors that reminded her of the bad old days.

Percy studied her. Those sea-green eyes made her unsettled.

"Did you and Nico grow up together?" he asked.

"No," Nico answered for her. "I found out that Hazel was my sister only recently. She's from New Orleans."

That was true, of course, but not the whole truth. Nico let people think he'd

stumbled upon her in modern New Orleans and brought her to camp. It was easier than telling the real story.

Hazel had tried to pass herself off as a modern kid. It wasn't easy. Thankfully, demigods didn't use a lot of technology at camp. Their powers tended to make electronic gadgets go haywire. But the first time she went on furlough to Berkeley, she had nearly had a stroke. Televisions, computers, iPods, the Internet...It made her glad to get back to the world of ghosts, unicorns, and gods. That seemed *much* less of a fantasy than the twenty-first century.

Nico was still talking about the children of Pluto. "There aren't many of us," he said, "so we have to stick together. When I found Hazel—"

"You have other sisters?" Percy asked, almost as if he knew the answer. Hazel wondered again when he and Nico had met, and what her brother was hiding.

"One," Nico admitted. "But she died. I saw her spirit a few times in the Underworld, except that the last time I went down there..."

To bring her back, Hazel thought, though Nico didn't say that.

"She was gone." Nico's voice turned hoarse. "She used to be in Elysium—like, the Underworld paradise—but she chose to be reborn into a new life. Now I'll never see her again. I was just lucky to find Hazel...in New Orleans, I mean."

Dakota grunted. "Unless you believe the rumors. Not saying that I do."

"Rumors?" Percy asked.

From across the room, Don the faun yelled, "Hazel!"

Hazel had never been so glad to see the faun. He wasn't allowed in camp, but of course he always managed to get in. He was working his way toward their table, grinning at everybody, sneaking food off plates, and pointing at campers: "Hey! Call me!" A flying pizza smacked him in the head, and he disappeared behind a couch. Then he popped up, still grinning, and made his way over.

"My favorite girl!" He smelled like a wet goat wrapped in old cheese. He leaned over their couches and checked out their food. "Say, new kid, you going to eat that?"

Percy frowned. "Aren't fauns vegetarian?"

"Not the cheeseburger, man! The plate!" He sniffed Percy's hair. "Hey... what's that smell?"

"Don!" Hazel said. "Don't be rude."

“No, man, I just—”

Their house god Vitellius shimmered into existence, standing half embedded in Frank’s couch. “Fauns in the dining hall! What are we coming to? Centurion Dakota, do your duty!”

“I am,” Dakota grumbled into his goblet. “I’m having dinner!”

Don was still sniffing around Percy. “Man, you’ve got an empathy link with a faun!”

Percy leaned away from him. “A what?”

“An empathy link! It’s real faint, like somebody’s suppressed it, but—”

“I know what!” Nico stood suddenly. “Hazel, how about we give you and Frank time to get Percy oriented? Dakota and I can visit the praetor’s table. Don and Vitellius, you come too. We can discuss strategies for the war games.”

“Strategies for losing?” Dakota muttered.

“Death Boy is right!” Vitellius said. “This legion fights worse than we did in Judea, and that was the *first* time we lost our eagle. Why, if *I* were in charge—”

“Could I just eat the silverware first?” Don asked.

“Let’s go!” Nico stood and grabbed Don and Vitellius by the ears.

Nobody but Nico could actually touch the Lares. Vitellius spluttered with outrage as he was dragged off to the praetor’s table.

“Ow!” Don protested. “Man, watch the ’fro!”

“Come on, Dakota!” Nico called over his shoulder.

The centurion got up reluctantly. He wiped his mouth—uselessly, since it was permanently stained red. “Back soon.” He shook all over, like a dog trying to get dry. Then he staggered away, his goblet sloshing.

“What was that about?” Percy asked. “And what’s wrong with Dakota?”

Frank sighed. “He’s okay. He’s a son of Bacchus, the wine god. He’s got a drinking problem.”

Percy’s eyes widened. “You let him drink *wine*?”

“Gods, no!” Hazel said. “That would be a disaster. He’s addicted to red Kool-Aid. Drinks it with three times the normal sugar, and he’s already ADHD—you know, attention deficit/hyperactive. One of these days, his head is going to explode.”

Percy looked over at the praetor’s table. Most of the senior officers were in deep conversation with Reyna. Nico and his two captives, Don and Vitellius,

stood on the periphery. Dakota was running back and forth along a line of stacked shields, banging his goblet on them like they were a xylophone.

“ADHD,” Percy said. “You don’t say.”

Hazel tried not to laugh. “Well...most demigods are. Or dyslexic. Just being a demigod means that our brains are wired differently. Like you—you said you had trouble reading.”

“Are you guys that way too?” Percy asked.

“I don’t know,” Hazel admitted. “Maybe. Back in my day, they just called kids like us ‘lazy.’”

Percy frowned. “Back in *your* day?”

Hazel cursed herself.

Luckily for her, Frank spoke up: “I wish I was ADHD or dyslexic. All I got is lactose intolerance.”

Percy grinned. “Seriously?”

Frank might’ve been the silliest demigod ever, but Hazel thought he was cute when he pouted. His shoulders slumped. “And I love ice cream, too....”

Percy laughed. Hazel couldn’t help joining in. It was good to sit at dinner and actually feel like she was among friends.

“Okay, so tell me,” Percy said, “why is it bad to be in the Fifth Cohort? You guys are great.”

The compliment made Hazel’s toes tingle. “It’s...complicated. Aside from being Pluto’s kid, I want to ride horses.”

“That’s why you use a cavalry sword?”

She nodded. “It’s stupid, I guess. Wishful thinking. There’s only one pegasus at camp—Reyna’s. The unicorns are just kept for medicine, because the shavings off their horns cure poison and stuff. Anyway, Roman fighting is always done on foot. Cavalry...they kind of look down on that. So they look down on me.”

“Their loss,” Percy said. “What about you, Frank?”

“Archery,” he muttered. “They don’t like that either, unless you’re a child of Apollo. Then you’ve got an excuse. I hope my dad *is* Apollo, but I don’t know. I can’t do poetry very well. And I’m not sure I want to be related to Octavian.”

“Can’t blame you,” Percy said. “But you’re excellent with the bow—the way you pegged those gorgons? Forget what other people think.”

Frank's face turned as red as Dakota's Kool-Aid. "Wish I could. They all think I should be a sword fighter because I'm big and bulky." He looked down at his body, like he couldn't quite believe it was his. "They say I'm too stocky for an archer. Maybe if my dad would ever claim me..."

They ate in silence for a few minutes. A dad who wouldn't claim you... Hazel knew that feeling. She sensed Percy could relate, too.

"You asked about the Fifth," she said at last. "Why it's the worst cohort. That actually started way before us."

She pointed to the back wall, where the legion's standards were on display. "See the empty pole in the middle?"

"The eagle," Percy said.

Hazel was stunned. "How'd you know?"

Percy shrugged. "Vitellius was talking about how the legion lost its eagle a long time ago—the *first* time, he said. He acted like it was a huge disgrace. I'm guessing that's what's missing. And from the way you and Reyna were talking earlier, I'm guessing your eagle got lost a second time, more recently, and it had something to do with the Fifth Cohort."

Hazel made a mental note not to underestimate Percy again. When he'd first arrived, she'd thought he was a little goofy from the questions he'd asked—about the Feast of Tuna and all—but clearly he was smarter than he let on.

"You're right," she said. "That's exactly what happened."

"So what *is* this eagle, anyway? Why is it a big deal?"

Frank looked around to make sure no one was eavesdropping. "It's the symbol of the whole camp—a big eagle made of gold. It's supposed to protect us in battle and make our enemies afraid. Each legion's eagle gave it all sorts of power, and ours came from Jupiter himself. Supposedly Julius Caesar nicknamed our legion 'Fulminata'—armed with lightning—because of what the eagle could do."

"I don't like lightning," Percy said.

"Yeah, well," Hazel said, "it didn't make us invincible. The Twelfth lost its eagle the first time way back in ancient days, during the Jewish Rebellion."

"I think I saw a movie like that," Percy said.

Hazel shrugged. "Could be. There have been lots of books and movies about legions losing their eagles. Unfortunately it happened quite a few times. The eagle was so important...well, archaeologists have *never* recovered a single

eagle from ancient Rome. Each legion guarded theirs to the last man, because it was charged with power from the gods. They'd rather hide it or melt it down than surrender it to an enemy.

The Twelfth was lucky the first time. We got our eagle back. But the second time..."

"You guys were there?" Percy asked.

They both shook their heads.

"I'm almost as new as you." Frank tapped his *probatio* plate. "Just got here last month. But everyone's heard the story. It's bad luck to even talk about this. There was this huge expedition to Alaska back in the eighties...."

"That prophecy you noticed in the temple," Hazel continued, "the one about the seven demigods and the Doors of Death? Our senior praetor at the time was Michael Varus, from the Fifth Cohort. Back then the Fifth was the best in camp. He thought it would bring glory to the legion if he could figure out the prophecy and make it come true—save the world from storm and fire and all that. He talked to the augur, and the augur said the answer was in Alaska. But he warned Michael it wasn't time yet. The prophecy wasn't for him."

"But he went anyway," Percy guessed. "What happened?"

Frank lowered his voice. "Long, gruesome story. Almost the entire Fifth Cohort was wiped out. Most of legion's Imperial gold weapons were lost, along with the eagle. The survivors went crazy or refused to talk about what had attacked them."

I know, Hazel thought solemnly. But she kept silent.

"Since the eagle was lost," Frank continued, "the camp has been getting weaker. Quests are more dangerous. Monsters attack the borders more often. Morale is lower. The last month or so, things have been getting much worse, much faster."

"And the Fifth Cohort took the blame," Percy guessed. "So now everyone thinks we're cursed."

Hazel realized her gumbo was cold. She sipped a spoonful, but the comfort food didn't taste very comforting. "We've been the outcasts of the legion since...well, since the Alaska disaster. Our reputation got better when Jason became praetor—"

"The kid who's missing?" Percy asked.

"Yeah," Frank said. "I never met him. Before my time. But I hear he was a

good leader. He practically grew up in the Fifth Cohort. He didn't care what people thought about us. He started to rebuild our reputation. Then he disappeared."

"Which put us back at square one," Hazel said bitterly. "Made us look cursed all over again. I'm sorry, Percy. Now you know what you've gotten yourself into."

Percy sipped his blue soda and gazed thoughtfully across the dining hall. "I don't even know where I come from...but I've got a feeling this isn't the first time I've been an underdog." He focused on Hazel and managed a smile. "Besides, joining the legion is better than being chased through the wilderness by monsters. I've got myself some new friends. Maybe together we can turn things around for the Fifth Cohort, huh?"

A horn blew at the end of the hall. The officers at the praetor's table got to their feet—even Dakota, his mouth vampire-red from Kool-Aid.

"The games begin!" Reyna announced. The campers cheered and rushed to collect their equipment from the stacks along the walls.

"So we're the attacking team?" Percy asked over the noise. "Is that good?"

Hazel shrugged. "Good news: we get the elephant. Bad news—"

"Let me guess," said Percy. "The Fifth Cohort always loses."

Frank slapped Percy on the shoulder. "I love this guy. Come on, new friend. Let's go chalk up my thirteenth defeat in a row!"

FRANK

AS HE MARCHED TO THE WAR GAMES, Frank replayed the day in his mind. He couldn't believe how close he'd come to death.

That morning on sentry duty, before Percy showed up, Frank had almost told Hazel his secret. The two of them had been standing for hours in the chilly fog, watching the commuter traffic on Highway 24. Hazel had been complaining about the cold.

"I'd give anything to be warm," she said, her teeth chattering. "I wish we had a fire." Even with her armor on, she looked great. Frank liked the way her cinnamon-toast-colored hair curled around the edges of her helmet, and the way her chin dimpled when she frowned. She was tiny compared to Frank, which made him feel like a big clumsy ox. He wanted to put his arms around her to warm her up, but he'd never do that. She'd probably hit him, and he'd lose the only friend he had at camp.

I could make a really impressive fire, he thought. Of course, it would only burn for a few minutes, and then I'd die....

It was scary that he even considered it. Hazel had that effect on him. Whenever she wanted something, he had the irrational urge to provide it. He wanted to be the old-fashioned knight riding to her rescue, which was stupid, as she was way more capable at *everything* than he was.

He imagined what his grandmother would say: *Frank Zhang riding to the rescue? Ha! He'd fall off his horse and break his neck.*

Hard to believe it had been only six weeks since he'd left his grandmother's house—six weeks since his mom's funeral.

Everything had happened since then: wolves arriving at his grandmother's door, the journey to Camp Jupiter, the weeks he'd spent in the Fifth Cohort trying not to be a complete failure. Through it all, he'd kept the half-burned

piece of firewood wrapped in a cloth in his coat pocket.

Keep it close, his grandmother had warned. As long as it is safe, you are safe.

The problem was that it burned so easily. He remembered the trip south from Vancouver. When the temperature dropped below freezing near Mount Hood, Frank had brought out the piece of tinder and held it in his hands, imagining how nice it would be to have some fire. Immediately, the charred end blazed with a searing yellow flame. It lit up the night and warmed Frank to the bone, but he could feel his life slipping away, as if *he* were being consumed rather than the wood. He'd thrust the flame into a snowbank. For a horrible moment it kept burning. When it finally went out, Frank got his panic under control. He wrapped the piece of wood and put it back in his coat pocket, determined not to bring it out again. But he couldn't forget it.

It was as though someone had said, "Whatever you do, don't think about that stick bursting into flame!"

So of course, that's all he thought about.

On sentry duty with Hazel, he would try to take his mind off it. He loved spending time with her. He asked her about growing up in New Orleans, but she got edgy at his questions, so they made small talk instead. Just for fun, they tried to speak French to each other. Hazel had some Creole blood on her mother's side. Frank had taken French in school. Neither of them was very fluent, and Louisiana French was so different from Canadian French it was almost impossible to converse. When Frank asked Hazel how her beef was feeling today, and she replied that his shoe was green, they decided to give up.

Then Percy Jackson had arrived.

Sure, Frank had seen kids fight monsters before. He'd fought plenty of them himself on his journey from Vancouver. But he'd never seen gorgons. He'd never seen a goddess in person. And the way Percy had controlled the Little Tiber—wow. Frank wished he had powers like that.

He could still feel the gorgons' claws pressing into his arms and smell their snaky breath—like dead mice and poison. If not for Percy, those grotesque hags would have carried him away. He'd be a pile of bones in the back of a Bargain Mart by now.

After the incident at the river, Reyna had sent Frank to the armory, which had given him way too much time to think.

While he polished swords, he remembered Juno, warning them to unleash

Death.

Unfortunately Frank had a pretty good idea of what the goddess meant. He had tried to hide his shock when Juno had appeared, but she looked exactly like his grandmother had described—right down to the goatskin cape.

She chose your path years ago, Grandmother had told him. And it will not be easy.

Frank glanced at his bow in the corner of the armory. He'd feel better if Apollo would claim him as a son. Frank had been *sure* his godly parent would speak up on his sixteenth birthday, which had passed two weeks ago.

Sixteen was an important milestone for Romans. It had been Frank's first birthday at camp. But nothing had happened. Now Frank hoped he would be claimed on the Feast of Fortuna, though from what Juno had said, they'd be in a battle for their lives on that day.

His father *had* to be Apollo. Archery was the only thing Frank was good at. Years ago, his mother had told him that their family name, *Zhang*, meant "master of bows" in Chinese. That must have been a hint about his dad.

Frank put down his polishing rags. He looked at the ceiling. "Please, Apollo, if you're my dad, tell me. I want to be an archer like you."

"No, you don't," a voice grumbled.

Frank jumped out of his seat. Vitellius, the Fifth Cohort's Lar, was shimmering behind him. His full name was Gaius Vitellius Reticulus, but the other cohorts called him Vitellius the Ridiculous.

"Hazel Levesque sent me to check on you," Vitellius said, hiking up his sword belt. "Good thing, too. Look at the state of this armor!"

Vitellius wasn't one to talk. His toga was baggy, his tunic barely fit over his belly, and his scabbard fell off his belt every three seconds, but Frank didn't bother pointing that out.

"As for archers," the ghost said, "they're wimps! Back in my day, archery was a job for barbarians. A good Roman should be in the fray, gutting his enemy with spear and sword like a civilized man! That's how we did it in the Punic Wars. Roman up, boy!"

Frank sighed. "I thought you were in Caesar's army."

"I was!"

"Vitellius, Caesar was hundreds of years after the Punic Wars. You couldn't have been alive that long."

“Questioning my honor?” Vitellius looked so mad, his purple aura glowed. He drew his ghostly *gladius* and yelled, “Take that!”

He ran the sword, which was about as deadly as a laser pointer, through Frank’s chest a few times.

“Ouch,” Frank said, just to be nice.

Vitellius looked satisfied and put his sword away. “Perhaps you’ll think twice about doubting your elders next time! Now...it was your sixteenth birthday recently, wasn’t it?”

Frank nodded. He wasn’t sure how Vitellius knew this, since Frank hadn’t told anyone except Hazel, but ghosts had ways of finding out secrets. Eavesdropping while invisible was probably one of them.

“So that’s why you’re such a grumpy gladiator,” the Lar said. “Understandable. The sixteenth birthday is your day of manhood! Your godly parent should have claimed you, no doubt about it, even if with only a small omen. Perhaps he thought you were younger. You look younger, you know, with that pudgy baby face.” “Thanks for reminding me,” Frank muttered.

“Yes, I remember my sixteenth,” Vitellius said happily. “Wonderful omen! A chicken in my underpants.”

“Excuse me?”

Vitellius puffed up with pride. “That’s right! I was at the river changing my clothes for my Liberalia. Rite of passage into manhood, you know. We did things properly back then. I’d taken off my childhood toga and was washing up to don the adult one. Suddenly, a pure-white chicken ran out of nowhere, dove into my loincloth, and ran off with it. I wasn’t wearing it at the time.”

“That’s good,” Frank said. “And can I just say: Too much information?”

“Mm.” Vitellius wasn’t listening. “That was the sign I was descended from Aesculapius, the god of medicine. I took my cognomen, my third name, Reticulus, because it meant *undergarment*, to remind me of the blessed day when a chicken stole my loincloth.”

“So...your name means Mr. Underwear?”

“Praise the gods! I became a surgeon in the legion, and the rest is history.” He spread his arms generously. “Don’t give up, boy. Maybe your father is running late. Most omens are not as dramatic as a chicken, of course. I knew a fellow once who got a dung beetle—”

“Thanks, Vitellius,” Frank said. “But I have to finish polishing this armor—”

“And the gorgon’s blood?”

Frank froze. He hadn’t told anyone about that. As far as he knew, only Percy had seen him pocket the vials at the river, and they hadn’t had a chance to talk about it.

“Come now,” Vitellius chided. “I’m a healer. I know the legends about gorgon’s blood. Show me the vials.”

Reluctantly, Frank brought out the two ceramic flask she’d retrieved from the Little Tiber. Spoils of war were often left behind when a monster dissolved—sometimes a tooth, or a weapon, or even the monster’s entire head. Frank had known what the two vials were immediately. By tradition they belonged to Percy, who had killed the gorgons, but Frank couldn’t help thinking, What if I could use them?

“Yes.” Vitellius studied the vials approvingly. “Blood taken from the right side of a gorgon’s body can cure any disease, even bring the dead back to life. The goddess Minerva once gave a vial of it to my divine ancestor, Aesculapius. But blood taken from the left side of a gorgon—instantly fatal. So, which is which?”

Frank looked down at the vials. “I don’t know. They’re identical.”

“Ha! But you’re hoping the right vial could solve your problem with the burned stick, eh? Maybe break your curse?”

Frank was so stunned, he couldn’t talk.

“Oh, don’t worry, boy.” The ghost chuckled. “I won’t tell anyone. I’m a Lar, a protector of the cohort! I wouldn’t do anything to endanger you.”

“You stabbed me through the chest with your sword.”

“Trust me, boy! I have sympathy for you, carrying the curse of that Argonaut.”

“The ... what?”

Vitellius waved away the question. “Don’t be modest. You’ve got ancient roots. Greek as well as Roman. It’s no wonder Juno—” He tilted his head, as if listening to a voice from above. His face went slack. His entire aura flickered green. “But I’ve said enough! At any rate, I’ll let you work out who gets the gorgon’s blood. I suppose that newcomer Percy could use it too, with his memory problem.”

Frank wondered what Vitellius had been about to say and what had made him so scared, but he got the feeling that for once Vitellius was going to keep his

mouth shut.

He looked down at the two vials. He hadn't even thought of Percy's needing them. He felt guilty that he'd been intending to use the blood for himself. "Yeah. Of course. He should have it."

"Ah, but if you want my advice..." Vitellius looked up nervously again. "You should both wait on that gorgon blood. If my sources are right, you're going to need it on your quest."

"Quest?"

The doors of the armory flew open.

Reyna stormed in with her metal greyhounds. Vitellius vanished. He might have liked chickens, but he did not like the praetor's dogs.

"Frank." Reyna looked troubled. "That's enough with the armor. Go find Hazel. Get Percy Jackson down here. He's been up there too long. I don't want Octavian..." She hesitated. "Just get Percy down here."

So Frank had run all the way to Temple Hill.

Walking back, Percy had asked tons of questions about Hazel's brother, Nico, but Frank didn't know that much.

"He's okay," Frank said. "He's not like Hazel—"

"How do you mean?" Percy asked.

"Oh, um..." Frank coughed. He'd meant that Hazel was better looking and nicer, but he decided not to say that. "Nico is kind of mysterious. He makes everybody else nervous, being the son of Pluto, and all."

"But not you?"

Frank shrugged. "Pluto's cool. It's not his fault he runs the Underworld. He just got bad luck when the gods were dividing up the world, you know? Jupiter got the sky, Neptune got the sea, and Pluto got the shaft."

"Death doesn't scare you?"

Frank almost wanted to laugh. *Not at all! Got a match?*

Instead he said, "Back in the old times, like the Greek times, when Pluto was called Hades, he was more of a death god. When he became Roman, he got more...I don't know, respectable. He became the god of wealth, too. Everything under the earth belongs to him. So I don't think of him as being real scary."

Percy scratched his head. "How does a god *become* Roman? If he's Greek,

wouldn't he stay Greek?"

Frank walked a few steps, thinking about that. Vitellius would've given Percy an hour-long lecture on the subject, probably with a PowerPoint presentation, but Frank took his best shot. "The way Romans saw it, they adopted the Greek stuff and perfected it."

Percy made a sour face. "Perfected it? Like there was something wrong with it?"

Frank remembered what Vitellius had said: *You've got ancient roots. Greek as well as Roman.* His grandmother had said something similar.

"I don't know," he admitted. "Rome was more successful than Greece. They made this huge empire. The gods became a bigger deal in Roman times—more powerful and widely known. That's why they're still around today. So many civilizations base themselves on Rome. The gods changed to Roman because that's where the center of power was. Jupiter was...well, more responsible as a Roman god than he had been when he was Zeus. Mars became a lot more important and disciplined."

"And Juno became a hippie bag lady," Percy noted. "So you're saying the old Greek gods—they just changed permanently to Roman? There's nothing left of the Greek?"

"Uh..." Frank looked around to make sure there were no campers or Lares nearby, but the main gates were still a hundred yards away. "That's a sensitive topic. Some people say Greek influence is still around, like it's still a part of the gods' personalities. I've heard stories of demigods occasionally leaving Camp Jupiter. They reject Roman training and try to follow the older Greek style—like being solo heroes instead of working as a team the way the legion does. And back in the ancient days, when Rome fell, the eastern half of the empire survived—the Greek half."

Percy stared at him. "I didn't know that."

"It was called Byzantium." Frank liked saying that word. It sounded cool. "The eastern empire lasted another thousand years, but it was always more Greek than Roman. For those of us who follow the Roman way, it's kind of a sore subject. That's why, whatever country we settle in, Camp Jupiter is always in the west—the *Roman* part of the territory. The east is considered bad luck."

"Huh." Percy frowned.

Frank couldn't blame him for feeling confused. The Greek/Roman stuff gave

him a headache, too.

They reached the gates.

“I’ll take you to the baths to get you cleaned up,” Frank said. “But first... about those vials I found at the river.”

“Gorgon’s blood,” Percy said. “One vial heals. One is deadly poison.”

Frank’s eyes widened. “You *know* about that? Listen, I wasn’t going to keep them. I just—”

“I know why you did it, Frank.”

“You do?”

“Yeah.” Percy smiled. “If I’d come into camp carrying a vial of poison, that would’ve looked bad. You were trying to protect me.”

“Oh...right.” Frank wiped the sweat off his palms. “But if we could figure out which vial was which, it might heal your memory.”

Percy’s smile faded. He gazed across the hills. “Maybe...I guess. But you should hang on to those vials for now. There’s a battle coming. We may need them to save lives.”

Frank stared at him, a little bit in awe. Percy had a chance to get his memory back, and he was willing to wait in case someone else needed the vial more? Romans were supposed to be unselfish and help their comrades, but Frank wasn’t sure anyone else at camp would have made that choice.

“So you don’t remember anything?” Frank asked. “Family, friends?”

Percy fingered the clay beads around his neck. “Only glimpses. Murky stuff. A girlfriend...I thought she’d be at camp.” He looked at Frank carefully, as if making a decision. “Her name was Annabeth. You don’t know her, do you?”

Frank shook his head. “I know everybody at camp, but no Annabeth. What about your family? Is your mom mortal?”

“I guess so...she’s probably worried out of her mind. Does your mom get to see you much?”

Frank stopped at the bathhouse entrance. He grabbed some towels from the supply shed. “She died.”

Percy knit his brow. “How?”

Usually Frank would lie. He’d say *an accident* and shut off the conversation. Otherwise his emotions got out of control. He couldn’t cry at Camp Jupiter. He couldn’t show weakness. But with Percy, Frank found it easier to talk.

“She died in the war,” he said. “Afghanistan.”

“She was in the military?”

“Canadian. Yeah.”

“Canada? I didn’t know—”

“Most Americans don’t.” Frank sighed. “But yeah, Canada has troops there. My mom was a captain. She was one of the first women to die in combat. She saved some soldiers who were pinned down by enemy fire. She...she didn’t make it. The funeral was right before I came down here.”

Percy nodded. He didn’t ask for more details, which Frank appreciated. He didn’t say he was sorry, or make any of the well-meaning comments Frank always hated: *Oh, you poor guy. That must be so hard on you. You have my deepest condolences.*

It was like Percy had faced death before, like he knew about grief. What mattered was listening. You didn’t need to say you were sorry. The only thing that helped was moving on—moving forward.

“How about you show me the baths now?” Percy suggested. “I’m filthy.”

Frank managed a smile. “Yeah. You kind of are.”

As they walked into the steam room, Frank thought of his grandmother, his mom, and his cursed childhood, thanks to Juno and her piece of firewood. He almost wished he could forget his past, the way Percy had.

FRANK

FRANK DIDN'T REMEMBER MUCH ABOUT the funeral itself.

But he remembered the hours leading up to it—his grand mother coming out into the backyard to find him shooting arrows at her porcelain collection.

His grandmother's house was a rambling gray stone mansion on twelve acres in North Vancouver. Her backyard ran straight into Lynn Canyon Park.

The morning was cold and drizzly, but Frank didn't feel the chill. He wore a black wool suit and a black overcoat that had once belonged to his grandfather. Frank had been startled and upset to find that they fit him fine. The clothes smelled like wet mothballs and jasmine. The fabric was itchy but warm. With his bow and quiver, he probably looked like a very dangerous butler.

He'd loaded some of his grandmother's porcelain in a wagon and toted it into the yard, where he set up targets on old fence posts at the edge of the property. He'd been shooting so long, his fingers were starting to lose their feeling. With every arrow, he imagined he was striking down his problems.

Snipers in Afghanistan. *Smash.* A teapot exploded with an arrow through the middle.

The sacrifice medal, a silver disk on a red-and-black ribbon, given for death in the line of duty, presented to Frank as if it were something important, something that made everything all right. *Thwack.* A teacup spun into the woods.

The officer who came to tell him: "Your mother is a hero.

Captain Emily Zhang died trying to save her comrades."

Crack. A blue-and-white plate split into pieces.

His grandmother's chastisement: *Men do not cry. Especially Zhang men. You will endure, Fai.*

No one called him Fai except his grandmother.

What sort of name is Frank? she would scold. *That is not a Chinese name.*

I'm not Chinese, Frank thought, but he didn't dare say that. His mother had told him years ago: *There is no arguing with Grandmother. It'll only make you suffer worse.* She'd been right. And now Frank had no one except his grandmother.

Thud. A fourth arrow hit the fence post and stuck there, quivering.

"Fai," said his grandmother.

Frank turned.

She was clutching a shoebox-sized mahogany chest that Frank had never seen before. With her high-collared black dress and severe bun of gray hair, she looked like a school teacher from the 1800s.

She surveyed the carnage: her porcelain in the wagon, the shards of her favorite tea sets scattered over the lawn, Frank's arrows sticking out of the ground, the trees, the fence posts, and one in the head of a smiling garden gnome.

Frank thought she would yell, or hit him with the box. He'd never done anything this bad before. He'd never felt so angry.

Grandmother's face was full of bitterness and disapproval. She looked nothing like Frank's mom. He wondered how his mother had turned out to be so nice—always laughing, always gentle. Frank couldn't imagine his mom growing up with Grandmother any more than he could imagine her on the battlefield—though the two situations probably weren't that different.

He waited for Grandmother to explode. Maybe he'd be grounded and wouldn't have to go to the funeral. He wanted to hurt her for being so mean all the time, for letting his mother go off to war, for scolding him to get over it. All she cared about was her stupid collection.

"Stop this ridiculous behavior," Grandmother said. She didn't sound very irritated. "It is beneath you."

To Frank's astonishment, she kicked aside one of her favorite teacups.

"The car will be here soon," she said. "We must talk."

Frank was dumbfounded. He looked more closely at the mahogany box. For a horrible moment, he wondered if it contained his mother's ashes, but that was impossible. Grandmother had told him there would be a military burial. Then why did Grandmother hold the box so gingerly, as if its contents grieved her?

"Come inside," she said. Without waiting to see if he would follow, she turned and marched toward the house.

In the parlor, Frank sat on a velvet sofa, surrounded by vintage family photos, porcelain vases that had been too large for his wagon, and red Chinese calligraphy banners. Frank didn't know what the calligraphy said. He'd never had much interest in learning. He didn't know most of the people in the photographs, either.

Whenever Grandmother started lecturing him about his ancestors—how they'd come over from China and prospered in the import/export business, eventually becoming one of the wealthiest Chinese families in Vancouver—well, it was boring. Frank was fourth-generation Canadian. He didn't care about China and all these musty antiques. The only Chinese characters he could recognize were his family name: Zhang. *Master of bows*. That was cool.

Grandmother sat next to him, her posture stiff, her hands folded over the box.

"Your mother wanted you to have this," she said with reluctance. "She kept it since you were a baby. When she went away to the war, she entrusted it to me. But now she is gone. And soon you will be going, too."

Frank's stomach fluttered. "Going? Where?"

"I am old," Grandmother said, as if that were a surprising announcement. "I have my own appointment with Death soon enough. I cannot teach you the skills you will need, and I cannot keep this burden. If something were to happen to it, I would never forgive myself. You would die."

Frank wasn't sure he'd heard her right. It sounded like she had said his life depended on that box. He wondered why he'd never seen it before. She must have kept it locked in the attic—the one room Frank was forbidden to explore. She'd always said she kept her most valuable treasures up there.

She handed the box to him. He opened the lid with trembling fingers. Inside, cushioned in velvet lining, was a terrifying, life-altering, incredibly important... piece of wood.

It looked like driftwood—hard and smooth, sculpted into a wavy shape. It was about the size of a TV remote control. The tip was charred. Frank touched the burned end. It still felt warm. The ashes left a black smudge on his finger.

"It's a stick," he said. He couldn't figure out why Grandmother was acting so tense and serious about it.

Her eyes glittered. "Fai, do you know of prophecies? Do you know of the gods?"

The questions made him uncomfortable. He thought about Grandmother's

silly gold statues of Chinese immortals, her superstitions about putting furniture in certain places and avoiding unlucky numbers. Prophecies made him think of fortune cookies, which weren't even Chinese—not really—but the bullies at school teased him about stupid stuff like that: *Confucius say ...all that garbage*. Frank had never even been to China. He wanted nothing to do with it. But of course, Grandmother didn't want to hear that.

“A little, Grandmother,” he said. “Not much.”

“Most would have scoffed at your mother's tale,” she said, “But I did not. I know of prophecies and gods. Greek, Roman, Chinese—they intertwine in our family. I did not question what she told me about your father.”

“Wait ... what?”

“Your father was a god,” she said plainly.

If Grandmother had had a sense of humor, Frank would have thought she was kidding. But Grandmother never teased. Was she going senile?

“Stop gaping at me!” she snapped. “My mind is not addled. Haven't you ever wondered why your father never came back?”

“He was...” Frank faltered. Losing his mother was painful enough. He didn't want to think about his father, too. “He was in the army, like Mom. He went missing in action. In Iraq.”

“Bah. He was a god. He fell in love with your mother because she was a natural warrior. She was like me—strong, brave, good, beautiful.”

Strong and brave, Frank could believe. Picturing Grandmother as good or beautiful was more difficult.

He still suspected she might be losing her marbles, but he asked, “What kind of god?”

“Roman,” she said. “Beyond that, I don't know. Your mother wouldn't say, or perhaps she didn't know herself. It is no surprise a god would fall in love with her, given our family. He must have known she was of ancient blood.”

“Wait...we're Chinese. Why would Roman gods want to date Chinese Canadians?”

Grandmother's nostrils flared. “If you bothered to learn the family history, Fai, you might know this. China and Rome are not so different, nor as separate as you might believe. Our family is from Gansu Province, a town once called Li-Jien. And before that...as I said, ancient blood. The blood of princes and heroes.”

Frank just stared at her.

She sighed in exasperation. “My words are wasted on this young ox! You will learn the truth when you go to camp.

Perhaps your father will claim you. But for now, I must explain the firewood.”

She pointed at the big stone fireplace. “Shortly after you were born, a visitor appeared at our hearth. Your mother and I sat here on the couch, just where you and I are sitting. You were a tiny thing, swaddled in a blue blanket, and she cradled you in her arms.”

It sounded like a sweet memory, but Grandmother told it in a bitter tone, as if she knew, even then, that Frank would turn into a big lumbering oaf.

“A woman appeared at the fire,” she continued. “She was a white woman—a *gwai poh*—dressed in blue silk, with a strange cloak like the skin of a goat.”

“A goat,” Frank said numbly.

Grandmother scowled. “Yes, clean your ears, Fai Zhang! I’m too old to tell every story twice! The woman with the goatskin was a goddess. I can always tell these things. She smiled at the baby—at you—and she told your mother, in perfect Mandarin, no less: ‘He will close the circle. He will return your family to its roots and bring you great honor.’”

Grandmother snorted. “I do not argue with goddesses, but perhaps this one did not see the future clearly. Whatever the case, she said, ‘He will go to camp and restore your reputation there. He will free Thanatos from his icy chains—’”

“Wait, who?”

“Thanatos,” Grandmother said impatiently. “The Greek name for Death. Now may I continue without interruptions? The goddess said, ‘The blood of Pylos is strong in this child from his mother’s side. He will have the Zhang family gift, but he will also have the powers of his father.’”

Suddenly Frank’s family history didn’t seem so boring. He desperately wanted to ask what it all meant—powers, gifts, blood of Pylos. What was this camp, and who was his father? But he didn’t want to interrupt Grandmother again. He wanted her to keep talking.

“No power comes without a price, Fai,” she said. “Before the goddess disappeared, she pointed at the fire and said, ‘He will be the strongest of your clan, and the greatest. But the Fates have decreed he will also be the most vulnerable. His life will burn bright and short. As soon as that piece of tinder is

consumed—that stick at the edge of the fire—your son is destined to die.”

Frank could hardly breathe. He looked at the box in his lap, and the smudge of ash on his finger. The story sounded ridiculous, but suddenly the piece of driftwood seemed more sinister, colder and heavier. “This...this—”

“Yes, my thick-headed ox,” Grandmother said. “That is the very stick. The goddess disappeared, and I snatched the wood from the fire immediately. We have kept it ever since.”

“If it burns up, I die?”

“It is not so strange,” Grandmother said. “Roman, Chinese—the destinies of men can often be predicted, and sometimes guarded against, at least for a time. The firewood is in your possession now. Keep it close. As long as it is safe, you are safe.”

Frank shook his head. He wanted to protest that this was just a stupid legend. Maybe Grandmother was trying to scare him as some sort of revenge for breaking her porcelain.

But her eyes were defiant. She seemed to be challenging Frank: *If you do not believe it, burn it.*

Frank closed the box. “If it’s so dangerous, why not seal the wood in something that won’t burn, like plastic or steel? Why not put it in a safe deposit box?”

“What would happen,” Grandmother wondered, “if we coated the stick in another substance. Would you, too, suffocate? I do not know. Your mother would not take the risk. She couldn’t bear to part with it, for fear something would go wrong. Banks can be robbed. Buildings can burn down. Strange things conspire when one tries to cheat fate. Your mother thought the stick was only safe in her possession, until she went to war. Then she gave it to me.”

Grandmother exhaled sourly. “Emily was foolish, going to war, though I suppose I always knew it was her destiny. She hoped to meet your father again.”

“She thought...she thought he’d be in Afghanistan?”

Grandmother spread her hands, as if this was beyond her understanding. “She went. She died bravely. She thought the family gift would protect her. No doubt that’s how she saved those soldiers. But the gift has never kept our family safe. It did not help my father, or *his* father. It did not help me. And now you have become a man. You must follow the path.”

“But...what path? What’s our gift—archery?”

“You and your archery! Foolish boy. Soon you will find out. Tonight, after the funeral, you must go south. Your mother said if she did not come back from combat, Lupa would send messengers. They will escort you to a place where the children of the gods can be trained for their destiny.”

Frank felt as if he were being shot with arrows, his heart splitting into porcelain shards. He didn't understand most of what Grandmother said, but one thing was clear: she was kicking him out.

“You'd just let me go?” he asked. “Your last family?”

Grandmother's mouth quivered. Her eyes looked moist. Frank was shocked to realize she was near tears. She'd lost her husband years ago, then her daughter, and now she was about to send away her only grandson. But she rose from the couch and stood tall, her posture as stiff and correct as ever.

“When you arrive at camp,” she instructed, “you must speak to the praetor in private. Tell her your great-grandfather was Shen Lun. It has been many years since the San Francisco incident. Hopefully they will not kill you for what he did, but you might want to beg forgiveness for his actions.”

“This is sounding better and better,” Frank mumbled.

“The goddess said you would bring our family full circle.” Grandmother's voice had no trace of sympathy. “She chose your path years ago, and it will not be easy. But now it is time for the funeral. We have obligations. Come. The car will be waiting.”

The ceremony was a blur: solemn faces, the patter of rain on the graveside awning, the crack of rifles from the honor guard, the casket sinking into the earth.

That night, the wolves came. They howled on the front porch. Frank came out to meet them. He took his travel pack, his warmest clothes, his bow and his quiver. His mother's sacrifice medal was tucked in his pack. The charred stick was wrapped carefully in three layers of cloth in his coat pocket, next to his heart.

His journey south began—to the Wolf House in Sonoma, and eventually to Camp Jupiter, where he spoke to Reyna privately as Grandmother had instructed. He begged forgiveness for the great-grandfather he knew nothing about. Reyna let him join the legion. She never did tell him what his great-grandfather had done, but she obviously knew. Frank could tell it was bad.

“I judge people by their own merits,” Reyna had told him. “But do not

mention the name Shen Lun to anyone else. It must remain our secret, or you'll be treated badly."

Unfortunately, Frank didn't have many merits. His first month at camp was spent knocking over rows of weapons, breaking chariots, and tripping entire cohorts as they marched. His favorite job was caring for Hannibal the elephant, but he'd managed to mess that up, too—giving Hannibal indigestion by feeding him peanuts. Who knew elephants could be peanut-intolerant? Frank figured Reyna was regretting her decision to let him join.

Every day, he woke up wondering if the stick would somehow catch fire and burn, and he would cease to exist.

All of this ran through Frank's head as he walked with Hazel and Percy to the war games. He thought about the stick wrapped inside his coat pocket, and what it meant that Juno had appeared at camp. Was he about to die? He hoped not. He hadn't brought his family any honor yet—that was for sure. Maybe Apollo would claim him today and explain his powers and gifts.

Once they got out of camp, the Fifth Cohort formed two lines behind their centurions, Dakota and Gwen. They marched north, skirting the edge of the city, and headed to the Field of Mars—the largest, flattest part of the valley. The grass was cropped short by all the unicorns, bulls, and homeless fauns that grazed here. The earth was pitted with explosion craters and scarred with trenches from past games. At the north end of the field stood their target. The engineers had built a stone fortress with an iron portcullis, guard towers, scorpion ballistae, water cannons, and no doubt many other nasty surprises for the defenders to use.

"They did a good job today," Hazel noted. "That's bad for us."

"Wait," Percy said. "You're telling me that fortress was built *today*?"

Hazel grinned. "Legionnaires are trained to build. If we had to, we could break down the entire camp and rebuild it somewhere else. Take maybe three or four days, but we could do it."

"Let's not," Percy said. "So you attack a different fort every night?"

"Not every night," Frank said. "We have different training exercises. Sometimes death ball—um, which is like paint-ball, except with...you know, poison and acid and fire balls. Sometimes we do chariots and gladiator competitions, sometimes war games."

Hazel pointed at the fort. "Somewhere inside, the First and Second Cohorts are keeping their banners. Our job is to get inside and capture them without

getting slaughtered. We do that, we win.”

Percy’s eyes lit up. “Like capture-the-flag. I think I like capture-the-flag.”

Frank laughed. “Yeah, well...it’s harder than it sounds. We have to get past those scorpions and water cannons on the walls, fight through the inside of the fortress, find the banners, and defeat the guards, all while protecting our own banners and troops from capture. And *our* cohort is in competition with the other two attacking cohorts. We sort of work together, but not really. The cohort that captures the banners gets all the glory.”

Percy stumbled, trying to keep time with the left-right marching rhythm. Frank sympathized. He’d spent his first two weeks falling down.

“So why are we practicing this, anyway?” Percy asked. “Do you guys spend a lot of time laying siege to fortified cities?”

“Teamwork,” Hazel said. “Quick thinking. Tactics. Battle skills. You’d be surprised what you can learn in the war games.”

“Like who will stab you in the back,” Frank said.

“Especially that,” Hazel agreed.

They marched to the center of the Field of Mars and formed ranks. The Third and Fourth Cohorts assembled as far as possible from the Fifth. The centurions for the attacking side gathered for a conference. In the sky above them, Reyna circled on her pegasus, Scipio, ready to play referee.

Half a dozen giant eagles flew in formation behind her—prepared for ambulance airlift duty if necessary. The only person not participating in the game was Nico di Angelo, “Pluto’s ambassador,” who had climbed an observation tower about a hundred yards from the fort and would be watching with binoculars.

Frank propped his *pilum* against his shield and checked Percy’s armor. Every strap was correct. Every piece of armor was properly adjusted.

“You did it right,” he said in amazement. “Percy, you must’ve done war games before.”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

The only thing that wasn’t regulation was Percy’s glowing bronze sword—not Imperial gold, and not a *gladius*. The blade was leaf-shaped, and the writing on the hilt was Greek.

Looking at it made Frank uneasy. Percy frowned. “We *can* use real weapons, right?”

“Yeah,” Frank agreed. “For sure. I’ve just never seen a sword like that.”

“What if I hurt somebody?”

“We heal them,” Frank said. “Or try to. The legion medics are pretty good with ambrosia and nectar, and unicorn draught.”

“No one dies,” Hazel said. “Well, not usually. And if they do—”

Frank imitated the voice of Vitellius: “They’re wimps! Backin my day, we died all the time, and we liked it!”

Hazel laughed. “Just stay with us, Percy. Chances are we’ll get the worst duty and get eliminated early. They’ll throw us at the walls first to soften up the defenses. Then the Third and Fourth Cohorts will march in and get the honors, *if* they can even breach the fort.”

Horns blew. Dakota and Gwen walked back from the officers’ conference, looking grim.

“All right, here’s the plan!” Dakota took a quick swig of Kool-Aid from his travel flask. “They’re throwing us at the walls first to soften up the defenses.”

The whole cohort groaned.

“I know, I know,” Gwen said. “But maybe this time we’ll have some luck!”

Leave it to Gwen to be the optimist. Everybody liked her because she took care of her people and tried to keep their spirits up. She could even control Dakota during his hyperactive bug-juice fits. Still, the campers grumbled and complained. Nobody believed in luck for the Fifth.

“First line with Dakota,” Gwen said. “Lock shields and advance in turtle formation to the main gates. Try to stay in one piece. Draw their fire. Second line—” Gwen turned to Frank’s row without much enthusiasm. “You seventeen, from Bobby over, take charge of the elephant and the scaling ladders. Try a flanking attack on the western wall. Maybe we can spread the defenders too thin. Frank, Hazel, Percy...well, just do whatever. Show Percy the ropes. Try to keep him alive.” She turned back to the whole cohort. “If anybody gets over the wall first, I’ll make sure you get the Mural Crown. Victory for the Fifth!”

The cohort cheered half heartedly and broke ranks.

Percy frowned. “Do whatever?”

“Yeah,” Hazel sighed. “Big vote of confidence.”

“What’s the Mural Crown?” he asked.

“Military medal,” Frank said. He’d been forced to memorize all the possible awards. “Big honor for the first soldier to breach an enemy fort. You’ll notice

nobody in the Fifth is wearing one. Usually we don't even get into the fort because we're burning or drowning or..."

He faltered, and looked at Percy. "Water cannons."

"What?" Percy asked.

"The cannons on the walls," Frank said, "they draw water from the aqueduct. There's a pump system—heck, I don't know how they work, but they're under a lot of pressure. If you could control them, like you controlled the river—"

"Frank!" Hazel beamed. "That's brilliant!"

Percy didn't look so sure. "I don't know how I did that at the river. I'm not sure I can control the cannons from this far away."

"We'll get you closer." Frank pointed to the eastern wall of the fort, where the Fifth Cohort wouldn't be attacking. "That's where the defense will be weakest. They'll never take three kids seriously. I think we can sneak up pretty close before they see us."

"Sneak up how?" Percy asked.

Frank turned to Hazel. "Can you do that thing again?"

She punched him in the chest. "You said you wouldn't tell anybody!"

Immediately Frank felt terrible. He'd gotten so caught up in the idea...

Hazel muttered under her breath. "Never mind. It's fine."

Percy, he's talking about the trenches. The Field of Mars is riddled with tunnels from over the years. Some are collapsed, or buried deep, but a lot of them are still passable. I'm pretty good at finding them and using them. I can even collapse them if I have to."

"Like you did with the gorgons," Percy said, "to slow them down."

Frank nodded approvingly. "I told you Pluto was cool. He's the god of everything under the earth. Hazel can find caves, tunnels, trapdoors—"

"And it was *our* secret," she grumbled.

Frank felt himself blushing. "Yeah, sorry. But if we can get close—"

"And if I can knock out the water cannons..." Percy nodded, like he was warming to the idea. "What do we do then?"

Frank checked his quiver. He always stocked up on special arrows. He'd never gotten to use them before, but maybe tonight was the night. Maybe he could finally do something good enough to get Apollo's attention.

"The rest is up to me," he said. "Let's go."

FRANK

FRANK HAD NEVER FELT SO SURE of anything, which made him nervous. Nothing he planned ever went right. He always managed to break, ruin, burn, sit on, or knock over something important. Yet he *knew* this strategy would work.

Hazel found them a tunnel with no problem. In fact, Frank had a sneaking suspicion she didn't just *find* tunnels. It was as though tunnels manufactured themselves to suit her needs. Passages that had been filled in years ago suddenly unfilled, changing direction to lead Hazel where she wanted to go. They crept along by the light of Percy's glowing sword,

Riptide. Above, they heard the sounds of battle—kids shouting, Hannibal the elephant bellowing with glee, scorpion bolts exploding, and water cannons firing. The tunnel shook. Dirt rained down on them.

Frank slipped his hand inside his armor. The piece of wood was still safe and secure in his coat pocket, though one good shot from a scorpion might set his lifeline on fire....

Bad Frank, he chided himself. *Fire* is the "F-word." Don't think about it.

"There's an opening just ahead," Hazel announced. "We'll come up ten feet from the east wall."

"How can you tell?" Percy asked.

"I don't know," she said. "But I'm sure."

"Could we tunnel straight under the wall?" Frank wondered.

"No," Hazel said. "The engineers were smart. They built the walls on old foundations that go down to bedrock. And don't ask how I know. I just do."

Frank stumbled over something and cursed. Percy brought this sword around for more light. The thing Frank had tripped on was gleaming silver.

He crouched down.

“Don’t touch it!” Hazel said.

Frank’s hand stopped a few inches from the chunk of metal. It looked like a giant Hershey’s Kiss, about the size of his fist.

“It’s massive,” he said. “Silver?”

“Platinum.” Hazel sounded scared out of her wits. “It’ll go away in a second. Please don’t touch it. It’s dangerous.”

Frank didn’t understand how a lump of metal could be dangerous, but he took Hazel seriously. As they watched, the chunk of platinum sank into the ground.

He stared at Hazel. “How did you know?”

In the light of Percy’s sword, Hazel looked as ghostly as a Lar. “I’ll explain later,” she promised.

Another explosion rocked the tunnel, and they forged ahead.

They popped out of a hole just where Hazel had predicted. In front of them, the fort’s east wall loomed. Off to their left, Frank could see the main line of the Fifth Cohort advancing in turtle formation, shields forming a shell over their heads and sides. They were trying to reach the main gates, but the defenders above pelted them with rocks and shot flaming bolts from the scorpions, blasting craters around their feet. A water cannon discharged with a jaw-rattling *THRUM*, and a jet of liquid carved a trench in the dirt right in front of the cohort.

Percy whistled. “That’s a lot of pressure, all right.”

The Third and Fourth Cohorts weren’t even advancing. They stood back and laughed, watching their “allies” get beat up. The defenders clustered on the wall above the gates, yelling insults at the tortoise formation as it staggered back and forth. War games had deteriorated into “beat up the Fifth.”

Frank’s vision went red with anger.

“Let’s shake things up.” He reached in his quiver and pulled out an arrow heavier than the rest. The iron tip was shaped like the nose cone of a rocket. An ultra thin gold rope trailed from the fletching. Shooting it accurately up the wall would take more force and skill than most archers could manage, but Frank had strong arms and good aim.

Maybe Apollo is watching, he thought hopefully.

“What does that do?” Percy asked. “Grappling hook?”

“It’s called a hydra arrow,” Frank said. “Can you knock out the water cannons?”

A defender appeared on the wall above them. “Hey!” he shouted to his buddies. “Check it out! More victims!”

“Percy,” Frank said, “now would be good.”

More kids came across the battlements to laugh at them. A few ran to the nearest water cannon and swung the barrel toward Frank.

Percy closed his eyes. He raised his hand.

Up on the wall, somebody yelled, “Open wide, losers!”

KA-BOOM!

The cannon exploded in a starburst of blue, green, and white. Defenders screamed as a watery shock wave flattened them against the battlements. Kids toppled over the walls but were snatched by giant eagles and carried to safety. Then the entire eastern wall shuddered as the explosion backed up through the pipelines. One after another, the water cannons on the battlements exploded. The scorpions’ fires were doused. Defenders scattered in confusion or were tossed through the air, giving the rescue eagles quite a workout. At the main gates, the Fifth Cohort forgot about their formation. Mystified, they lowered their shields and stared at the chaos.

Frank shot his arrow. It streaked upward, carrying its glittering rope. When it reached the top, the metal point fractured into a dozen lines that lashed out and wrapped around anything they could find—parts of the wall, a scorpion, a broken water cannon, and a couple of defending campers, who yelped and found themselves slammed against the battlements as anchors. From the main rope, handholds extended at two-foot intervals, making a ladder.

“Go!” Frank said.

Percy grinned. “You first, Frank. This is your party.”

Frank hesitated. Then he slung his bow on his back and began to climb. He was halfway up before the defenders recovered their senses enough to sound the alarm.

Frank glanced back at Fifth Cohort’s main group. They were staring up at him, dumbfounded.

“Well?” Frank screamed. “Attack!”

Gwen was the first to unfreeze. She grinned and repeated the order. A cheer went up from the battlefield. Hannibal the elephant trumpeted with happiness, but Frank couldn’t afford to watch. He clambered to the top of the wall, where three defenders were trying to hack down his rope ladder.

One good thing about being big, clumsy, and clad in metal: Frank was like a heavily armored bowling ball. He launched himself at the defenders, and they toppled like pins. Frank got to his feet. He took command of the battlements, sweeping his *pilum* back and forth and knocking down defenders. Some shot arrows. Some tried to get under his guard with their swords, but Frank felt unstoppable. Then Hazel appeared next to him, swinging her big cavalry sword like she was born for battle.

Percy leaped onto the wall and raised Riptide.

“Fun,” he said.

Together they cleared the defenders off the walls. Below them the gates broke. Hannibal barreled into the fort, arrows and rocks bouncing harmlessly off his Kevlar armor.

The Fifth Cohort charged in behind the elephant, and the battle went hand-to-hand.

Finally, from the edge of the Field of Mars, a battle cry went up. The Third and Fourth Cohorts ran to join the fight.

“A little late,” Hazel grumbled.

“We can’t let them get the banners,” Frank said.

“No,” Percy agreed. “Those are ours.”

No more talk was necessary. They moved like a team, as if the three of them had been working together for years. They rushed down the interior steps and into the enemy base.

FRANK

AFTER THAT, THE BATTLE WAS MAYHEM.

Frank, Percy, and Hazel waded through the enemy, plowing down anyone who stood in their way. The First and Second Cohorts—pride of Camp Jupiter, a well-oiled, highly disciplined war machine—fell apart under the assault and the sheer novelty of being on the losing side.

Part of their problem was Percy. He fought like a demon, whirling through the defenders' ranks in a completely unorthodox style, rolling under their feet, slashing with his sword instead of stabbing like a Roman would, whacking campers with the flat of his blade, and generally causing mass panic. Octavian screamed in a shrill voice—maybe ordering the First Cohort to stand their ground, maybe trying to sing soprano—but Percy put a stop to it. He somersaulted over a line of shields and slammed the butt of his sword into Octavian's helmet. The centurion collapsed like a sock puppet.

Frank shot arrows until his quiver was empty, using blunt-tipped missiles that wouldn't kill but left some nasty bruises. He broke his *pilum* over a defender's head, then reluctantly drew his *gladius*.

Meanwhile, Hazel climbed onto Hannibal's back. She charged toward the center of the fort, grinning down at her friends. "Let's go, slowpokes!"

Gods of Olympus, she's beautiful, Frank thought.

They ran to the center of the base. The inner keep was virtually unguarded. Obviously the defenders never dreamed an assault would get this far. Hannibal busted down the huge doors. Inside, the First and Second Cohort standard-bearers were sitting around a table playing Mythomagic with cards and figurines. The cohort's emblems were propped carelessly against one wall.

Hazel and Hannibal rode straight into the room, and the standard-bearers fell backward out of their chairs. Hannibal stepped on the table, and game pieces

scattered.

By the time the rest of the cohort caught up with them, Percy and Frank had disarmed the enemies, grabbed the banners, and climbed onto Hannibal's back with Hazel. They marched out of the keep triumphantly with the enemy colors.

The Fifth Cohort formed ranks around them. Together they paraded out of the fort, past stunned enemies and lines of equally mystified allies.

Reyna circled low overhead on her pegasus. "The game is won!" She sounded as if she were trying not to laugh. "Assemble for honors!"

Slowly the campers regrouped on the Field of Mars. Frank saw plenty of minor injuries—some burns, broken bones, black eyes, cuts and gashes, plus a lot of very interesting hairdos from fires and exploding water cannons—but nothing that couldn't be fixed.

He slid off the elephant. His comrades swarmed him, pounding him on the back and complimenting him. Frank wondered if he was dreaming. It was the best night of his life—until he saw Gwen.

"Help!" somebody yelled. A couple of campers rushed out of the fortress, carrying a girl on a stretcher. They set her down, and other kids started running over. Even from a distance, Frank could tell it was Gwen. She was in bad shape. She lay on her side on the stretcher with a *pilum* sticking out of her armor—almost like she was holding it between her chest and her arm, but there was too much blood.

Frank shook his head in disbelief. "No, no, no..." he muttered as he ran to her side.

The medics barked at everyone to stand back and give her air. The whole legion fell silent as the healers worked—trying to get gauze and powdered unicorn horn under Gwen's armor to stop the bleeding, trying to force some nectar into her mouth. Gwen didn't move. Her face was ashen gray.

Finally one of the medics looked up at Reyna and shook his head.

For a moment, there was no sound except water from the ruined cannons trickling down the walls of the fort. Hannibal nuzzled Gwen's hair with his trunk.

Reyna surveyed the campers from her pegasus. Her expression was as hard and dark as iron. "There will be an investigation. Whoever did this, you cost the legion a good officer. Honorable death is one thing, but *this* ..."

Frank wasn't sure what she meant. Then he noticed the marks engraved in

the wooden shaft of the *pilum*: CHT I LEGIO XII F. The weapon belonged to the First Cohort, and the point was sticking out the front of her armor. Gwen had been speared from behind—possibly *after* the game had ended.

Frank scanned the crowd for Octavian. The centurion was watching with more interest than concern, as if he were examining one of his stupid gutted teddy bears. He didn't have a *pilum*.

Blood roared in Frank's ears. He wanted to strangle Octavian with his bare hands, but at that moment, Gwen gasped.

Everyone stepped back. Gwen opened her eyes. The color came back to her face.

"Wh-what is it?" She blinked. "What's everyone staring at?" She didn't seem to notice the seven-foot harpoon sticking out through her chest.

Behind Frank, a medic whispered, "There's no way. She was dead. She *has* to be dead."

Gwen tried to sit up, but couldn't. "There was a river, and a man asking...for a coin? I turned around and the exit door was open. So I just...I just left. I don't understand. What's happened?"

Everyone stared at her in horror. Nobody tried to help.

"Gwen." Frank knelt next to her. "Don't try to get up. Just close your eyes for a second, okay?"

"Why? What—"

"Just trust me."

Gwen did what he asked.

Frank grabbed the shaft of the *pilum* below its tip, but his hands were shaking. The wood was slick. "Percy, Hazel—help me."

One of the medics realized what he was planning. "Don't!" he said. "You might—"

"What?" Hazel snapped. "Make it worse?"

Frank took a deep breath. "Hold her steady. One, two, three!"

He pulled the *pilum* out from the front. Gwen didn't even wince. The blood stopped quickly.

Hazel bent down to examine the wound. "It's closing on its own," she said. "I don't know how, but—"

"I feel fine," Gwen protested. "What's everyone worried about?"

With Frank and Percy's help, she got to her feet. Frank glowered at Octavian, but the centurion's face was a mask of polite concern.

Later, Frank thought. Deal with him later.

"Gwen," Hazel said gently, "there's no easy way to say this. You were dead. Somehow you came back."

"I...what?" She stumbled against Frank. Her hand pressed against the ragged hole in her armor. "How—how?"

"Good question." Reyna turned to Nico, who was watching grimly from the edge of the crowd. "Is this some power of Pluto?"

Nico shook his head. "Pluto never lets people return from the dead."

He glanced at Hazel as if warning her to stay quiet. Frank wondered what that was about, but he didn't have time to think about it.

A thunderous voice rolled across the field: *Death loses its hold. This is only the beginning.*

Campers drew weapons. Hannibal trumpeted nervously. Scipio reared, almost throwing Reyna.

"I know that voice," Percy said. He didn't sound pleased.

In the midst of the legion, a column of fire blasted into the air. Heat seared Frank's eyelashes. Campers who had been soaked by the cannons found their clothes instantly steam-dried. Everyone scrambled backward as a huge soldier stepped out of the explosion.

Frank didn't have much hair, but what he *did* have stood straight up. The soldier was ten feet tall, dressed in Canadian Forces desert camouflage. He radiated confidence and power. His black hair was cut in a flat-topped wedge like Frank's. His face was angular and brutal, marked with old knife scars. His eyes were covered with infrared goggles that glowed from inside. He wore a utility belt with a sidearm, a knife holster, and several grenades. In his hands was an oversized M16 rifle.

The worst thing was that Frank felt *drawn* to him. As everyone else stepped back, Frank stepped forward. He realized the soldier was silently willing him to approach.

Frank desperately wanted to run away and hide, but he couldn't. He took three more steps. Then he sank to one knee.

The other campers followed his example and knelt. Even Reyna dismounted.

"That's good," the soldier said. "Kneeling is good. It's been a long time

since I've visited Camp Jupiter."

Frank noticed that one person wasn't kneeling. Percy Jackson, his sword still in hand, was glaring at the giant soldier.

"You're Ares," Percy said. "What do you want?"

A collective gasp went up from two hundred campers and an elephant. Frank wanted to say something to excuse Percy and placate the god, but he didn't know what. He was afraid the war god would blast his new friend with that extra-large M16.

Instead, the god bared his brilliant white teeth.

"You've got spunk, demigod," he said. "Ares is my Greek form. But to these followers, to the children of Rome, I am Mars—patron of the empire, divine father of Romulus and Remus."

"We've met," Percy said. "We...we had a fight..."

The god scratched his chin, as if trying to recall. "I fight a lot of people. But I assure you—you've never fought me as Mars. If you had, you'd be dead. Now, kneel, as befits a child of Rome, before you try my patience."

Around Mars's feet, the ground boiled in a circle of flame.

"Percy," Frank said, "please."

Percy clearly didn't like it, but he knelt.

Mars scanned the crowd. "Romans, lend me your ears!" He laughed—a good, hearty bellow, so infectious it almost made Frank smile, though he was still shivering with fear. "I've always wanted to say that. I come from Olympus with a message. Jupiter doesn't like us communicating directly with mortals, especially nowadays, but he has allowed this exception, as you Romans have always been my special people. I'm only permitted to speak for a few minutes, so listen up."

He pointed at Gwen. "This one should be dead, yet she's not. The monsters you fight no longer return to Tartarus when they are slain. Some mortals who died long ago are now walking the earth again."

Was it Frank's imagination, or did the god glare at Nico di Angelo?

"Thanatos has been chained," Mars announced. "The Doors of Death have been forced open, and no one is policing them—at least, not *impartially*. Gaea allows our enemies to pour forth into the world of mortals. Her sons the giants are mustering armies against you—armies that you will not be able to kill. Unless Death is unleashed to return to his duties, you will be overrun. You must

find Thanatos and free him from the giants. Only *he* can reverse the tide.”

Mars looked around, and noticed that everyone was still silently kneeling. “Oh, you can get up now. Any questions?”

Reyna rose uneasily. She approached the god, followed by Octavian, who was bowing and scraping like a champion groveler.

“Lord Mars,” Reyna said, “we are honored.”

“*Beyond* honored,” said Octavian. “So far beyond honored—”

“Well?” Mars snapped.

“Well,” Reyna said, “Thanatos is the god of death, the lieutenant of Pluto?”

“Right,” the god said.

“And you’re saying that he’s been captured by giants.”

“Right.”

“And therefore people will stop dying?”

“Not all at once,” Mars said. “But the barriers between life and death will continue to weaken. Those who know how to take advantage of this will exploit it. Monsters are already harder to dispatch. Soon they will be completely impossible to kill. Some demigods will also be able to find their way back from the Underworld—like your friend Centurion Shishkebab.”

Gwen winced. “Centurion Shish kebab?”

“If left unchecked,” Mars continued, “even mortals will eventually find it impossible to die. Can you imagine a world in which no one dies—*ever*?”

Octavian raised his hand. “But, ah, mighty all-powerful Lord Mars, if we can’t die, isn’t that a good thing? If we can stay alive indefinitely—”

“Don’t be foolish, boy!” Mars bellowed. “Endless slaughter with no conclusion? Carnage without any point? Enemies that rise again and again and can never be killed? Is that what you want?”

“You’re the god of war,” Percy spoke up. “Don’t you want endless carnage?”

Mars’s infrared goggles glowed brighter. “Insolent, aren’t you? Perhaps I *have* fought you before. I can understand why I’d want to kill you. I’m the god of Rome, child. I am the god of military might used for a righteous cause. I protect the legions. I am happy to crush my enemies underfoot, but I don’t fight without reason. I don’t want war without end.

You will discover this. You will serve me.”

“Not likely,” Percy said.

Again, Frank waited for the god to strike him down, but Mars just grinned like they were two old buddies talking trash.

“I order a quest!” the god announced. “You will go north and find Thanatos in the land beyond the gods. You will free him and thwart the plans of the giants. Beware Gaea! Beware her son, the eldest giant!”

Next to Frank, Hazel made a squeaking sound. “The land beyond the gods?”

Mars stared down at her, his grip tightening on his M16. “That’s right, Hazel Levesque. You know what I mean. Everyone here remembers the land where the legion lost its honor! Perhaps if the quest succeeds, and you return by the Feast of Fortuna...perhaps then your honor will be restored. If you don’t succeed, there won’t be any camp left to return to. Rome will be overrun, its legacy lost forever. So my advice is: Don’t fail.”

Octavian somehow managed to bow even lower. “Um, Lord Mars, just one tiny thing. A quest requires a prophecy, a mystical poem to guide us! We used to get them from the Sibylline books, but now it’s up to the augur to glean the will of gods. So if I could just run and get about seventy stuffed animals and possibly a knife—”

“You’re the augur?” the god interrupted.

“Y-yes, my lord.”

Mars pulled a scroll from his utility belt. “Anyone got a pen?”

The legionnaires stared at him.

Mars sighed. “Two hundred Romans, and *no one’s* got a pen? Never mind!”

He slung his M16 onto his back and pulled out a hand grenade. There were many screaming Romans. Then the grenade morphed into a ballpoint pen, and Mars began to write.

Frank looked at Percy with wide eyes. He mouthed: *Can your sword do grenade form?*

Percy mouthed back, *No. Shut up.*

“There!” Mars finished writing and threw the scroll at Octavian. “A prophecy. You can add it to your books, engrave it on your floor, whatever.”

Octavian read the scroll. “This says, ‘Go to Alaska. Find Thanatos and free him. Come back by sundown on June twenty-fourth or die.’”

“Yes,” Mars said. “Is that not clear?”

“Well, my lord...usually prophecies are *unclear*. They’re wrapped in riddles. They rhyme, and...”

Mars casually popped another grenade off his belt. “Yes?”

“The prophecy is clear!” Octavian announced. “A quest!”

“Good answer.” Mars tapped the grenade to his chin. “Now, what else? There was something else....Oh, yes.”

He turned to Frank. “C’mere, kid.”

No, Frank thought. The burned stick in his coat pocket felt heavier. His legs turned wobbly. A sense of dread settled over him, worse than the day the military officer had come to the door.

He knew what was coming, but he couldn’t stop it. He stepped forward against his will.

Mars grinned. “Nice job taking the wall, kid. Who’s the ref for this game?”

Reyna raised her hand.

“You see that play, ref?” Mars demanded. “That was *my* kid. First over the wall, won the game for his team. Unless you’re blind, that was an MVP play. You’re not blind, are you?”

Reyna looked like she was trying to swallow a mouse. “No, Lord Mars.”

“Then make sure he gets the Mural Crown,” Mars demanded. “My kid, here!” he yelled at the legion, in case anyone hadn’t heard. Frank wanted to melt into the dirt.

“Emily Zhang’s son,” Mars continued. “She was a good soldier. Good woman. This kid Frank proved his stuff tonight. Happy late birthday, kid. Time you stepped up to a *real* man’s weapon.”

He tossed Frank his M16. For a split second Frank thought he’d be crushed under the weight of the massive assault rifle, but the gun changed in midair, becoming smaller and thinner. When Frank caught it, the weapon was a spear. It had a shaft of Imperial gold and a strange point like a white bone, flickering with ghostly light.

“The tip is a dragon’s tooth,” Mars said. “You haven’t learned to use your mom’s talents yet, have you? Well—that spear will give you some breathing room until you do. You get three charges out of it, so use it wisely.”

Frank didn’t understand, but Mars acted like the matter was closed. “Now, my kid Frank Zhang is gonna lead the quest to free Thanatos, unless there are any objections?”

Of course, no one said a word. But many of the campers glared at Frank with envy, jealousy, anger, bitterness.

“You can take two companions,” Mars said. “Those are the rules. One of them needs to be this kid.”

He pointed at Percy. “He’s gonna learn some respect for Mars on this trip, or die trying. As for the second, I don’t care. Pick whomever you want. Have one of your senate debates. You all are good at those.”

The god’s image flickered. Lightning crackled across the sky.

“That’s my cue,” Mars said. “Until next time, Romans. Do not disappoint me!”

The god erupted in flames, and then he was gone.

Reyna turned toward Frank. Her expression was part amazement, part nausea, like she’d finally managed to swallow that mouse. She raised her arm in a Roman salute. “Ave, Frank Zhang, son of Mars.”

The whole legion followed her lead, but Frank didn’t want their attention anymore. His perfect night had been ruined.

Mars was his father. The god of war was sending him to Alaska. Frank had been handed more than a spear for his birthday. He’d been handed a death sentence.

PERCY

PERCY SLEPT LIKE A MEDUSA VICTIM—which is to say, like a rock.

He hadn't crashed in a safe, comfortable bed since...well, he couldn't even remember. Despite his insane day and the million thoughts running through his head, his body took over and said: *You will sleep now.*

He had dreams, of course. He always had dreams, but they passed like blurred images from the window of a train. He saw a curly-haired faun in ragged clothes running to catch up with him.

"I don't have any spare change," Percy called.

"What?" the faun said. "No, Percy. It's me, Grover! Stay put! We're on our way to find you. Tyson is close—at least we *think* he's the closest. We're trying to get a lock on your position."

"What?" Percy called, but the faun disappeared in the fog.

Then Annabeth was running along beside him, reaching out her hand. "Thank the gods!" she called. "For months and months we couldn't see you! Are you all right?"

Percy remembered what Juno had said—*for months he has been slumbering, but now he is awake.* The goddess had intentionally kept him hidden, but why?

"Are you real?" he asked Annabeth.

He wanted so much to believe it he felt like Hannibal the elephant was standing on his chest. But her face began to dissolve. She cried, "Stay put! It'll be easier for Tyson to find you! Stay where you are!"

Then she was gone. The images accelerated. He saw a huge ship in a dry dock, workers scrambling to finish the hull, a guy with a blowtorch welding a bronze dragon figurehead to the prow. He saw the war god stalking toward him in the surf, a sword in his hands.

The scene shifted. Percy stood on the Field of Mars, looking up at the Berkeley Hills. Golden grass rippled, and a face appeared in the landscape—a sleeping woman, her features formed from shadows and folds in the terrain. Her eyes remained closed, but her voice spoke in Percy’s mind:

So this is the demigod who destroyed my son Kronos. You don’t look like much, Percy Jackson, but you’re valuable to me. Come north. Meet Alcyoneus. Juno can play her little games with Greeks and Romans, but in the end, you will be my pawn. You will be the key to the gods’ defeat.

Percy’s vision turned dark. He stood in a theater-sized version of the camp’s headquarters—a *principia* with walls of ice and freezing mist hanging in the air. The floor was littered with skeletons in Roman armor and Imperial gold weapons encrusted with frost. In the back of the room sat an enormous shadowy figure. His skin glinted of gold and silver, as if he were an automaton like Reyna’s dogs. Behind him stood a collection of ruined emblems, tattered banners, and a large golden eagle on a staff of iron.

The giant’s voice boomed in the vast chamber. “This will be fun, son of Neptune. It’s been eons since I broke a demigod of your caliber. I await you atop the ice.”

Percy woke, shivering. For a moment he didn’t know where he was. Then he remembered: Camp Jupiter, the Fifth Cohort barracks. He lay in his bunk, staring at the ceiling and trying to control his racing heartbeat.

A golden giant was waiting to break him. Wonderful. But what unnerved him more was that sleeping woman’s face in the hills. *You will be my pawn.* Percy didn’t play chess, but he was pretty sure that being a pawn was bad. They died a lot.

Even the friendlier parts of his dream were disturbing. A faun named Grover was looking for him. Maybe that’s why Don had detected a—what had he called it?—an empathy link. Somebody named Tyson was searching for him, too, and Annabeth had warned Percy to stay where he was.

He sat up in his bunk. His roommates were rushing around, getting dressed and brushing their teeth. Dakota was wrapping himself in a long piece of red-speckled cloth—a toga. One of the Lares was giving him pointers on where to tuck and fold.

“Breakfast time?” Percy asked hopefully.

Frank’s head popped up from the bunk below. He had bags under his eyes like he hadn’t slept well. “A quick breakfast. Then we’ve got the senate

meeting.”

Dakota’s head was stuck in his toga. He staggered around like a Kool-Aid-stained ghost.

“Um,” Percy said, “should I wear my bed sheets?”

Frank snorted. “That’s just for the senators. There’re ten of them, elected yearly. You’ve got to be at camp five years to qualify.”

“So how come we’re invited to the meeting?”

“Because...you know, the quest.” Frank sounded worried, like he was afraid Percy would back out. “We have to be in on the discussion. You, me, Hazel. I mean, if you’re willing...”

Frank probably didn’t mean to guilt him, but Percy’s heart felt pulled like taffy. He had sympathy for Frank. Getting claimed by the war god in front of the whole camp—what a nightmare. Plus, how could Percy say no to that big pouty baby face? Frank had been given a huge task that would most likely get him killed. He was scared. He needed Percy’s help.

And the three of them *had* made a good team last night. Hazel and Frank were solid, dependable people. They’d accepted Percy like family. Still, he didn’t like the idea of this quest, especially since it came from Mars, and especially after his dreams.

“I, um...I’d better get ready...” He climbed out of bed and got dressed. The whole time, he thought about Annabeth. Help was on the way. He could have his old life back. All he had to do was stay put.

At breakfast, Percy was conscious of everyone looking at him. They were whispering about the previous night:

“Two gods in one day...”

“Un-Roman fighting...”

“Water cannon up my nose...”

He was too hungry to care. He filled up on pancakes, eggs, bacon, waffles, apples, and several glasses of orange juice. He probably would have eaten more, but Reyna announced that the senate would now convene in the city, and all the folks in togas got up to leave.

“Here we go.” Hazel fidgeted with a stone that looked like a two-carat ruby.

The ghost Vitellius appeared next to them in a purple shimmer. “*Bona fortuna*, you three! Ah, senate meetings. I remember the one when Caesar was assassinated. Why, the amount of blood on his toga—”

“Thanks, Vitellius,” Frank interrupted. “We should get going.”

Reyna and Octavian led the procession of senators out of camp, with Reyna’s metal greyhounds dashing back and forth along the road. Hazel, Frank, and Percy trailed behind. Percynoticed Nico di Angelo in the group, wearing a black toga and talking with Gwen, who looked a little pale but surprisingly good considering she’d been dead the night before. Nico waved at Percy, then went back to his conversation, leaving Percy more sure than ever that Hazel’s brother was trying to avoid him.

Dakota stumbled along in his red-speckled robe. A lot of other senators seemed to be having trouble with their togas, too—hiking up their hems, trying to keep the cloth from slipping off their shoulders. Percy was glad he was wearing a regular purple T-shirt and jeans.

“How could Romans move, in those things?” he wondered.

“They were just for formal occasions,” Hazel said. “Like tuxedos. I bet the ancient Romans hated togas as much as we do. By the way, you didn’t bring any weapons, did you?”

Percy’s hand went to his pocket, where his pen always stayed. “Why? Are we not supposed to?”

“No weapons allowed inside the Pomerian Line,” she said.

“The *what* line?”

“Pomerian,” Frank said. “The city limits. Inside is a sacred ‘safe zone.’ Legions can’t march through. No weapons allowed. That’s so senate meetings don’t get bloody.”

“Like Julius Caesar getting assassinated?” Percy asked.

Frank nodded. “Don’t worry. Nothing like that has happened in months.”

Percy hoped he was kidding.

As they got closer to the city, Percy could appreciate how beautiful it was. The tiled roofs and gold domes gleamed in the sun. Gardens bloomed with honeysuckle and roses. The central plaza was paved in white and gray stone, decorated with statues, fountains, and gilded columns. In the surrounding neighborhoods, cobblestone streets were lined with freshly painted town houses, shops, cafés, and parks. In the distance rose the coliseum and the horse racing arena.

Percy didn’t notice they’d reached the city limits until the senators in front of him started slowing down.

On the side of the road stood a white marble statue—a life-size muscular man with curly hair, no arms, and an irritated expression. Maybe he looked mad because he'd been carved only from the waist up. Below that, he was just a big block of marble.

“Single file, please!” the statue said. “Have your IDs ready.”

Percy looked to his left and right. He hadn't noticed before, but a line of identical statues ringed the city at intervals of about a hundred yards.

The senators passed through easily. The statue checked the tattoos on their forearms and called each senator by name. “Gwendolyn, senator, Fifth Cohort, yes. Nico di Angelo, ambassador of Pluto—very well. Reyna, praetor, of course. Hank, senator, Third Cohort—oh, nice shoes, Hank! Ah, who have we here?”

Hazel, Frank, and Percy were the last ones.

“Terminus,” Hazel said, “this is Percy Jackson. Percy, this is Terminus, the god of boundaries.”

“New, eh?” said the god. “Yes, *probatio* tablet. Fine. Ah, weapon in your pocket? Take it out! Take it out!”

Percy didn't know how Terminus could tell, but he took out his pen.

“Quite dangerous,” Terminus said. “Leave it in the tray. Wait, where's my assistant? Julia!”

A little girl about six years old peeked out from behind the base of the statue. She had pigtails, a pink dress, and an impish grin with two missing teeth.

“Julia?” Terminus glanced behind him, and Julia scurried in the other direction. “Where did that girl go?”

Terminus looked the other way and caught sight of Julia before she could hide. The little girl squealed with delight.

“Oh, there you are,” said the statue. “Front and center. Bring the tray.”

Julia scrambled out and brushed off her dress. She picked up a tray and presented it to Percy. On it were several paring knives, a corkscrew, an oversized container of sun lotion, and a water bottle.

“You can pick up your weapon on the way out,” Terminus said. “Julia will take good care of it. She's a trained professional.”

The little girl nodded. “Pro-fess-ion-al.” She said each syllable carefully, like she'd been practicing.

Percy glanced at Hazel and Frank, who didn't seem to find anything odd about this. Still, he wasn't wild about handing over a deadly weapon to a kid.

“The thing is,” he said, “the pen returns to my pocket automatically, so even if I give it up—”

“Not to worry,” Terminus assured him. “We’ll make sure it doesn’t wander off. Won’t we, Juila?”

“Yes, Mr. Terminus.”

Reluctantly, Percy put his pen on the tray.

“Now, a few rules, since you’re new,” Terminus said. “You are entering the boundaries of the city proper. Keep the peace inside the line. Yield to chariot traffic while walking on public roads. When you get to the Senate House, sit on the left-hand side. And, down there—do you see where I’m pointing?”

“Um,” Percy said, “you don’t have any hands.”

Apparently this was a sore point for Terminus. His marble face turned a dark shade of gray. “A smart aleck, eh? Well, Mr. Rule Flouter, right down there in the forum—Julia, point for me, please—”

Julia dutifully set down the security tray and pointed toward the main plaza.

“The shop with the blue awning,” Terminus continued, “that’s the general store. They sell tape measures. Buy one! I want those pants exactly one inch above the ankles and that hair regulation cut. And tuck your shirt in.”

Hazel said, “Thank you, Terminus. We need to get going.”

“Fine, fine, you may pass,” the god said testily. “But stay on the right side of the road! And that rock right there—No, Hazel, look where I’m pointing. That rock is entirely too close to that tree. Move it two inches to the left.”

Hazel did what she was told, and they continued down the path, Terminus still shouting orders at them while Julia did cartwheels across the grass.

“Is he always like that?” Percy asked.

“No,” Hazel admitted. “Today he was laid back. Usually he’s more obsessive/compulsive.”

“He inhabits every boundary stone around the city,” Frank said. “Kind of our last line of defense if the city’s attacked.”

“Terminus isn’t so bad,” Hazel added. “Just don’t make him angry, or he’ll force you to measure every blade of grass in the valley.”

Percy filed that information. “And the kid? Julia?”

Hazel grinned. “Yeah, she’s a cutie. Her parents live in the city. Come on. We’d better catch up to the senators.”

As they approached the forum, Percy was struck by the sheer number of people. College-age kids were hanging out at the fountain. Several of them waved at the senators as they passed. One guy in his late twenties stood at a bakery counter, flirting with a young woman who was buying coffee. An older couple was watching a little boy in diapers and a miniature Camp Jupiter shirt toddle after seagulls. Merchants were opening their shops for the day, putting out signs in

Latin that advertised pottery, jewelry, and half-price tickets for the Hippodrome.

“All these people are demigods?” Percy asked.

“Or descended from demigods,” Hazel said. “Like I told you, it’s a good place to go to college or raise a family without worrying about monster attacks every day. Maybe two, three hundred people live here? The veterans act as, like, advisers and reserve forces as needed, but mostly they’re just citizens living their lives.”

Percy imagined what that would be like: getting an apartment in this tiny replica of Rome, protected by the legion and Terminus the OCD border god. He imagined holding hands with Annabeth at a café. Maybe when they were older, watching their own kid chase seagulls across the forum...

He shook the idea out of his head. He couldn’t afford to indulge in that kind of thinking. Most of his memories were gone, but he knew this place wasn’t his home. He belonged somewhere else, with his other friends.

Besides, Camp Jupiter was in danger. If Juno was right, an attack was coming in less than five days. Percy imagined that sleeping woman’s face—the face of Gaea—forming in the hills above camp. He imagined hordes of monsters descending into this valley.

If you don’t succeed, Mars had warned, there won’t be any camp left to return to. Rome will be overrun, its legacy lost forever.

He thought about the little girl Julia, the families with kids, his new friends in the Fifth Cohort, even those silly fauns. He didn’t want to picture what might happen to them if this place was destroyed.

The senators made their way to a big white-domed building on the west end of the forum. Percy paused at the doorway, trying not to think about Julius Caesar getting slashed to death at a senate meeting. Then he took a deep breath and followed Hazel and Frank inside.

PERCY

THE SENATE HOUSE INTERIOR looked like a high school lecture hall. A semicircle of tiered seats faced a dais with a podium and two chairs. The chairs were empty, but one had a small velvet package on the seat.

Percy, Hazel, and Frank sat on the left side of the semicircle. The ten senators and Nico di Angelo occupied the rest of the front row. The upper rows were filled with several dozing hosts and a few older veterans from the city, all in formal togas. Octavian stood in front with a knife and a Beanie Babylon, just in case anyone needed to consult the god of cutesy collectibles. Reyna walked to the podium and raised her hand for attention.

“Right, this is an emergency meeting,” she said. “We won’t stand on formalities.”

“I love formalities!” a ghost complained.

Reyna shot him a cross look.

“First of all,” she said, “we’re not here to vote on the quest itself. The quest has been issued by Mars Ultor, patron of Rome. We will obey his wishes. Nor are we here to debate the choice of Frank Zhang’s companions.”

“All three from the Fifth Cohort?” called out Hank from the Third. “That’s not fair.”

“And not smart,” said the boy next to him. “We *know* the Fifth will mess up. They should take somebody *good*.”

Dakota got up so fast, he spilled Kool-Aid from his flask. “We were plenty good last night when we whipped your *podex*, Larry!”

“Enough, Dakota,” Reyna said. “Let’s leave Larry’s *podex* out of this. As quest leader, Frank has the right to choose his companions. He has chosen Percy Jackson and Hazel Levesque.”

A ghost from the second row yelled, “*Absurdus!* Frank Zhang isn’t even a

full member of the legion! He's on *probatio*. A quest must be led by someone of centurion rank or higher. This is completely—”

“Cato,” Reyna snapped. “We must obey the wishes of Mars Ultor. That means certain ... adjustments.”

Reyna clapped her hands, and Octavian came forward. He set down his knife and Beanie Baby and took the velvet package from the chair.

“Frank Zhang,” he said, “come forward.”

Frank glanced nervously at Percy. Then he got to his feet and approached the augur.

“It is my ... pleasure,” Octavian said, forcing out the last word, “to bestow upon you the Mural Crown for being first over the walls in siege warfare.” Octavian handed him a bronze badge shaped like a laurel wreath. “Also, by order of Praetor Reyna, to promote you to the rank of centurion.”

He handed Frank another badge, a bronze crescent, and the senate exploded in protest.

“He's still a probie!” one yelled.

“Impossible!” said another.

“Water cannon up my nose!” yelled a third.

“Silence!” Octavian's voice sounded a lot more commanding than it had the previous night on the battlefield. “Our praetor recognizes that no one below the rank of centurion may lead a quest. For good or ill, Frank must lead this quest—so our praetor has decreed that Frank Zhang must be made centurion.”

Suddenly Percy understood what an effective speaker Octavian was. He sounded reasonable and supportive, but his expression was pained. He carefully crafted his words to put all the responsibility on Reyna. *This was her idea*, he seemed to say.

If it went wrong, Reyna was to blame. If only Octavian had been the one in charge, things would have been done more sensibly. But alas, he had no choice but to support Reyna, because Octavian was a loyal Roman soldier.

Octavian managed to convey all that without saying it, simultaneously calming the senate and sympathizing with them. For the first time, Percy realized this scrawny, funny-looking scarecrow of a kid might be a dangerous enemy.

Reyna must have recognized this too. A look of irritation flashed across her face. “There is an opening for centurion,” she said. “One of our officers, also a senator, has decided to step down. After ten years in the legion, she will retire to

the city and attend college. Gwen of the Fifth Cohort, we thank you for your service.”

Everyone turned to Gwen, who managed a brave smile. She looked tired from the previous night’s ordeal, but also relieved. Percy couldn’t blame her. Compared to getting skewered with a *pilum*, college sounded pretty good.

“As praetor,” Reyna continued, “I have the right to replace officers. I admit it’s unusual for a camper on *probatio* to rise directly to the rank of centurion, but I think we can agree...last night was unusual. Frank Zhang, your ID, please.”

Frank removed the lead tablet from around his neck and handed it to Octavian.

“Your arm,” Octavian said.

Frank held up his forearm. Octavian raised his hands to the heavens. “We accept Frank Zhang, Son of Mars, to the Twelfth Legion Fulminata for his first year of service. Do you pledge your life to the senate and people of Rome?”

Frank muttered something like “Ud-dud.” Then he cleared his throat and managed: “I do.”

The senators shouted, “*Senatus Populusque Romanus!*”

Fire blazed on Frank’s arm. For a moment his eyes filled with terror, and Percy was afraid his friend might pass out. Then the smoke and flame died, and new marks were seared onto Frank’s skin: SPQR, an image of crossed spears, and a single stripe, representing the first year of service.

“You may sit down.” Octavian glanced at the audience as if to say: *This wasn’t my idea, folks.* “Now,” Reyna said, “we must discuss the quest.”

The senators shifted and muttered as Frank returned to his seat.

“Did it hurt?” Percy whispered.

Frank looked at his forearm, which was still steaming. “Yeah. A lot.” He seemed mystified by the badges in his hand—the centurion’s mark and the Mural Crown—like he wasn’t sure what to do with them.

“Here.” Hazel’s eyes shone with pride. “Let me.”

She pinned the medals to Frank’s shirt.

Percy smiled. He’d only known Frank for a day, but he felt proud of him too. “You deserve it, man,” he said. “What you did last night? Natural leadership.”

Frank scowled. “But *centurion*—”

“Centurion Zhang,” called Octavian. “Did you hear the question?”

Frank blinked. “Um...sorry. What?”

Octavian turned to the senate and smirked, like *What did I tell you?*

“I was *asking*,” Octavian said like he was talking to a three-year-old, “if you have a plan for the quest. Do you even know where you are going?”

“Um...”

Hazel put her hand on Frank’s shoulder and stood. “Weren’t *you* listening last night, Octavian? Mars was pretty clear. We’re going to the land beyond the gods—Alaska.”

The senators squirmed in their togas. Some of the ghosts shimmered and disappeared. Even Reyna’s metal dogs rolled over on their backs and whimpered.

Finally Senator Larry stood. “I know what Mars said, but that’s crazy. Alaska is cursed! They call it the land beyond the gods for a reason. It’s so far north, the Roman gods have no power there. The place is swarming with monsters. No demigod has come back from there alive since—”

“Since you lost your eagle,” Percy said.

Larry was so startled, he fell back on his *podex*.

“Look,” Percy continued, “I know I’m new here. I know you guys don’t like to mention that massacre in the nineteen-eighties—”

“He mentioned it!” one of the ghosts whimpered.

“—But don’t you get it?” Percy continued. “The Fifth Cohort led that expedition. We failed, and we have to be responsible for making things right. That’s why Mars is sending us. This giant, the son of Gaea—he’s the one who defeated your forces thirty years ago. I’m sure of it. Now he’s sitting up there in Alaska with a chained death god, and all your old equipment. He’s mustering his armies and sending them south to attack this camp.”

“Really?” Octavian said. “You seem to know a lot about our enemy’s plans, Percy Jackson.”

Most insults Percy could shrug off—being called weak or stupid or whatever. But it dawned on him that Octavian was calling him a spy—a traitor. That was such a foreign concept to Percy, so *not* who he was, he almost couldn’t process the slur. When he did, his shoulders tensed. He was tempted to smack Octavian on the head again, but he realized Octavian was baiting him, trying to make him look unstable.

Percy took a deep breath.

“We’re going to confront this son of Gaea,” he said, managing to keep his composure. “We’ll get back your eagle and unchain this god...” He glanced at Hazel. “Thanatos, right?”

She nodded. “Letus, in Roman. But his old Greek name is Thanatos. When it comes to Death...we’re happy to let him stay Greek.”

Octavian sighed in exasperation. “Well, *whatever* you call him...how do you expect to do all this and get back by the Feast of Fortuna? That’s the evening of the twenty-fourth. It’s the twentieth now. Do you even know where to look? Do you even know who this son of Gaea is?”

“Yes.” Hazel spoke with such certainty that even Percy was surprised. “I don’t know *exactly* where to look, but I have a pretty good idea. The giant’s name is Alcyoneus.”

That name seemed to lower the temperature in the room by fifty degrees. The senators shivered.

Reyna gripped her podium. “How do you know this, Hazel? Because you’re a child of Pluto?”

Nico di Angelo had been so quiet, Percy had almost forgotten he was there. Now he stood in his black toga.

“Praetor, if I may,” he said. “Hazel and I...we learned a little about the giants from our father. Each giant was bred specifically to oppose one of the twelve Olympian gods—tousurp that god’s domain. The king of giants was Porphyron, the anti-Jupiter. But the *eldest* giant was Alcyoneus. He was born to oppose Pluto. That’s why we know of him in particular.”

Reyna frowned. “Indeed? You sound *quite* familiar with him.”

Nico picked at the edge of his toga. “Anyway...the giants were hard to kill. According to prophecy, they could only be defeated by gods and demigods working together.”

Dakota belched. “Sorry, did you say gods and demigods...like fighting side by side? That could never happen!”

“It *has* happened,” Nico said. “In the first giant war, the gods called on heroes to join them, and they were victorious. Whether it could happen again, I don’t know. But with Alcyoneus ... *he* was different. He was completely immortal, impossible to kill by god or demigod, as long as he remained in his home territory—the place where he was born.”

Nico paused to let that sink in. “And if Alcyoneus has been reborn in Alaska

—”

“Then he can’t be defeated there,” Hazel finished. “Ever. By any means. Which is why our nineteen-eighties expedition was doomed to fail.”

Another round of arguing and shouting broke out.

“The quest is impossible!” shouted a senator.

“We’re doomed!” cried a ghost.

“More Kool-Aid!” yelled Dakota.

“Silence!” Reyna called. “Senators, we must act like Romans. Mars has given us this quest, and we have to believe it *is* possible. These three demigods must travel to Alaska. They must free Thanatos and return before the Feast of Fortuna. If they can retrieve the lost eagle in the process, so much the better. All we can do is advise them and make sure they have a plan.”

Reyna looked at Percy without much hope. “You *do* have a plan?”

Percy wanted to step forward bravely and say, *No, I don’t!*

That was the truth, but looking around at all the nervous faces, Percy knew he couldn’t say it.

“First, I need to understand something.” He turned toward Nico. “I thought Pluto was the god of the dead. Now I hear about this other guy, Thanatos, and the Doors of Death from that prophecy—the Prophecy of Seven. What does all that mean?”

Nico took a deep breath. “Okay. Pluto is the god of the Underworld, but the actual god of death, the one who’s responsible for making sure souls go to the afterlife and stay there—that’s Pluto’s lieutenant, Thanatos. He’s like...well, imagine Life and Death are two different countries. Everybody would like to be in Life, right? So there’s a guarded border to keep people from crossing back over without permission. But it’s a *big* border, with lots of holes in the fence. Pluto tries to seal up the breaches, but new ones keep popping up all the time. That’s why he depends on Thanatos, who’s like the border patrol, the police.”

“Thanatos catches souls,” Percy said, “and deports them back to the Underworld.”

“Exactly,” Nico said. “But now Thanatos has been captured, chained up.”

Frank raised his hand. “Uh...how do you chain Death?”

“It’s been done before,” Nico said. “In the old days, a guy named Sisyphus tricked Death and tied him up. Another time, Hercules wrestled him to the ground.”

“And now a giant has captured him,” Percy said. “So if we could free Thanatos, then the dead would stay dead?” He glanced at Gwen. “Um...no offense.”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Nico said.

Octavian rolled his eyes. “Why does *that* not surprise me?”

“You mean the Doors of Death,” Reyna said, ignoring Octavian. “They are mentioned in the Prophecy of Seven, which sent the first expedition to Alaska —”

Cato the ghost snorted. “We all know how that turned out! We Lares remember!”

The other ghosts grumbled in agreement.

Nico put his finger to his lips. Suddenly all the Lares went silent. Some looked alarmed, like their mouths had been glued together. Percy wished he had that power over certain living people...like Octavian, for instance.

“Thanatos is only part of the solution,” Nico explained. “The Doors of Death...well, that’s a concept even I don’t completely understand. There are many ways into the Underworld—the River Styx, the Door of Orpheus—plussmaller escape routes that open up from time to time. With Thanatos imprisoned, all those exits will be easier to use. Sometimes it might work to our advantage and let a friendly soul come back—like Gwen here. More often, it will benefit evil souls and monsters, the sneaky ones who are looking to escape. Now, the Doors of Death—those are the personal doors of Thanatos, his fast lane between Life and Death. Only Thanatos is supposed to know where they are, and the location shifts over the ages. If I understand correctly, the Doors of Death have been forced open. Gaea’s minions have seized control of them—”

“Which means Gaea controls who can come back from the dead,” Percy guessed.

Nico nodded. “She can pick and choose who to let out—the worst monsters, the most evil souls. If we rescue Thanatos, that means at least he can catch souls again and send them below. Monsters will die when we kill them, like they used to, and we’ll get a little breathing room. But unless we’re able to retake the Doors of Death, our enemies won’t stay down for long. They’ll have an easy way back to the world of the living.”

“So we can catch them and deport them,” Percy summed up, “but they’ll just keep coming back across.”

“In a depressing nutshell, yes,” Nico said.

Frank scratched his head. “But Thanatos knows where the doors are, right? If we free him, he can retake them.”

“I don’t think so,” Nico said. “Not alone. He’s no match for Gaea. That would take a massive quest...an army of the best demigods.”

“*Foes bear arms to the Doors of Death,*” Reyna said. “That’s the Prophecy of Seven...” She looked at Percy, and for just a moment he could see how scared she was. She did a good job of hiding it, but Percy wondered if she’d had nightmares about Gaea too—if she’d seen visions of what would happen when the camp was invaded by monsters that couldn’t be killed. “If this begins the ancient prophecy, we don’t have resources to send an army to these Doors of Death *and* protect the camp. I can’t imagine even sparing seven demigods—”

“First things first.” Percy tried to sound confident, though he could feel the level of panic rising in the room. “I don’t know who the seven are, or what that old prophecy means, exactly. But first we have to free Thanatos. Mars told us we only needed three people for the quest to Alaska. Let’s concentrate on succeeding with that and getting back before the Feast of Fortuna. Then we can worry about the Doors of Death.”

“Yeah,” Frank said in a small voice. “That’s probably enough for one week.”

“So you *do* have a plan?” Octavian asked skeptically.

Percy looked at his teammates. “We go to Alaska as fast as possible...”

“And we improvise,” Hazel said.

“A lot,” Frank added.

Reyna studied them. She looked like she was mentally writing her own obituary.

“Very well,” she said. “Nothing remains except for us to vote what support we can give the quest—transportation, money, magic, weapons.”

“Praetor, if I may,” Octavian said.

“Oh, great,” Percy muttered. “Here it comes.”

“The camp is in grave danger,” Octavian said. “*Two* gods have warned us we will be attacked four days from now. We must not spread our resources too thin, especially by funding projects that have a slim chance of success.”

Octavian looked at the three of them with pity, as if to say, *Poor little things*. “Mars has clearly chosen the least likely candidates for this quest. Perhaps that is because he considers them the most expendable. Perhaps Mars is playing the

long odds. Whatever the case, he wisely *didn't* order a massive expedition, nor did he ask us to fund their adventure. I say we keep our resources here and defend the camp. This is where the battle will be lost or won. If these three succeed, wonderful! But they should do so by their own ingenuity.”

An uneasy murmur passed through the crowd. Frank jumped to his feet. Before he could start a fight, Percy said, “Fine! No problem. But at least give us transportation. Gaea is the earth goddess, right? Going overland, across the earth—I’m guessing we should avoid that. Plus, it’ll be too slow.”

Octavian laughed. “Would you like us to charter you an airplane?”

The idea made Percy nauseous. “No. Air travel...I have a feeling that would be bad, too. But a boat. Can you at least give us a boat?”

Hazel made a grunting sound. Percy glanced over. She shook her head and mouthed, *Fine. I'm fine.*

“A boat!” Octavian turned to the senators. “The son of Neptune wants a boat. Sea travel has never been the Roman way, but he isn’t much of a Roman!”

“Octavian,” Reyna said sternly, “a boat is little enough to ask. And providing no other aid seems very—”

“Traditional!” Octavian exclaimed. “It is very traditional. Let us see if these questers have the strength to survive without help, like true Romans!”

More muttering filled the chamber. The senators’ eyes moved back and forth between Octavian and Reyna, watching the test of wills.

Reyna straightened in her chair. “Very well,” she said tightly. “We’ll put it to a vote. Senators, the motion is as follows: The quest shall go to Alaska. The senate shall provide full access to the Roman navy docked at Alameda. No other aid will be forthcoming. The three adventurers will survive or fail on their own merits. All in favor?”

Every senator’s hand went up.

“The motion is passed.” Reyna turned to Frank. “Centurion, your party is excused. The senate has other matters to discuss. And, Octavian, if I may confer with you for a moment.”

Percy was incredibly glad to see the sunlight. In that dark hall, with all those eyes on him, he’d felt like the world was riding on his shoulders—and he was fairly sure he’d had that experience before.

He filled his lungs with fresh air.

Hazel picked up a large emerald from the path and slipped it in her pocket.

“So...we’re pretty much toast?”

Frank nodded miserably. “If either of you wants to back out, I wouldn’t blame you.”

“Are you kidding?” Hazel said. “And pull sentry duty for the rest of the week?”

Frank managed a smile. He turned to Percy.

Percy gazed across the forum. *Stay put*, Annabeth had said in his dream. But if he stayed put, this camp would be destroyed. He looked up at the hills, and imagined Gaea’s face smiling in the shadows and ridges. *You can’t win, little demigod*, she seemed to say. *Serve me by staying, or serve me by going.*

Percy made a silent vow: After the Feast of Fortuna, he would find Annabeth. But for now, he had to act. He couldn’t let Gaea win.

“I’m with you,” he told Frank. “Besides, I want to check out the Roman navy.”

They were only halfway across the forum when some called, “Jackson!” Percy turned and saw Octavian jogging toward them.

“What do you want?” Percy asked.

Octavian smiled. “Already decided I’m your enemy? That’s a rash choice, Percy. I’m a loyal Roman.”

Frank snarled. “You backstabbing, slimy—” Both Percy and Hazel had to restrain him.

“Oh, dear,” Octavian said. “Hardly the right behavior for a new centurion. Jackson, I only followed you because Reyna charged me with a message. She wants you to report to the *principia* without your—ah—two lackeys, here. Reyna will meet you there after the senate adjourns. She’d like a private word with you before you leave on your quest.”

“What about?” Percy said.

“I’m sure I don’t know.” Octavian smiled wickedly. “The last person she had a private talk with was Jason Grace. And that was the last time I ever saw him. Good luck and good bye, Percy Jackson.”

PERCY

PERCY WAS GLAD RIPTIDE HAD RETURNED to his pocket. Judging from Reyna's expression, he thought he might need to defend himself.

She stormed into the *principia* with her purple cloak billowing, and her greyhounds at her feet. Percy was sitting in one of the praetor chairs that he'd pulled to the visitor's side, which maybe wasn't the proper thing to do. He started to get up.

"Stay seated," Reyna growled. "You leave after lunch. We have a lot to discuss."

She plunked down her dagger so hard, the jelly-bean bowl rattled. Aurum and Argentum took their posts on her left and right and fixed their ruby eyes on Percy.

"What'd I do wrong?" Percy asked. "If it's about the chair—"

"It's not you." Reyna scowled. "*I hate* senate meetings. When Octavian gets talking..."

Percy nodded. "You're a warrior. Octavian is a talker. Put him in front of the senate, and suddenly *he* becomes the powerful one."

She narrowed her eyes. "You're smarter than you look."

"Gee, thanks. I hear Octavian might get elected praetor, assuming the camp survives that long."

"Which brings us to the subject of doomsday," Reyna said, "and how you might help prevent it. But before I place the fate of Camp Jupiter in your hands, we need to get a few things straight."

She sat down and put a ring on the table—a band of silver etched with a sword-and-torch design, like Reyna's tattoo.

"Do you know what this is?"

“The sign of your mom,” Percy said. “The...uh, war goddess.” He tried to remember the name but he didn’t want to get it wrong—something like bologna. Or salami?

“Bellona, yes.” Reyna scrutinized him carefully. “You don’t remember where you saw this ring before? You really don’t remember me or my sister, Hylla?”

Percy shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

“It would’ve been four years ago.”

“Just before you came to camp.”

Reyna frowned. “How did you—?”

“You’ve got four stripes on your tattoo. Four years.”

Reyna looked at her forearm. “Of course. It seems so long ago. I suppose you wouldn’t recall me even if you *had* your memory. I was just a little girl—one attendant among so many at the spa. But you spoke with my sister, just before you and that other one, Annabeth, destroyed our home.”

Percy tried to remember. He really did. For some reason, Annabeth and he had visited a spa and decided to destroy it. He couldn’t imagine why. Maybe they hadn’t liked the deep-tissue massage? Maybe they’d gotten bad manicures?

“It’s a blank,” he said. “Since your dogs aren’t attacking me, I hope you’ll believe me. I’m telling the truth.”

Aurum and Argentum snarled. Percy got the feeling they were thinking, *Please lie. Please lie.*

Reyna tapped the silver ring.

“I believe you’re sincere,” she said. “But not everyone at camp does. Octavian thinks you’re a spy. He thinks you were sent here by Gaea to find our weaknesses and distract us. He believes the old legends about the Greeks.”

“Old legends?”

Reyna’s hand rested halfway between her dagger and the jelly beans. Percy had a feeling that if she made a sudden move, she wouldn’t be grabbing for the candy.

“Some believe Greek demigods still exist,” she said, “heroes who follow the older forms of the gods. There are legends of battles between Roman and Greek heroes in relatively modern times—the American Civil War, for instance. I have no proof of this, and if our Lares know anything, they refuse to say. But Octavian believes the Greeks are still around, plotting our downfall, working

with the forces of Gaea. He thinks you are one of them.”

“Is that what you believe?”

“I believe you came from *somewhere*,” she said. “You’re important, and dangerous. Two gods have taken a special interest in you since you arrived, so I can’t believe you’d work against Olympus...or Rome.” She shrugged. “Of course, I could be wrong. Perhaps the gods sent you here to test my judgment. But I think...I think you were sent here to make up for the loss of Jason.”

Jason ... Percy couldn’t go very far in this camp without hearing that name.

“The way you talk about him...” Percy said. “Were you two a couple?”

Reyna’s eyes bored into him—like the eyes of a hungry wolf. Percy had seen enough hungry wolves to know.

“We might have been,” Reyna said, “given time. Praetors work closely together. It’s common for them to become romantically involved. But Jason was only praetor for a few months before he disappeared. Ever since then, Octavian has been pestering me, agitating for new elections. I’ve resisted. I need a partner in power—but I’d prefer someone like Jason. A warrior, not a schemer.”

She waited. Percy realized she was sending him a silent invitation.

His throat went dry. “Oh ... you mean ... oh.”

“I believe the gods sent you to help me,” Reyna said. “I don’t understand where you come from, any more than I understood it four years ago. But I think your arrival is some sort of repayment. You destroyed my home once. Now you’ve been sent to save my home. I don’t hold a grudge against you for the past, Percy. My sister hates you still, it’s true, but Fate brought me here to Camp Jupiter. I’ve done well. All I ask is that you work with me for the future. I intend to save this camp.”

The metal dogs glared at him, their mouths frozen in snarl mode. Percy found Reyna’s eyes a lot harder to meet.

“Look, I’ll help,” he promised. “But I’m new here. You’ve got a lot of good people who know this camp better than I do. If we succeed on this quest, Hazel and Frank will be heroes. You could ask one of them—”

“Please,” Reyna said. “No one will follow a child of Pluto. There’s something about that girl...rumors about where she came from....No, she won’t do. As for Frank Zhang, he has a good heart, but he’s hopelessly naïve and inexperienced. Besides, if the others found out about his family history at this camp—”

“Family history?”

“The point is, Percy, *you* are the real power on this quest. *You* are a seasoned veteran. I’ve seen what you can do. A son of Neptune wouldn’t be my first choice, but if you return successfully from this mission, the legion might be saved. The praetorship will be yours for the taking. Together, you and I could expand the power of Rome. We could raise an army and find the Doors of Death, crush Gaea’s forces once and for all. You would find me a very helpful... friend.”

She said that word like it could have several meanings, and he could pick which one.

Percy’s feet started tapping on the floor, anxious to run. “Reyna...I’m honored, and all. Seriously. But I’ve got a girlfriend. And I don’t want power, or a praetorship.”

Percy was afraid he’d make her mad. Instead she just raised her eyebrows.

“A man who turns down power?” she said. “That’s not very Roman of you. Just think about it. In four days, I have to make a choice. If we are to fight off an invasion, we *must* have two strong praetors. I’d prefer you, but if you fail on your quest, or don’t come back, or refuse my offer...Well, I’ll work with Octavian. I mean to save this camp, Percy Jackson. Things are worse than you realize.”

Percy remembered what Frank said about the monster attacks getting more frequent. “How bad?”

Reyna’s nails dug into the table. “Even the senate doesn’t know the whole truth. I’ve asked Octavian not to share his auguries, or we’d have mass panic. He’s seen a great army marching south, more than we can possibly defeat. They’re led by a giant—”

“Alcyoneus?”

“I don’t think so. If he is truly invulnerable in Alaska, he’d be foolish to come here himself. It must be one of his brothers.”

“Great,” Percy said. “So we’ve got two giants to worry about.”

The praetor nodded. “Lupa and her wolves are trying to slow them down, but this force is too strong even for them. The enemy will be here soon—by the Feast of Fortuna at the very latest.”

Percy shuddered. He’d seen Lupa in action. He knew all about the wolf goddess and her pack. If this enemy was too powerful for Lupa, Camp Jupiter

didn't stand a chance.

Reyna read his expression. "Yes, it's bad, but not hopeless.

If you succeed in bringing back our eagle, if you release Death so we can actually *kill* our enemies, then we stand a chance. And there's one more possibility...."

Reyna slid the silver ring across the table. "I can't give you much help, but your journey will take you close to Seattle. I'm asking you for a favor, which may also help you. Find my sister Hylla."

"Your sister...the one who hates me?"

"Oh, yes," Reyna agreed. "She would love to kill you. But show her that ring as a token from me, and she may help you instead."

"*May?*"

"I can't speak for her. In fact..." Reyna frowned. "In fact I haven't spoken to her in weeks. She's gone silent. With these armies passing through—"

"You want me to check on her," Percy guessed. "Make sure she's okay."

"Partially, yes. I can't imagine she's been overcome. My sister has a powerful force. Her territory is well defended. But if you can find her, she could offer you valuable help. It could mean the difference between success and failure on your quest. And if you tell her what's happening here—"

"She might send help?" Percy asked.

Reyna didn't answer, but Percy could see the desperation in her eyes. She was terrified, grasping for *anything* that could save her camp. No wonder she wanted Percy's help. She was the only praetor. The defense of the camp rested on her shoulders alone.

Percy took the ring. "I'll find her. Where do I look? What kind force does she have?"

"Don't worry. Just go to Seattle. They'll find you."

That didn't sound encouraging, but Percy slipped the ring onto his leather necklace with his beads and his *probatio* tablet. "Wish me luck."

"Fight well, Percy Jackson," Reyna said. "And thank you."

He could tell the audience was over. Reyna was having trouble holding herself together, keeping up the image of the confident commander. She needed some time by herself.

But at the door of the *principia*, Percy couldn't resist turning. "How did we

destroy your home—that spa where you lived?”

The metal greyhounds growled. Reyna snapped her fingers to silence them.

“You destroyed the power of our mistress,” she said. “You freed some prisoners who took revenge on all of us who lived on the island. My sister and I...well, we survived. It was difficult. But in the long run, I think we are better off away from that place.”

“Still, I’m sorry,” Percy said. “If I hurt you, I’m sorry.”

Reyna gazed at him for a long time, as if trying to translate his words. “An apology? Not very Roman at all, Percy Jackson. You’d make an interesting praetor. I hope you’ll think about my offer.”

PERCY

LUNCH FELT LIKE A FUNERAL PARTY. Everybody ate. People talked in hushed tones. Nobody seemed particularly happy. The other campers kept glancing over at Percy like he was the corpse of honor.

Reyna made a brief speech wishing them luck. Octavian ripped open a Beanie Baby and pronounced grave omens and hard times ahead, but predicted the camp would be saved by an unexpected hero (whose initials were probably OCTAVIAN). Then the other campers went off to their afternoon classes—gladiator fighting, Latin lessons, paintball with ghosts, eagle training, and a dozen other activities that sounded better than a suicide quest. Percy followed Hazel and Frank to the barracks to pack.

Percy didn't have much. He'd cleaned up his backpack from his trip south and had kept most of his Bargain Mart supplies.

He had a fresh pair of jeans and an extra purple T-shirt from the camp quarter master, plus some nectar, ambrosia, snacks, a little mortal money, and camping supplies. At lunch, Reyna had handed him a scroll of introduction from the praetor and camp senate. Supposedly, any retired legionnaires they met on the trip would help them if shown the letter. He also kept his leather necklace with the beads, the silver ring, and the *probatio* tablet, and of course he had Riptide in his pocket.

He folded his tattered orange T-shirt and left it on his bunk.

"I'll be back," he said. He felt pretty stupid talking to a T-shirt, but he was really thinking of Annabeth, and his old life. "I'm not leaving for good. But I have to help these guys. They took me in. They deserve to survive."

The T-shirt didn't answer, thankfully.

One of their roommates, Bobby, gave them a ride to the border of the valley on Hannibal the elephant. From the hilltops, Percy could see everything below.

The Little Tiber snaked across golden pastures where the unicorns were grazing. The temples and forums of New Rome gleamed in the sunlight. On the Field of Mars, engineers were hard at work, pulling down the remains of last night's fort and setting up barricades for a game of death ball. A normal day for Camp Jupiter—but on the northern horizon, storm clouds were gathering. Shadows moved across the hills, and Percy imagined the face of Gaea getting closer and closer.

Work with me for the future, Reyna had said. *I intend to save this camp.*

Looking down at the valley, Percy understood why she cared so much. Even though he was new to Camp Jupiter, he felt a fierce desire to protect this place. A safe haven where demigods could build their lives—he wanted that to be part of his future. Maybe not the way Reyna imagined, but if he could share this place with Annabeth...

They got off the elephant. Bobby wished them a safe journey. Hannibal wrapped the three questers with his trunk. Then the elephant taxi service headed back into the valley.

Percy sighed. He turned to Hazel and Frank and tried to think of something upbeat to say.

A familiar voice said, "IDs, please."

A statue of Terminus appeared at the summit of the hill. The god's marble face frowned irritably. "Well? Come along!"

"You again?" Percy asked. "I thought you just guarded the city."

Terminus huffed. "Glad to see you, too, Mr. Rule Flouter. Normally, yes, I guard the city, but for international departures, I like to provide extra security at the camp borders. You really should've allowed two hours before your planned departure time, you know. But we'll have to make do. Now, come over here so I can pat you down."

"But you don't have—" Percy stopped himself. "Uh, sure."

He stood next to the armless statue. Terminus conducted a rigorous mental pat down.

"You seem to be clean," Terminus decided. "Do you have anything to declare?"

"Yes," Percy said. "I declare this is stupid."

"Hmph! *Probatio* tablet: Percy Jackson, Fifth Cohort, son of Neptune. Fine, go. Hazel Levesque, daughter of Pluto. Fine. Any foreign currency or, ahem,

precious metals to declare?”

“No,” she muttered.

“Are you sure?” Terminus asked. “Because last time—”

“No!”

“Well, this is a grumpy bunch,” said the god. “Quest travelers! Always in a rush. Now, let’s see—Frank Zhang. Ah! Centurion? Well done, Frank. And that haircut is regulation perfect. I approve! Off you go, then, Centurion Zhang. Do you need any directions today?”

“No. No, I guess not.”

“Just down to the BART station,” Terminus said anyway. “Change trains at Twelfth Street in Oakland. You want Fruitvale Station. From there, you can walk or take the bus to Alameda.”

“You guys don’t have a magical BART train or some thing?” Percy asked.

“Magic trains!” Terminus scoffed. “You’ll be wanting your own security lane and a pass to the executive lounge next. Just travel safely, and watch out for Polybotes. Talk about scofflaws—bah! I wish I could throttle him with my bare hands.”

“Wait—who?” Percy asked.

Terminus made a straining expression, like he was flexing his nonexistent biceps. “Ah, well. Just be careful of him. I imagine he can smell a son of Neptune a mile away. Out you go, now. Good luck!”

An invisible force kicked them across the boundary. When Percy looked back, Terminus was gone. In fact, the entire valley was gone. The Berkeley Hills seemed to be free of any Roman camp.

Percy looked at his friends. “Any idea what Terminus was talking about? Watch out for...Political something or other?”

“Poh-LIB-uh-tease?” Hazel sounded out the name carefully. “Never heard of him.”

“Sounds Greek,” Frank said.

“That narrows it down.” Percy sighed. “Well, we probably just appeared on the smell radar for every monster within five miles. We’d better get moving.”

It took them two hours to reach the docks in Alameda. Compared to Percy’s last few months, the trip was easy. No monsters attacked. Nobody looked at Percy like he was a homeless wild child.

Frank had stored his spear, bow, and quiver in a long bag made for skis. Hazel's cavalry sword was wrapped in a bedroll slung on her back. Together the three of them looked like normal high schoolers on their way to an overnight trip. They walked to Rockridge Station, bought their tickets with mortal money, and hopped on the BART train.

They got off in Oakland. They had to walk through some rough neighborhoods, but nobody bothered them. When ever the local gang members came close enough to look in Percy's eyes, they quickly veered away. He'd perfected his wolf stare over the last few months—a look that said: *However bad you think you are, I'm worse.* After strangling sea monsters and running over gorgons in a police car, Percy wasn't scared of gangs. Pretty much nothing in the mortal world scared him anymore.

In the late afternoon, they made it to the Alameda docks. Percy looked out over San Francisco Bay and breathed in the salty sea air. Immediately he felt better. This was his father's domain. Whatever they faced, he'd have the upper hand as long as they were at sea.

Dozens of boats were moored at the docks—everything from fifty-foot yachts to ten-foot fishing boats. He scanned the slips for some sort of magic vessel—a trireme, maybe, or a dragon-headed warship like he'd seen in his dreams.

“Um...you guys know what we're looking for?”

Hazel and Frank shook their heads.

“I didn't even know we *had* a navy.” Hazel sounded as if she wished there wasn't one.

“Oh...” Frank pointed. “You don't think...?”

At the end of the dock was a tiny boat, like a dinghy, covered in a purple tarp. Embroidered in faded gold along the canvas was *S.P.Q.R.*

Percy's confidence wavered. “No way.”

He uncovered the boat, his hands working the knots like he'd been doing it his whole life. Under the tarp was an old steel rowboat with no oars. The boat had been painted dark blue at one point, but the hull was so crusted with tar and salt it looked like one massive nautical bruise.

On the bow, the name *Pax* was still readable, lettered in gold. Painted eyes drooped sadly at the water level, as if the boat were about to fall asleep. On board were two benches, some steel wool, an old cooler, and a mound of frayed

rope with one end tied to the mooring. At the bottom of the boat, a plastic bag and two empty Coke cans floated in several inches of scummy water.

“Behold,” Frank said. “The mighty Roman navy.”

“There’s got to be a mistake,” Hazel said. “This is a piece of junk.”

Percy imagined Octavian laughing at them, but he decided not to let it get him down. The *Pax* was still a boat. He jumped aboard, and the hull hummed under his feet, responding to his presence. He gathered up the garbage in the cooler and put it on the dock. He willed the scummy water to flow over the sides and out of the boat. Then he pointed at the steel wool and it flew across the floor, scrubbing and polishing so fast, the steel began to smoke. When it was done, the boat was clean. Percy pointed at the rope, and it untied itself from the dock.

No oars, but that didn’t matter. Percy could tell that the boat was ready to move, just awaiting his command.

“This’ll do,” he said. “Hop in.”

Hazel and Frank looked a little stunned, but they climbed aboard. Hazel seemed especially nervous. When they had settled on the seats, Percy concentrated, and the boat slipped away from the dock.

Juno was right, you know. The sleepy voice of Gaea whispered in Percy’s mind, startling him so badly the boat rocked. *You could have chosen a new life in the sea. You would have been safe from me there. Now it’s too late. You chose pain and misery. You’re part of my plan, now—my important little pawn.*

“Get off my ship,” Percy growled.

“Uh, what?” Frank asked.

Percy waited, but the voice of Gaea was silent.

“Nothing,” he said. “Let’s see what this rowboat can do.”

He turned the boat to the north, and in no time they were speeding along at fifteen knots, heading for the Golden Gate Bridge.

HAZEL

HAZEL HATED BOATS.

She got seasick so easily, it was more like sea plague. She hadn't mentioned this to Percy. She didn't want to mess up the quest, but she remembered how horrible her life had been when she and her mother had moved to Alaska—no roads. Everywhere they went, they'd had to take the train or a boat.

She hoped her condition might have improved since she'd come back from the dead. Obviously not. And this little boat, the *Pax*, looked so much like that other boat they'd had in Alaska. It brought back bad memories....

As soon as they left the dock, Hazel's stomach started to churn. By the time they passed the piers along the San Francisco Embarcadero, she felt so woozy she thought she was hallucinating. They sped by a pack of sea lions lounging on the docks, and she swore she saw an old homeless guy sitting among them. From across the water, the old man pointed a bony finger at Percy and mouthed something like *Don't even think about it*.

"Did you see that?" Hazel asked.

Percy's face was red in the sunset. "Yeah. I've been here before. I...I don't know. I think I was looking for my girlfriend."

"Annabeth," Frank said. "You mean, on your way to Camp Jupiter?"

Percy frowned. "No. Before that." He scanned the city like he was still looking for Annabeth until they passed under the Golden Gate Bridge and turned north.

Hazel tried to settle her stomach by thinking of pleasant things—the euphoria she'd felt last night when they'd won the war games, riding Hannibal into the enemy keep, Frank's sudden transformation into a leader. He'd looked like a different person when he'd scaled the walls, calling on the Fifth Cohort to

attack. The way he'd swept the defenders off the battlements...Hazel had never seen him like that before. She'd been so proud to pin the centurion's badge to his shirt.

Then her thoughts turned to Nico. Before they had left, her brother had pulled her aside to wish her luck. Hazel hoped he'd stay at Camp Jupiter to help defend it, but he said he'd be leaving today—heading back to the Underworld.

“Dad needs all the help he can get,” he said. “The Fields of Punishment look like a prison riot. The Furies can barely keep order. Besides...I'm going to try to track some of the escaping souls. Maybe I can find the Doors of Death from the other side.”

“Be careful,” Hazel said. “If Gaea is guarding those doors—”

“Don't worry.” Nico smiled. “I know how to stay hidden. Just take care of yourself. The closer you get to Alaska...I'm not sure if it'll make the blackouts better or worse.”

Take care of myself, Hazel thought bitterly. As if there was any way the quest would end well for her.

“If we free Thanatos,” Hazel told Nico, “I may never see you again. Thanatos will send me back to the Underworld....”

Nico took her hand. His fingers were so pale, it was hard to believe Hazel and he shared the same godly father.

“I wanted to give you a chance at Elysium,” he said. “That was the best I could do for you. But now, I wish there was another way. I don't want to lose my sister.”

He didn't say the word *again*, but Hazel knew that's what he was thinking. For once, she didn't feel jealous of Bianca di Angelo. She just wished that she had more time with Nico and her friends at camp. She didn't want to die a second time.

“Good luck, Hazel,” he said. Then he melted into the shadows—just like her father had seventy years before.

The boat shuddered, jolting Hazel back to the present. They entered the Pacific currents and skirted the rocky coastline of Marin County.

Frank held his ski bag across his lap. It passed over Hazel's knees like the safety bar on an amusement ride, which made her think of the time Sammy had taken her to the carnival during Mardi Gras....She quickly pushed that memory aside. She couldn't risk a blackout.

“You okay?” Frank asked. “You look queasy.”

“Seasickness,” she confessed. “I didn’t think it would be this bad.”

Frank pouted like it was somehow his fault. He started digging in his pack. “I’ve got some nectar. And some crackers. Um, my grandmother says ginger helps...I don’t have any of that, but—”

“It’s okay.” Hazel mustered a smile. “That’s sweet of you, though.”

Frank pulled out a saltine. It snapped in his big fingers. Cracker exploded everywhere.

Hazel laughed. “Gods, Frank....Sorry. I shouldn’t laugh.”

“Uh, no problem,” he said sheepishly. “Guess you don’t want that one.”

Percy wasn’t paying much attention. He kept his eyes fixed on the shoreline. As they passed Stinson Beach, he pointed inland, where a single mountain rose above the green hills.

“That looks familiar,” he said.

“Mount Tam,” Frank said. “Kids at camp are always talking about it. Big battle happened on the summit, at the old Titan base.”

Percy frowned. “Were either of you there?”

“No,” Hazel said. “That was back in August, before I—um, before I got to camp. Jason told me about it. The legion destroyed the enemy’s palace and about a million monsters. Jason had to battle Krios—hand-to-hand combat with a Titan, if you can imagine.”

“I can imagine,” Percy muttered.

Hazel wasn’t sure what he meant, but Percy *did* remind her of Jason, even though they looked nothing alike. They had the same aura of quiet power, plus a kind of sadness, like they’d seen their destiny and knew it was only a matter of time before they met a monster they couldn’t beat.

Hazel understood the feeling. She watched the sun set in the ocean, and she knew she had less than a week to live. Whether or not their quest succeeded, her journey would be over by the Feast of Fortuna.

She thought about her first death, and the months leading up to it—her house in Seward, the six months she’d spent in Alaska, taking that little boat into Resurrection Bay at night, visiting that cursed island.

She realized her mistake too late. Her vision went black, and she slipped back in time.

Their rental house was a clapboard box suspended on pilings over the bay. When the train from Anchorage rolled by, the furniture shook and the pictures rattled on the walls. At night, Hazel fell asleep to the sound of icy water lapping against the rocks under the floorboards. The wind made the building creak and groan.

They had one room, with a hot plate and an icebox for a kitchen. One corner was curtained off for Hazel, where she kept her mattress and storage chest. She'd pinned her drawings and old photos of New Orleans on the walls, but that only made her homesickness worse.

Her mother was rarely home. She didn't go by Queen Marie anymore. She was just Marie, the hired help. She'd cook and clean all day at the diner on Third Avenue for fishermen, railroad workers, and the occasional crew of navy men. She'd come home smelling like Pine-Sol and fried fish.

At night, Marie Levesque would transform. The Voice took over, giving Hazel orders, putting her to work on their horrible project.

Winter was the worst. The Voice stayed longer because of the constant darkness. The cold was so intense, Hazel thought she would never be warm again.

When summer came, Hazel couldn't get enough sun. Every day of summer vacation, she stayed away from home as long as she could, but she couldn't walk around town. It was a small community. The other kids spread rumors about her—the witch's child who lived in the old shack by the docks. If she came too close, the kids jeered at her or threw bottles and rocks. The adults weren't much better.

Hazel could've made their lives miserable. She could've given them diamonds, pearls, or gold. Up here in Alaska, gold was easy. There was so much in the hills, Hazel could've buried the town without half trying. But she didn't really hate the locals for pushing her away. She couldn't blame them.

She spent the day walking the hills. She attracted ravens. They'd caw at her from the trees and wait for the shiny things that always appeared in her footsteps. The curse never seemed to bother them. She saw brown bears, too, but they kept their distance. When Hazel got thirsty, she'd find a snowmelt waterfall and drink cold, clean water until her throat hurt. She'd climb as high as she could and let the sunshine warm her face.

It wasn't a bad way to pass the time, but she knew eventually she'd have to go home.

Sometimes she thought about her father—that strange pale man in the silver-

and-black suit. Hazel wished he'd come back and protect her from her mother, maybe use his powers to get rid of that awful Voice. If he was a god, he should be able to do that.

She looked up at the ravens and imagined they were his emissaries. Their eyes were dark and maniacal, like his. She wondered if they reported her movements to her father.

But Pluto had warned her mother about Alaska. It was a land beyond the gods. He couldn't protect them here. If he was watching Hazel, he didn't speak to her. She often wondered if she had imagined him. Her old life seemed as distant as the radio programs she listened to, or President Roosevelt talking about the war. Occasionally the locals would discuss the Japanese and some fighting on the outer islands of Alaska, but even that seemed far away—not nearly as scary as Hazel's problem.

One day in midsummer, she stayed out later than usual, chasing a horse.

She'd seen it first when she had heard a crunching sound behind her. She turned and saw a gorgeous tan roan stallion with a black mane—just like the one she'd ridden her last day in New Orleans, when Sammy had taken her to the stables. It could've been the same horse, though that was impossible. It was eating something off the path, and for a second, Hazel had the crazy impression it was munching one of the gold nuggets that always appeared in her wake.

“Hey, fella,” she called.

The horse looked at her warily.

Hazel figured it must belong to someone. It was too well groomed, its coat too sleek for a wild horse. If she could get close enough...What? She could find its owner? Return it?

No, she thought. I just want to ride again.

She got within ten feet, and the horse bolted. She spent the rest of the afternoon trying to catch it—getting maddeningly close before it ran away again.

She lost track of time, which was easy to do with the summer sun staying up so long. Finally she stopped at a creek for a drink and looked at the sky, thinking it must be around three in the afternoon. Then she heard a train whistle from down in the valley. She realized it had to be the evening run to Anchorage, which meant it was ten at night.

She glared at the horse, grazing peacefully across the creek. “Are you trying to get me in trouble?”

The horse whinnied. Then...Hazel must've imagined it. The horse sped away in a blur of black and tan, faster than forked lightning—almost too quick for her eyes to register. Hazel didn't understand how, but the horse was *definitely* gone.

She stared at the spot where the horse had stood. A wisp of steam curled from the ground.

The train whistle echoed through the hills again, and she realized how much trouble she was in. She ran for home.

Her mother wasn't there. For a second Hazel felt relieved. Maybe her mom had had to work late. Maybe tonight they wouldn't have to make the journey.

Then she saw the wreckage. Hazel's curtain was pulled down. Her storage chest was open and her few clothes strewn across the floor. Her mattress had been shredded as if a lion had attacked it. Worst of all, her drawing pad was ripped to pieces. Her colored pencils were all broken. Pluto's birthday gift, Hazel's only luxury, had been destroyed. Pinned to the wall was a note in red on the last piece of drawing paper, in writing that was not her mother's: *Wicked girl. I'm waiting at the island. Don't disappoint me.* Hazel sobbed in despair. She wanted to ignore the summons. She wanted to run away, but there was nowhere to go. Besides, her mother was trapped. The Voice had promised that they were almost done with their task. If Hazel kept helping, her mother would be freed. Hazel didn't trust the Voice, but she didn't see any other option.

She took the rowboat—a little skiff her mother had bought with a few gold nuggets from a fisherman, who had a tragic accident with his nets the next day. They had only one boat, but Hazel's mother seemed capable on occasion of reaching the island without any transportation. Hazel had learned not to ask about that.

Even in midsummer, chunks of ice swirled in Resurrection Bay. Seals glided by her boat, looking at Hazel hopefully, sniffing for fish scraps. In the middle of the bay, the glistening back of a whale raked the surface.

As always, the rocking of the boat made her stomach queasy. She stopped once to be sick over the side. The sun was finally going down over the mountains, turning the sky blood red.

She rowed toward the bay's mouth. After several minutes, she turned and looked ahead. Right in front of her, out of the fog, the island materialized—an acre of pine trees, boulders, and snow with a black sand beach.

If the island had a name, she didn't know it. Once Hazel had made the mistake of asking the townsfolk, but they had stared at her like she was crazy.

“Ain’t no island there,” said one old fisherman, “or my boat would’ve run into it a thousand times.”

Hazel was about fifty yards from the shore when a raven landed on the boat’s stern. It was a greasy black bird almost as large as an eagle, with a jagged beak like an obsidian knife.

Its eyes glittered with intelligence, so Hazel wasn’t much surprised when it talked.

“Tonight,” it croaked. “The last night.”

Hazel let the oars rest. She tried to decide if the raven was warning her, or advising her, or making a promise.

“Are you from my father?” she asked.

The raven tilted its head. “The last night. Tonight.”

It pecked at the boat’s prow and flew toward the island.

The last night, Hazel told herself. She decided to take it as a promise. *No matter what she tells me, I will make this the last night.*

That gave her enough strength to row on. The boat slid ashore, cracking through a fine layer of ice and black silt.

Over the months, Hazel and her mother had worn a path from the beach into the woods. She hiked inland, careful to stick to the trail. The island was full of dangers, both natural and magical. Bears rustled in the undergrowth. Glowing white spirits, vaguely human, drifted through the trees. Hazel didn’t know what they were, but she knew they were watching her, hoping she’d stray into their clutches.

At the center of the island, two massive black boulders formed the entrance to a tunnel. Hazel made her way into the cavern she called the Heart of the Earth.

It was the only truly warm place Hazel had found since moving to Alaska. The air smelled of freshly turned soil. The sweet, moist heat made Hazel feel drowsy, but she fought to stay awake. She imagined that if she fell asleep here, her body would sink into the earthen floor and turn to mulch.

The cave was as large as a church sanctuary, like the St. Louis Cathedral back home on Jackson Square. The walls glowed with luminescent mosses—green, red, and purple. The whole chamber thrummed with energy, an echoing *boom, boom, boom* that reminded Hazel of a heartbeat. Perhaps it was just the sea’s waves battering the island, but Hazel didn’t think so. This place was alive. The earth was asleep, but it pulsed with power. Its dreams were so malicious,

so fitful, that Hazel felt herself losing her grip on reality.

Gaea wanted to consume her identity, just as she'd overwhelmed Hazel's mother. She wanted to consume every human, god, and demigod that dared to walk across her surface.

You all belong to me, Gaea murmured like a lullaby. Surrender. Return to the earth.

No, Hazel thought. I'm Hazel Levesque. You can't have me.

Marie Levesque stood over the pit. In six months, her hair had turned as gray as lint. She'd lost weight. Her hands were gnarled from hard work. She wore snow boots and waders and a stained white shirt from the diner. She never would have been mistaken for a queen.

"It's too late." Her mother's frail voice echoed through the cavern. Hazel realized with a shock that it was *her* voice—not Gaea's.

"Mother?"

Marie turned. Her eyes were open. She was awake and conscious. This should have made Hazel feel relieved, but it made her nervous. The Voice had never relinquished control while they were on the island.

"What have I done?" her mother asked helplessly. "Oh, Hazel, what did I do to you?"

She stared in horror at the thing in the pit.

For months they'd been coming here, four or five nights a week as the Voice required. Hazel had cried, she'd collapsed with exhaustion, she'd pleaded, she'd given in to despair. But the Voice that controlled her mother had urged her on relentlessly. *Bring valuables from the earth. Use your powers, child. Bring my most valuable possession to me.*

At first, her efforts had brought only scorn. The fissure in the earth had filled with gold and precious stones, bubbling in a thick soup of petroleum. It looked like a dragon's treasure dumped in a tar pit. Then, slowly, a rock spire began to grow like a massive tulip bulb. It emerged so gradually, night after night, that Hazel had trouble judging its progress. Often she concentrated all night on raising it, until her mind and soul were exhausted, but she didn't notice any difference. Yet the spire *did* grow. Now Hazel could see how much she'd accomplished. The thing was two stories high, a swirl of rocky tendrils jutting like a spear tip from the oily morass. Inside, something glowed with heat. Hazel couldn't see it clearly, but she knew what was happening. A body was forming

out of silver and gold, with oil for blood and raw diamonds for a heart. Hazel was resurrecting the son of Gaea. He was almost ready to wake.

Her mother fell to her knees and wept. "I'm sorry, Hazel. I'm so sorry." She looked helpless and alone, horribly sad. Hazel should have been furious. *Sorry?* She'd lived in fear of her mother for years. She'd been scolded and blamed for her mother's unfortunate life. She'd been treated like a freak, dragged away from her home in New Orleans to this cold wilderness, and worked like a slave by a merciless evil goddess. *Sorry* didn't cut it. She should have despised her mother.

But she couldn't make herself feel angry.

Hazel knelt and put her arm around her mother. There was hardly anything left of her—just skin and bones and stained work clothes. Even in the warm cave, she was trembling.

"What can we do?" Hazel said. "Tell me how to stop it."

Her mother shook her head. "She let me go. She knows it's too late. There's nothing we can do."

"She...the Voice?" Hazel was afraid to get her hopes up, but if her mother was really freed, then nothing else mattered. They could get out of here. They could run away, back to New Orleans. "Is she gone?"

Her mother glanced fearfully around the cave. "No, she's here. There's only one more thing she needs from me. For that, she needs my free will."

Hazel didn't like the sound of that.

"Let's get out of here," she urged. "That thing in the rock...it's going to hatch."

"Soon," her mother agreed. She looked at Hazel so tenderly....Hazel couldn't remember the last time she'd seen that kind of affection in her mother's eyes. She felt a sob building in her chest.

"Pluto warned me," her mother said. "He told me my wish was too dangerous."

"Your—your wish?"

"All the wealth under the earth," she said. "He controlled it. I wanted it. I was so tired of being poor, Hazel. So tired. First I summoned him...just to see if I could. I never thought the old *gris-gris* spell would work on a god. But he courted me, told me I was brave and beautiful..." She stared at her bent, calloused hands. "When you were born, he was so pleased and proud. He promised me anything. He swore on the River Styx. I asked for all the riches he

had. He warned me the greediest wishes cause the greatest sorrows. But I insisted. I imagined living like a queen—the wife of a god! And you...you received the curse.”

Hazel felt as if she were expanding to the breaking point, just like that spire in the pit. Her misery would soon become too great to hold inside, and her skin would shatter. “That’s why I can find things under the earth?”

“And why they bring only sorrow.” Her mother gestured listlessly around the cavern. “That’s how *she* found me, how she was able to control me. I was angry with your father. I blamed him for my problems. I blamed you. I was so bitter, I listened to Gaea’s voice. I was a fool.”

“There’s got to be something we can do,” Hazel said. “Tell me how to stop her.”

The ground trembled. Gaea’s disembodied voice echoed through the cave.

My eldest rises, she said, the most precious thing in the earth —and you have brought him from the depths, Hazel Levesque. You have made him anew. His awakening cannot be stopped. Only one thing remains.

Hazel clenched her fists. She was terrified, but now that her mother was free, she felt like she could confront her enemy at last. This creature, this evil goddess, had ruined their lives. Hazel wasn’t going to let her win.

“I won’t help you anymore!” she yelled.

But I am done with your help, girl. I brought you here for one reason only. Your mother required...incentive.

Hazel’s throat constricted. “Mother?”

“I’m sorry, Hazel. If you can forgive me, please—know that it was only because I loved you. She promised to let you live if—”

“If *you* sacrifice yourself,” Hazel said, realizing the truth. “She needs you to give your life willingly to raise that—that *thing*.”

Alcyoneus, Gaea said. Eldest of the giants. He must rise first, and this will be his new homeland—far from the gods. He will walk these icy mountains and forests. He will raise an army of monsters. While the gods are divided, fighting each other in this mortal World War, he will send forth his armies to destroy Olympus.

The earth goddess’s dreams were so powerful, they cast shadows across the cave walls—ghastly shifting images of Nazi armies raging across Europe, Japanese planes destroying American cities. Hazel finally understood. The gods

of Olympus would take sides in the battle as they always did in human wars. While the gods fought each other to a bloody standstill, an army of monsters would rise in the north. Alcyoneus would revive his brother giants and send them forth to conquer the world. The weakened gods would fall. The mortal conflict would rage for decades until all civilization was swept away, and the earth goddess awakened fully. Gaea would rule forever.

All this, the goddess purred, because your mother was greedy and cursed you with the gift of finding riches. In my sleeping state, I would have needed decades more, perhaps even centuries, before I found the power to resurrect Alcyoneus myself. But now he will wake, and soon, so shall I!

With terrible certainty, Hazel knew what would happen next. The only thing Gaea needed was a willing sacrifice—a soul to be consumed for Alcyoneus to awaken. Her mother would step into the fissure and touch that horrible spire—and she would be absorbed.

“Hazel, go.” Her mother rose unsteadily. “She’ll let you live, but you must hurry.”

Hazel believed it. That was the most horrible thing. Gaea would honor the bargain and let Hazel live. Hazel would survive to see the end of the world, knowing that she’d caused it.

“No.” Hazel made her decision. “I won’t live. Not for that.”

She reached deep into her soul. She called on her father, the Lord of the Underworld, and summoned all the riches that lay in his vast realm. The cavern shook.

Around the spire of Alcyoneus, oil bubbled, then churned and erupted like a boiling cauldron.

Don’t be foolish, Gaea said, but Hazel detected concern in her tone, maybe even fear. You will destroy yourself for nothing! Your mother will still die!

Hazel almost wavered. She remembered her father’s promise: someday her curse would be washed away; a descendant of Neptune would bring her peace. He’d even said she might find a horse of her own. Maybe that strange stallion in the hills was meant for her. But none of that would happen if she died now. She’d never see Sammy again, or return to New Orleans. Her life would be thirteen short, bitter years with an unhappy ending.

She met her mother’s eyes. For once, her mother didn’t look sad or angry. Her eyes shone with pride.

“You were my gift, Hazel,” she said. “My most precious gift. I was foolish to think I needed anything else.”

She kissed Hazel’s forehead and held her close. Her warmth gave Hazel the courage to continue. They would die, but not as sacrifices to Gaea. Instinctively Hazel knew that their final act would reject Gaea’s power. Their souls would go to the Underworld, and Alcyoneus would not rise—at least not yet.

Hazel summoned the last of her willpower. The air turned searing hot. The spire began to sink. Jewels and chunks of gold shot from the fissure with such force, they cracked the cavern walls and sent shrapnel flying, stinging Hazel’s skin through her jacket.

Stop this! Gaea demanded. You cannot prevent his rise. At best, you will delay him—a few decades. Half a century. Would you trade your lives for that?

Hazel gave her an answer.

The last night, the raven had said.

The fissure exploded. The roof crumbled. Hazel sank into her mother’s arms, into the darkness, as oil filled her lungs and the island collapsed into the bay.

HAZEL

“HAZEL!” FRANK SHOOK HER ARMS, sounding panicked. “Come on, please! Wake up!”

She opened her eyes. The night sky blazed with stars. The rocking of the boat was gone. She was lying on solid ground, her bundled sword and pack beside her.

She sat up groggily, her head spinning. They were on a cliff overlooking a beach. About a hundred feet away, the ocean glinted in the moonlight. The surf washed gently against the stern of their beached boat. To her right, hugging the edge of the cliff, was a building like a small church with a search light in the steeple. A lighthouse, Hazel guessed. Behind them, fields of tall grass rustled in the wind.

“Where are we?” she asked.

Frank exhaled. “Thank the gods you’re awake! We’re in Mendocino, about a hundred and fifty miles north of the Golden Gate.”

“A hundred and fifty miles?” Hazel groaned. “I’ve been out *that* long?”

Percy knelt beside her, the sea wind sweeping his hair. He put his hand on her forehead as if checking for a fever. “We couldn’t wake you. Finally we decided to bring you ashore. We thought maybe the seasickness—”

“It wasn’t seasickness.” She took a deep breath. She couldn’t hide the truth from them anymore. She remembered what Nico had said: *If a flashback like that happens when you’re in combat ...*

“I—I haven’t been honest with you,” she said. “What happened was a blackout. I have them once in a while.”

“A blackout?” Frank took Hazel’s hand, which startled her...though pleasantly so. “Is it medical? Why haven’t I noticed before?”

“I try to hide it,” she admitted. “I’ve been lucky so far, but it’s getting worse.”

It's not medical...not really. Nico says it's a side effect from my past, from where he found me."

Percy's intense green eyes were hard to read. She couldn't tell whether he was concerned or wary.

"Where exactly did Nico find you?" he asked.

Hazel's tongue felt like cotton. She was afraid if she started talking, she'd slip back into the past, but they deserved to know. If she failed them on this quest, zonked out when they needed her most...she couldn't bear that idea.

"I'll explain," she promised. She clawed through her pack. Stupidly, she'd forgotten to bring a water bottle. "Is...is there anything to drink?"

"Yeah." Percy muttered a curse in Greek. "That was dumb.

I left my supplies down at the boat."

Hazel felt bad asking them to take care of her, but she'd woken up parched and exhausted, as if she'd lived the last few hours in both the past and the present. She shouldered her pack and sword. "Never mind. I can walk...."

"Don't even think about it," Frank said. "Not until you've had some food and water. I'll get the supplies."

"No, I'll go." Percy glanced at Frank's hand on Hazel's. Then he scanned the horizon as if he sensed trouble, but there was nothing to see—just the lighthouse and the field of grass stretching inland. "You two stay here. I'll be right back."

"You sure?" Hazel said feebly. "I don't want you to—"

"It's fine," said Percy. "Frank, just keep your eyes open. Something about this place...I don't know."

"I'll keep her safe," Frank promised.

Percy dashed off.

Once they were alone, Frank seemed to realize he was still holding Hazel's hand. He cleared his throat and let go.

"I, um...I think I understand your blackouts," he said. "And where you come from."

Her heartbeat stumbled. "You do?"

"You seem so different from other girls I've met." He blinked, then rushed on. "Not like...*bad* different. Just the way you talk. The things that surprise you—like songs, or

TV shows, or slang people use. You talk about your life like it happened a

long time ago. You were born in a different time, weren't you? You came from the Underworld."

Hazel wanted to cry—not because she was sad, but because it was such a relief to hear someone say the truth. Frank didn't act revolted or scared. He didn't look at her as if she were a ghost or some awful undead zombie.

"Frank, I—"

"We'll figure it out," he promised. "You're alive now. We're going to keep you that way."

The grass rustled behind them. Hazel's eyes stung in the cold wind.

"I don't deserve a friend like you," she said. "You don't know what I am... what I've done."

"Stop that." Frank scowled. "You're great! Besides, you're not the only one with secrets."

Hazel stared at him. "I'm not?"

Frank started to say something. Then he tensed.

"What?" Hazel asked.

"The wind's stopped."

She looked around and noticed he was right. The air had become perfectly still.

"So?" she asked.

Frank swallowed. "So why is the grass still moving?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Hazel saw dark shapes ripple through the field.

"Hazel!" Frank tried to grab her arms, but it was too late.

Something knocked him backward. Then a force like a grassy hurricane wrapped around Hazel and dragged her into the fields.

HAZEL

HAZEL WAS AN EXPERT ON WEIRD. She'd seen her mother possessed by an earth goddess. She'd created a giant out of gold. She'd destroyed an island, died, and come back from the Underworld.

But getting kidnapped by a field of grass? That was new.

She felt as if she were trapped in a funnel cloud of plants. She'd heard of modern-day singers jumping into crowds of fans and getting passed overhead by thousands of hands. She imagined this was similar—only she was moving a thousand times faster, and the grass blades weren't adoring fans.

She couldn't sit up. She couldn't touch the ground. Her sword was still in her bedroll, strapped to her back, but she couldn't reach it. The plants kept her off balance, tossing her around, slicing her face and arms. She could barely make out the stars through the tumble of green, yellow, and black.

Frank's shouting faded into the distance.

It was hard to think clearly, but Hazel knew one thing: She was moving fast. Wherever she was being taken, she'd soon be too far away for her friends to find her.

She closed her eyes and tried to ignore the tumbling and tossing. She sent her thoughts into the earth below her. Gold, silver—she'd settle for anything that might disrupt her kidnappers.

She felt nothing. Riches under the earth—zero.

She was about to despair when she felt a huge cold spot pass beneath her. She locked onto it with all her concentration, dropping a mental anchor. Suddenly the ground rumbled. The swirl of plants released her and she was thrown upward like a catapult projectile.

Momentarily weightless, she opened her eyes. She twisted her body in midair. The ground was about twenty feet below her. Then she was falling. Her

combat training kicked in. She'd practiced dropping from giant eagles before. She tucked into a roll, turned the impact into a somersault, and came up standing.

She unslung her bedroll and drew her sword. A few yards to her left, an outcropping of rock the size of a garage jutted from the sea of grass. Hazel realized it was her anchor. She'd *caused* the rock to appear.

The grass rippled around it. Angry voices hissed in dismay at the massive clump of stone that had broken their progress. Before they could regroup, Hazel ran to the rock and clambered to the top.

The grass swayed and rustled around her like the tentacles of a gigantic undersea anemone. Hazel could sense her kidnappers' frustration.

"Can't grow on this, can you?" she yelled. "Go away, you bunch of weeds! Leave me alone!"

"Schist," said an angry voice from the grass.

Hazel raised her eyebrows. "Excuse me?"

"Schist! Big pile of schist!"

A nun at St. Agnes Academy had once washed Hazel's mouth with lye soap for saying something very similar, so she wasn't sure how to respond. Then, all around her rock island, the kidnappers materialized from the grass. At first glance they looked like Valentine angels—a dozen chubby little Cupid babies. As they stepped closer, Hazel realized they were neither cute nor angelic.

They were the size of toddlers, with rolls of baby fat, but their skin had a strange greenish hue, as if chlorophyll ran through their veins. They had dry, brittle wings like corn-husks, and tufts of white hair like corn silk. Their faces were haggard, pitted with kernels of grain. Their eyes were solid green, and their teeth were canine fangs.

The largest creature stepped forward. He wore a yellow loincloth, and his hair was spiky, like the bristles on a stalk of wheat. He hissed at Hazel and waddled back and forth so quickly, she was afraid his loincloth might fall off.

"Hate this schist!" the creature complained. "Wheat cannot grow!"

"Sorghum cannot grow!" another piped up.

"Barley!" yelled a third. "Barley cannot grow. Curse this schist!"

Hazel's knees wobbled. The little creatures might have been funny if they weren't surrounding her, staring up at her with those pointed teeth and hungry green eyes. They were like Cupid piranhas.

“Y-you mean the rock?” she managed. “This rock is called schist?”

“Yes, greenstone! Schist!” the first creature yelled. “Nasty rock.”

Hazel began to understand how she’d summoned it. “It’s a precious stone. It’s valuable?”

“Bah!” said the one in the yellow loincloth. “Foolish native people made jewelry from it, yes. Valuable? Maybe. Not as good as wheat.”

“Or sorghum!”

“Or barley!”

The others chimed in, calling out different types of grain. They circled the rock, making no effort to climb it—at least not yet. If they decided to swarm her, there was no way she could fend off all of them.

“You’re Gaea’s servants,” she guessed, just to keep them talking. Maybe Percy and Frank weren’t too far away. Maybe they’d be able to see her, standing so tall above the fields. She wished that her sword glowed like Percy’s.

The yellow-diapered Cupid snarled. “We are the *karpoi*, spirits of the grain. Children of the Earth Mother, yes! We have been her attendants since forever. Before nasty humans cultivated us, we were wild. We will be again. Wheat will destroy all!”

“No, sorghum will rule!”

“Barley shall dominate!”

The others joined in, each *karpos* cheering for his own variety.

“Right.” Hazel swallowed her revulsion. “So you’re Wheat, then—you in the yellow, um, britches.”

“Hmmm,” said Wheat. “Come down from your schist, demigod. We must take you to our mistress’s army. They will reward us. They will kill you slowly!”

“Tempting,” Hazel said, “but no thanks.”

“I will give you wheat!” said Wheat, as if this were a very fine offer in exchange for her life. “So much wheat!”

Hazel tried to think. How far had she been carried? How long would it take her friends to find her? The *karpoi* were getting bolder, approaching the rock in twos and threes, scratching at the schist to see if it would hurt them.

“Before I get down...” She raised her voice, hoping it would carry over the fields. “Um, explain something to me, would you? If you’re grain spirits, shouldn’t you be on the gods’ side? Isn’t the goddess of agriculture Ceres—”

“Evil name!” Barley wailed.

“Cultivates us!” Sorghum spat. “Makes us grow in disgusting rows. Lets humans harvest us. Pah! When Gaea is mistress of the world again, we will grow wild, yes!”

“Well, naturally,” Hazel said. “So this army of hers, where you’re taking me in exchange for wheat—”

“Or barley,” Barley offered.

“Yeah,” Hazel agreed. “This army is where, now?”

“Just over the ridge!” Sorghum clapped his hands excitedly. “The Earth Mother—oh, yes!—she told us: ‘Look for the daughter of Pluto who lives again. Find her! Bring her alive! I have many tortures planned for her.’ The giant Polybotes will reward us for your life! Then we will march south to destroy the Romans. We can’t be killed, you know. But you can, yes.”

“That’s wonderful.” Hazel tried to sound enthusiastic. It wasn’t easy, knowing Gaea had special revenge planned for her. “So you—you can’t be killed because Alcyoneus has captured Death, is that it?”

“Exactly!” Barley said.

“And he’s keeping him chained in Alaska,” Hazel said, “at...let’s see, what’s the name of that place?”

Sorghum started to answer, but Wheat flew at him and knocked him down. The *karpoi* began to fight, dissolving into funnel clouds of grain. Hazel considered making a run for it. Then Wheat re-formed, holding Sorghum in a headlock. “Stop!” he yelled at the others. “Multigrain fighting is not allowed!”

The *karpoi* solidified into chubby Cupid piranhas again.

Wheat pushed Sorghum away.

“Oh, clever demigod,” he said. “Trying to trick us into giving secrets. No, you’ll never find the lair of Alcyoneus.”

“I already know where it is,” she said with false confidence. “He’s on the island in Resurrection Bay.”

“Ha!” Wheat sneered. “That place sank beneath the waves long ago. You should know that! Gaea hates you for it. When you thwarted her plans, she was forced to sleep again. Decades and decades! Alcyoneus—not until the dark times was he able to rise.”

“The nineteen-eighties,” Barley agreed. “Horrible! Horrible!”

“Yes,” Wheat said. “And our mistress *still* sleeps. Alcyoneus was forced to

bide his time in the north, waiting, planning. Only now does Gaea begin to stir. Oh, but she remembers you, and so does her son!”

Sorghum cackled with glee. “You will never find the prison of Thanatos. All of Alaska is the giant’s home. He could be keeping Death anywhere! Years it would take you to find him, and your poor camp has only days. Better you surrender. We will give you grain. So much grain.”

Hazel’s sword felt heavy. She’d dreaded returning to Alaska, but at least she’d had an idea where to start looking for Thanatos. She’d assumed that the island where she had died hadn’t been completely destroyed, or possibly had risen again when Alcyoneus woke. She had hoped that his base would be there. But if the island was really gone, she had no idea how to find the giant. Alaska was huge. They could search for decades and never find him.

“Yes,” Wheat said, sensing her anguish. “Give up.”

Hazel gripped her *spatha*. “Never!” She raised her voice again, hoping it would somehow reach her friends. “If I have to destroy you all, I will. I am the daughter of Pluto!”

The *karpoi* advanced. They gripped the rock, hissing as if it were scalding hot, but they began to climb.

“Now you will die,” Wheat promised, gnashing his teeth. “You will feel the wrath of grain!”

Suddenly there was a whistling sound. Wheat’s snarl froze. He looked down at the golden arrow that had just pierced his chest. Then he dissolved into pieces of Chex Mix.

HAZEL

FOR A HEARTBEAT, HAZEL WAS just as stunned as the *karpoi*. Then Frank and Percy burst into the open and began to massacre every source of fiber they could find. Frank shot an arrow through Barley, who crumbled into seeds. Percy slashed Riptide through Sorghum and charged toward Millet and Oats. Hazel jumped down and joined the fight.

Within minutes, the *karpoi* had been reduced to piles of seeds and various breakfast cereals. Wheat started to re-form, but Percy pulled a lighter from his pack and sparked a flame.

“Try it,” he warned, “and I’ll set this whole field on fire. Stay dead. Stay away from us, or the grass gets it!”

Frank winced like the flame terrified him. Hazel didn’t understand why, but she shouted at the grain piles anyway: “He’ll do it! He’s crazy!”

The remnants of the *karpoi* scattered in the wind. Frank climbed the rock and watched them go.

Percy extinguished his lighter and grinned at Hazel.

“Thanks for yelling. We wouldn’t have found you otherwise.

How’d you hold them off so long?”

She pointed to the rock. “A big pile of schist.”

“Excuse me?”

“Guys,” Frank called from the top of the rock. “You need to see this.”

Percy and Hazel climbed up to join him. As soon as Hazel saw what he was looking at, she inhaled sharply. “Percy, no light! Put up your sword!”

“Schist!” He touched the sword tip, and Riptide shrank back into a pen.

Down below them, an army was on the move.

The field dropped into a shallow ravine, where a country road wound north

and south. On the opposite side of the road, grassy hills stretched to the horizon, empty of civilization except for one darkened convenience store at the top of the nearest rise.

The whole ravine was full of monsters—column after column marching south, so many and so close, Hazel was amazed they hadn't heard her shouting.

She, Frank, and Percy crouched against the rock. They watched in disbelief as several dozen large, hairy humanoids passed by, dressed in tattered bits of armor and animal fur. The creatures had six arms each, three sprouting on either side, so they looked like cavemen evolved from insects.

"Gegenes," Hazel whispered. "The Earthborn."

"You've fought them before?" Percy asked.

She shook her head. "Just heard about them in monster class at camp." She'd never liked monster class—reading Pliny the Elder and those other musty authors who described legendary monsters from the edges of the Roman Empire. Hazel believed in monsters, but some of the descriptions were so wild, she had thought they must be just ridiculous rumors.

Only now, a whole army of those rumors was marching by.

"The Earthborn fought the Argonauts," she murmured. "And those things behind them—"

"Centaur," Percy said. "But...that's not right. Centaurs are *good* guys."

Frank made a choking sound. "That's not what *we* were taught at camp. Centaurs are crazy, always getting drunk and killing heroes."

Hazel watched as the horse-men cantered past. They were human from the waist up, palomino from the waist down. They were dressed in barbarian armor of hide and bronze, armed with spears and slings. At first, Hazel thought they were wearing Viking helmets. Then she realized they had actual horns jutting from their shaggy hair.

"Are they supposed to have bull's horns?" she asked.

"Maybe they're a special breed," Frank said. "Let's not ask them, okay?"

Percy gazed farther down the road and his face went slack. "My gods ... Cyclopes."

Sure enough, lumbering after the centaurs was a battalion of one-eyed ogres, both male and female, each about ten feet tall, wearing armor cobbled out of junkyard metal. Six of the monsters were yoked like oxen, pulling a two-story-tall siege tower fitted with a giant scorpion ballista.

Percy pressed the sides of his head. “Cyclopes. Centaurs. This is wrong. All wrong.”

The monster army was enough to make anyone despair, but Hazel realized that something else was going on with Percy. He looked pale and sickly in the moonlight, as if his memories were trying to come back, scrambling his mind in the process.

She glanced at Frank. “We need to get him back to the boat. The sea will make him feel better.”

“No argument,” Frank said. “There are too many of them. The camp...we have to warn the camp.”

“They know,” Percy groaned. “Reyna knows.”

A lump formed in Hazel’s throat. There was no way the legion could fight so many. If they were only a few hundred miles north of Camp Jupiter, their quest was already doomed. They could never make it to Alaska and back in time.

“Come on,” she urged. “Let’s...”

Then she saw the giant.

When he appeared over the ridge, Hazel couldn’t quite believe her eyes. He was taller than the siege tower—thirty feet, at least—with scaly reptilian legs like a Komodo dragon from the waist down and green-blue armor from the waist up. His breastplate was shaped like rows of hungry monstrous faces, their mouths open as if demanding food. His face was human, but his hair was wild and green, like a mop of seaweed. As he turned his head from side to side, snakes dropped from his dreadlocks. Viper dandruff—gross.

He was armed with a massive trident and a weighted net.

Just the sight of those weapons made Hazel’s stomach clench. She’d faced that type of fighter in gladiator training many times. It was the trickiest, sneakiest, most evil combat style she knew. This giant was a supersize *retiarius*.

“Who is he?” Frank’s voice quivered. “That’s not—”

“Not Alcyoneus,” Hazel said weakly. “One of his brothers, I think. The one Terminus mentioned. The grain spirit mentioned him, too. That’s Polybotes.”

She wasn’t sure how she knew, but she could feel the giant’s aura of power even from here. She remembered that feeling from the Heart of the Earth as she had raised Alcyoneus—as if she were standing near a powerful magnet, and all the iron in her blood was being drawn toward it. This giant was another child of Gaea—a creature of the earth so malevolent and powerful, he radiated his own

gravitational field.

Hazel knew they should leave. Their hiding place on top of the rock would be in plain sight to a creature that tall if he chose to look in their direction. But she sensed something important was about to happen. She and her friends crept a little farther down the schist and kept watching.

As the giant got close, a Cyclops woman broke ranks and ran back to speak with him. She was enormous, fat, and horribly ugly, wearing a chain-mail dress like a muumuu—but next to the giant she looked like a child.

She pointed to the closed-up convenience store on top of the nearest hill and muttered something about food. The giant snapped back an answer, as if he was annoyed. The female Cyclopes barked an order to her kindred, and three of them followed her up the hill.

When they were halfway to the store, a searing light turned night into day. Hazel was blinded. Below her, the enemy army dissolved into chaos, monsters screaming in pain and outrage. Hazel squinted. She felt like she'd just stepped out of a dark theater into a sunny afternoon.

“Too pretty!” the Cyclopes shrieked. “Burns our eye!”

The store on the hill was encased in a rainbow, closer and brighter than any Hazel had ever seen. The light was anchored at the store, shooting up into the heavens, bathing the countryside in a weird kaleidoscopic glow.

The lady Cyclops hefted her club and charged at the store. As she hit the rainbow, her whole body began to steam. She wailed in agony and dropped her club, retreating with multicolored blisters all over her arms and face.

“Horrible goddess!” she bellowed at the store. “Give us snacks!”

The other monsters went crazy, charging the convenience store, then running away as the rainbow light burned them. Some threw rocks, spears, swords, and even pieces of their armor, all of which burned up in flames of pretty colors.

Finally the giant leader seemed to realize that his troops were throwing away perfectly good equipment.

“Stop!” he roared.

With some difficulty, he managed to shout and push and pummel his troops into submission. When they'd quieted down, he approached the rainbow-shielded store himself and stalked around the borders of the light. “Goddess!” he shouted. “Come out and surrender!”

No answer from the store. The rainbow continued to shimmer.

The giant raised his trident and net. “I am Polybotes! Kneel before me so I may destroy you quickly.”

Apparently, no one in the store was impressed. A tiny dark object came sailing out the window and landed at the giant’s feet. Polybotes yelled, “Grenade!”

He covered his face. His troops hit the ground.

When the thing did not explode, Polybotes bent down cautiously and picked it up.

He roared in outrage. “A Ding Dong? You dare insult me with a Ding Dong?” He threw the cake back at the shop, and it vaporized in the light.

The monsters got to their feet. Several muttered hungrily, “Ding Dongs? Where Ding Dongs?”

“Let’s attack,” said the lady Cyclops. “I am hungry. My boys want snacks!”

“No!” Polybotes said. “We’re already late. Alcyoneus wants us at the camp in four days’ time. You Cyclopes move inexcusably slowly. We have no time for *minor* goddesses!”

He aimed that last comment at the store, but got no response.

The lady Cyclops growled. “The camp, yes. Vengeance! The orange and purple ones destroyed my home. Now Ma Gasket will destroy theirs! Do you hear me, Leo? Jason? Piper? I come to annihilate you!”

The other Cyclopes bellowed in approval. The rest of the monsters joined in.

Hazel’s whole body tingled. She glanced at her friends. “Jason,” she whispered. “She fought Jason. He might still be alive.”

Frank nodded. “Do those other names mean anything to you?”

Hazel shook her head. She didn’t know any Leo or Piper at camp. Percy still looked sickly and dazed. If the names meant anything to him, he didn’t show it.

Hazel pondered what the Cyclops had said: *Orange and purple ones*. Purple—obviously the color of Camp Jupiter. But orange...Percy had shown up in a tattered orange shirt. That couldn’t be a coincidence.

Below them, the army began to march south again, but the giant Polybotes stood to one side, frowning and sniffing the air.

“Sea god,” he muttered. To Hazel’s horror, he turned in their direction. “I smell sea god.”

Percy was shaking. Hazel put her hand on his shoulder and tried to press him

flat against the rock.

The lady Cyclops Ma Gasket snarled. “Of course you smell sea god! The sea is right over there!”

“More than that,” Polybotes insisted. “I was born to destroy Neptune. I can sense...” He frowned, turning his head and shaking out a few more snakes.

“Do we march or sniff the air?” Ma Gasket scolded. “I don’t get Ding Dongs, you don’t get sea god!”

Polybotes growled. “Very well. March! March!” He took one last look at the rainbow-encased store, then raked his fingers through his hair. He brought out three snakes that seemed larger than the rest, with white markings around their necks. “A gift, goddess! My name, Polybotes, means ‘Many- to-Food!’ Here are some hungry mouths for you. See if your store gets many customers with these sentries outside.”

He laughed wickedly and threw the snakes into the tall grass on the hillside.

Then he marched south, his massive Komodo legs shaking the earth. Gradually, the last column of monsters passed over the hills and disappeared into the night.

Once they were gone, the blinding rainbow shut off like a spotlight.

Hazel, Frank, and Percy were left alone in the dark, staring across the road at a closed-up convenience store.

“That was different,” Frank muttered.

Percy shuddered violently. Hazel knew he needed help, or rest, or something. Seeing that army seemed to have triggered some kind of memory, leaving him shell-shocked. They should get him back to the boat.

On the other hand, a huge stretch of grassland lay between them and the beach. Hazel got the feeling the *karpoi* wouldn’t stay away forever. She didn’t like the idea of the three of them making their way back to the boat in the middle of the night. And she couldn’t shake the dreadful feeling that if she hadn’t summoned that schist, she’d be a captive of the giant right now.

“Let’s go to the store,” she said. “If there’s a goddess inside, maybe she can help us.”

“Except a bunch of snake things are guarding the hill now,” Frank said. “And that burning rainbow might comeback.”

They both looked at Percy, who was shaking like he had hypothermia.

“We’ve got to try,” Hazel said.

Frank nodded grimly. “Well...any goddess who throws a Ding Dong at a giant can't be all bad. Let's go.”

FRANK

FRANK HATED DING DONGS. He hated snakes. And he hated his life. Not necessarily in that order.

As he trudged up the hill, he wished that he could pass out like Hazel—just go into a trance and experience some other time, like before he got drafted for this insane quest, before he found out his dad was a godly drill sergeant with an ego problem.

His bow and spear slapped against his back. He hated the spear, too. The moment he got it, he silently swore he'd never use it. *A real man's weapon—* Mars was a moron.

Maybe there had been a mix-up. Wasn't there some sort of DNA test for gods' kids? Perhaps the godly nursery had accidentally switched Frank with one of Mars's buff little bully babies. No way would Frank's mother have gotten involved with that blustering war god.

She was a natural warrior, Grandmother's voice argued.

It is no surprise a god would fall in love with her, given our family. Ancient blood. The blood of princes and heroes.

Frank shook the thought out of his head. He was no prince or hero. He was a lactose-intolerant klutz, who couldn't even protect his friend from getting kidnapped by wheat.

His new medals felt cold against his chest: the centurion's crescent, the Mural Crown. He should've been proud of them, but he felt like he'd only gotten them because his dad had bullied Reyna.

Frank didn't know how his friends could stand to be around him. Percy had made it clear that he hated Mars, and Frank couldn't blame him. Hazel kept watching Frank out of the corner of her eye, like she was afraid he might turn into a muscle-bound freak.

Frank looked down at his body and sighed. Correction: even *more* of a muscle-bound freak. If Alaska really was a land beyond the gods, Frank might stay there. He wasn't sure he had anything to return to.

Don't whine, his grandmother would say. *Zhang men do not whine*.

She was right. Frank had a job to do. He had to complete this impossible quest, which at the moment meant reaching the convenience store alive.

As they got closer, Frank worried that the store might burst into rainbow light and vaporize them, but the building stayed dark. The snakes Polybotes had dropped seemed to have vanished.

They were twenty yards from the porch when something hissed in the grass behind them.

"Go!" Frank yelled.

Percy stumbled. While Hazel helped him up, Frank turned and nocked an arrow.

He shot blindly. He thought he'd grabbed an exploding arrow, but it was only a signal flare. It skidded through the grass, bursting into orange flame and whistling: *WOO!*

At least it illuminated the monster. Sitting in a patch of withered yellow grass was a lime-colored snake as short and thick as Frank's arm. Its head was ringed with a mane of spiky white fins. The creature stared at the arrow zipping by as if wondering, *What the heck is that?*

Then it fixed its large, yellow eyes on Frank. It advanced like an inchworm, hunching up in the middle. Wherever it touched, the grass withered and died.

Frank heard his friends climbing the steps of the store. He didn't dare turn and run. He and the snake studied each other. The snake hissed, flames billowing from its mouth.

"Nice creepy reptile," Frank said, very aware of the driftwood in his coat pocket. "Nice poisonous, fire-breathing reptile."

"Frank!" Hazel yelled behind him. "Come on!"

The snake sprang at him. It sailed through the air so fast, there wasn't time to nock an arrow. Frank swung his bow and smacked the monster down the hill. It spun out of sight, wailing, "*Screeeee!*"

Frank felt proud of himself until he looked at his bow, which was steaming where it had touched the snake. He watched in disbelief as the wood crumbled to dust.

He heard an outraged hiss, answered by two more hisses farther downhill.

Frank dropped his disintegrating bow and ran for the porch. Percy and Hazel pulled him up the steps. When Frank turned, he saw all three monsters circling in the grass, breathing fire and turning the hillside brown with their poisonous touch. They didn't seem able or willing to come closer to the store, but that wasn't much comfort to Frank. He'd lost his bow.

"We'll never get out of here," he said miserably.

"Then we'd better go in." Hazel pointed to the hand-painted sign over the door: RAINBOW ORGANIC FOODS & LIFESTYLES.

Frank had no idea what that meant, but it sounded better than flaming poisonous snakes. He followed his friends inside.

As they stepped through the door, lights came on. Flute music started up like they'd walked onto a stage. The wide aisles were lined with bins of nuts and dried fruit, baskets of apples, and clothing racks with tie-dyed shirts and gauzy Tinker

Bell-type dresses. The ceiling was covered in wind chimes. Along the walls, glass cases displayed crystal balls, geodes, macramé dream catchers, and a bunch of other strange stuff. Incense must have been burning somewhere. It smelled like a bouquet of flowers was on fire.

"Fortune-teller's shop?" Frank wondered.

"Hope not," Hazel muttered.

Percy leaned against her. He looked worse than ever, like he'd been hit with a sudden flu. His face glistened with sweat. "Sit down..." he muttered. "Maybe water."

"Yeah," Frank said. "Let's find you a place to rest."

The floorboards creaked under their feet. Frank navigated between two Neptune statue fountains.

A girl popped up from behind the granola bins. "Help you?"

Frank lurched backward, knocking over one of the fountains. A stone Neptune crashed to the floor. The sea god's head rolled off and water spewed out of his neck, spraying a rack of tie-dyed man satchels.

"Sorry!" Frank bent down to clean up the mess. He almost goosed the girl with his spear.

"Eep!" she said. "Hold it! It's okay!"

Frank straightened slowly, trying not to cause any more damage. Hazel looked mortified. Percy turned a sickly shade of green as he stared at the decapitated statue of his dad.

The girl clapped her hands. The fountain dissolved into mist. The water evaporated. She turned to Frank. “Really, it’s no problem. Those Neptune fountains are so grumpy-looking, they bum me out.”

She reminded Frank of the college-age hikers he some times saw in Lynn Canyon Park behind his grandmother’s house. She was short and muscular, with lace-up boots, cargo shorts, and a bright yellow T-shirt that read *R.O.F.L. Rainbow Organic Foods & Lifestyles*. She looked young, but her hair was frizzy white, sticking out on either side of her head like the white of a giant fried egg.

Frank tried to remember how to speak. The girl’s eyes were really distracting. The irises changed color from gray to black to white.

“Uh...sorry about the fountain,” he managed. “We were just—”

“Oh, I know!” the girl said. “You want to browse. It’s all right. Demigods are welcome. Take your time. You’re not like those awful monsters. They just want to use the restroom and never buy anything!”

She snorted. Her eyes flashed with lightning. Frank glanced at Hazel to see if he’d imagined it, but Hazel looked just as surprised.

From the back of the store, a woman’s voice called: “Fleecy? Don’t scare the customers, now. Bring them here, will you?”

“Your name is Fleecy?” Hazel asked.

Fleecy giggled. “Well, in the language of the *nebulae* it’s actually—” She made a series of crackling and blowing noises that reminded Frank of a thunderstorm giving way to a nice cold front. “But you can call me Fleecy.”

“*Nebulae*. . .” Percy muttered in a daze. “Cloud nymphs.”

Fleecy beamed. “Oh, I like this one! Usually *no one* knows about cloud nymphs. But dear me, he doesn’t look so good. Come to the back. My boss wants to meet you. We’ll get your friend fixed up.”

Fleecy led them through the produce aisle, between rows of eggplants, kiwis, lotus fruit, and pomegranates. At the back of the store, behind a counter with an old-fashioned cash register, stood a middle-aged woman with olive skin, long black hair, rimless glasses, and a T-shirt that read: *The Goddess Is Alive!* She wore amber necklaces and turquoise rings. She smelled like rose petals.

She looked friendly enough, but something about her made Frank feel shaky,

like he wanted to cry. It took him a second, then he realized what it was—the way she smiled with just one corner of her mouth, the warm brown color of her eyes, the tilt of her head, like she was considering a question. She reminded Frank of his mother.

“Hello!” She leaned over the counter, which was lined with dozens of little statues—waving Chinese cats, meditating Buddhas, Saint Francis bobble heads, and novelty dippy drinking birds with top hats. “So glad you’re here. I’m Iris!”

Hazel’s eyes widened. “Not *the* Iris—the rainbow goddess?”

Iris made a face. “Well, that’s my *official* job, yes. But I don’t define myself by my corporate identity. In my spare time, I run this!” She gestured around her proudly. “The R.O.F.L. Co-op—an employee-run cooperative promoting healthy alternative lifestyles and organic foods.”

Frank stared at her. “But you throw Ding Dongs at monsters.”

Iris looked horrified. “Oh, they’re not Ding Dongs.” She rummaged under the counter and brought out a package of chocolate-covered cakes that looked exactly like Ding Dongs. “These are gluten-free, no-sugar-added, vitamin-enriched, soy-free, goat-milk-and-seaweed-based cupcake simulations.”

“All natural!” Fleecy chimed in.

“I stand corrected.” Frank suddenly felt as queasy as Percy.

Iris smiled. “You should try one, Frank. You’re lactose intolerant, aren’t you?”

“How did you—”

“I know these things. Being the messenger goddess...well, I do learn a lot, hearing all the communications from the gods and so on.” She tossed the cakes on the counter. “Besides, those monsters should be glad to have some healthy snacks. Always eating junk food and heroes. They’re so *unenlightened*. I couldn’t have them tromping through my store, tearing up things and disturbing our *feng shui*.”

Percy leaned against the counter. He looked like he was going to throw up all over the goddess’s *feng shui*. “Monsters marching south,” he said with difficulty. “Going to destroy our camp. Couldn’t you stop them?”

“Oh, I’m strictly nonviolent,” Iris said. “I can act in self-defense, but I won’t be drawn into any more Olympian aggression, thank you very much. I’ve been reading about Buddhism. And Taoism. I haven’t decided between them.”

“But...” Hazel looked mystified. “Aren’t you a Greek goddess?”

Iris crossed her arms. “Don’t try to put me in a box, demigod! I’m not defined by my past.”

“Um, okay,” Hazel said. “Could you at least help our friend here? I think he’s sick.”

Percy reached across the counter. For a second Frank was afraid he wanted the cupcakes. “Iris-message,” he said. “Can you send one?”

Frank wasn’t sure he’d heard right. “Iris-message?”

“It’s...” Percy faltered. “Isn’t that something you do?”

Iris studied Percy more closely. “Interesting. You’re from Camp Jupiter, and yet...Oh, I see. Juno is up to her tricks.”

“What?” Hazel asked.

Iris glanced at her assistant, Fleecy. They seemed to have a silent conversation. Then the goddess pulled a vial from behind the counter and sprayed some honeysuckle-smelling oil around Percy’s face. “There, that should balance your *chakra*. As for Iris-messages—that’s an ancient way of communication. The Greeks used it. The Romans never took to it—always relying on their road systems and giant eagles and whatnot. But yes, I imagine... Fleecy, could you give it a try?”

“Sure, boss!”

Iris winked at Frank. “Don’t tell the other gods, but Fleecy handles most of my messages these days. She’s wonderful at it, really, and I don’t have time to answer all those requests personally. It messes up my *wa*.”

“Your *wa*?” Frank asked.

“Mmm. Fleecy, why don’t you take Percy and Hazel into the back? You can get them something to eat while you arrange their messages. And for Percy... yes, memory sickness. I imagine that old Polybotes...well, meeting him in a state of amnesia *can’t* be good for a child of P—that is to say, Neptune. Fleecy, give him a cup of green tea with organic honey and wheat germ and some of my medicinal powder number five. That should fix him up.”

Hazel frowned. “What about Frank?”

Iris turned to him. She tilted her head quizzically, just the way his mother used to—as if Frank were the biggest question in the room.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Iris said. “Frank and I have a lot to talk about.”

FRANK

FRANK WOULD'VE PREFERRED TO go with his friends, even if it meant he had to endure green tea with wheat germ. But Iris roped her arm through his and led him to a café table at a bay window. Frank set his spear on the floor. He sat across from Iris. Outside in the dark, the snake monsters restlessly patrolled the hillside, spewing fire and poisoning the grass.

“Frank, I know how you feel,” Iris said. “I imagine that half-burned stick in your pocket gets heavier every day.”

Frank couldn't breathe. His hand went instinctively to his coat. “How do you —?”

“I told you. I know things. I was Juno's messenger for ages. I know why she gave you a reprieve.”

“A reprieve?” Frank brought out the piece of firewood and unwrapped it from its cloth. As unwieldy as Mars's spear was, the piece of tinder was worse. Iris was right. It weighed him down.

“Juno saved you for a reason,” the goddess said. “She wants you to serve her plan. If she hadn't appeared that day when you were a baby and warned your mother about the firewood, you would've died. You were born with too many gifts. That sort of power tends to burn out a mortal life.”

“Too many gifts?” Frank felt his ears getting warm with anger. “I don't have *any* gifts!”

“That's not true, Frank.” Iris swiped her hand in front of her like she was cleaning a windshield. A miniature rainbow appeared. “Think about it.”

An image shimmered in the rainbow. Frank saw himself when he was four years old, running across Grandmother's backyard. His mother leaned out the window of the attic, high above, waving and calling to get his attention. Frank wasn't supposed to be in the backyard by himself. He didn't know why his

mother was up in the attic, but she told him to stay by the house, not to go too far. Frank did exactly the opposite. He squealed with delight and ran to the edge of the woods, where he came face to face with a grizzly bear.

Until Frank saw that scene in the rainbow, the memory had been so hazy, he thought he'd dreamed it. Now he could appreciate just how surreal the experience had been. The bear regarded the little boy, and it was difficult to tell who was more startled. Then Frank's mother appeared at his side. There was no way she should have been able to get down from the attic so fast. She put herself between the bear and Frank and told him to run to the house. This time, Frank obeyed. When he turned at the back porch, he saw his mother coming out of the woods. The bear was gone. Frank asked what had happened. His mother smiled. *Mama Bear just needed directions*, she said.

The scene in the rainbow changed. Frank saw himself as a six-year-old, curling up in his mother's lap even though he was much too big for that. His mother's long black hair was pulled back. Her arms were around him. She wore her rimless glasses that Frank always liked to steal, and her fuzzy gray fleece pullover that smelled like cinnamon. She was telling him stories about heroes, pretending they were all related to Frank: one was Xu Fu, who sailed in search of the elixir of life. The rainbow image had no sound, but Frank remembered his mother's words: *He was your great-great-great-...* She would poke Frank's stomach every time she said *great-*, dozens of times, until he was giggling uncontrollably.

Then there was Sung Guo, also called Seneca Gracchus, who fought twelve Roman dragons and sixteen Chinese dragons in the western deserts of China. *He was the strongest dragon of all, you see*, his mother said. *That's how he could beat them!* Frank didn't know what that meant, but it sounded exciting.

Then she poked his belly with so many *greats*, Frank rolled onto the floor to escape the tickling. *And your very oldest ancestor that we know of: he was the Prince of Pylos! Hercules fought him once. It was a hard fight!*

Did we win? Frank asked.

His mother laughed, but there was sadness in her voice. *No, our ancestor lost. But it wasn't easy for Hercules. Imagine trying to fight a swarm of bees. That's how it was. Even Hercules had trouble!*

The comment made no sense to Frank, then or now. His ancestor had been a beekeeper?

Frank hadn't thought about these stories in years, but now they came back to

him as clearly as his mother's face. It hurt to see her again. Frank wanted to go back to that time. He wanted to be a little kid and curl up on her lap.

In the rainbow image, little Frank asked where their family was from. So many heroes! Were they from Pylos, or Rome, or China, or Canada?

His mother smiled, tilting her head as if considering how to answer.

Li-Jien, she said at last. *Our family is from many places, but our home is Li-Jien. Always remember, Frank: you have a special gift. You can be anything.*

The rainbow dissolved, leaving just Iris and Frank.

"I don't understand." His voice was hoarse.

"Your mother explained it," Iris said. "You can be anything."

It sounded like one of those stupid things parents say to boost your self-esteem—a worn-out slogan that could be printed on Iris's T-shirts, right along with *The Goddess Is Alive!* and *My Other Car Is a Magic Carpet!* But the way Iris said it, it sounded like a challenge.

Frank pressed his hand against his pants pocket, where he kept his mother's sacrifice medal. The silver medallion was cold as ice.

"I *can't* be anything," Frank insisted. "I've got zero skills."

"What have you tried?" Iris asked. "You wanted to be an archer. You managed that pretty well. You've only scratched the surface. Your friends Hazel and Percy—they're both stretched between worlds: Greek and Roman, the past and the present. But you are stretched more than either of them.

Your family is ancient—the blood of Pylos on your mother's side, and your father is Mars. No wonder Juno wants you to be one of her seven heroes. She wants you to fight the giants and Gaea. But think about this: What do *you* want?"

"I don't have any choice," Frank said. "I'm the son of the stupid war god. I have to go on this quest and—"

"*Have* to," Iris said. "Not *want* to. I used to think like that. Then I got tired of being everyone's servant. Fetch goblets of wine for Jupiter. Deliver letters for Juno. Send messages back and forth across the rainbow for anyone with a golden *drachma*."

"A golden what?"

"Not important. But I learned to let go. I started R.O.F.L., and now I'm free of that baggage. You can let go, too. Maybe you can't escape fate. Someday that piece of wood *will* burn. I foresee that you'll be holding it when it happens, and your life will end—"

“Thanks,” Frank muttered.

“—but that just makes your life more precious! You don’t have to be what your parents and your grandmother expect.

You don’t have to follow the war god’s orders, or Juno’s. Do your own thing, Frank! Find a new path!”

Frank thought about that. The idea was thrilling: reject the gods, his destiny, his dad. He didn’t want to be a war god’s son. His mother had *died* in a war. Frank had lost everything thanks to a war. Mars clearly didn’t know the first thing about him. Frank didn’t want to be a hero.

“Why are you telling me this?” he asked. “You want me to abandon the quest, let Camp Jupiter be destroyed? My friends are counting on me.”

Iris spread her hands. “I can’t tell you what to do, Frank.

But do what you *want*, not what they tell you to do. Where did conforming ever get me? I spent five millennia serving everyone else, and I never discovered my own identity. What’s my sacred animal? No one bothered to give me one. Where are my temples? They never made any. Well, fine! I’ve found peace here at the co-op. You could stay with us, if you want.

Become a ROFLcopter.”

“A what, now?”

“The point is you have options. If you continue this quest...what happens when you free Thanatos? Will it be good for your family? Your friends?”

Frank remembered what his grandmother had said: she had an appointment with Death. Grandmother infuriated him sometimes; but still, she was his only living family, the only person alive who loved him. If Thanatos stayed chained up, Frank might not lose her. And Hazel—somehow she had come back from the Underworld. If Death took her again, Frank wouldn’t be able to stand it. Not to mention Frank’s own problem: according to Iris, he should have died when he was a baby. All that stood between him and Death was a half-burned stick. Would Thanatos take him away, too?

Frank tried to imagine staying here with Iris, putting on a R.O.F.L. shirt, selling crystals and dream catchers to demigod travelers and lobbying gluten-free cupcake simulations at passing monsters. Meanwhile, an undying army would overrun Camp Jupiter.

You can be anything, his mother had said.

No, he thought. *I can’t be that selfish.*

“I have to go,” he said. “It’s my job.”

Iris sighed. “I expected as much, but I had to try. The task ahead of you... Well, I wouldn’t wish it on anyone, especially a nice boy like you. If you must go, at least I can offer some advice. You’ll need help finding Thanatos.” “You know where the giants are hiding him?” Frank asked.

Iris gazed thoughtfully at the wind chimes swaying on the ceiling. “No... Alaska is beyond the gods’ sphere of control. The location is shielded from my sight. But there *is* someone who would know. Seek out the seer Phineas. He’s blind, but he can see the past, present, and future. He knows many things. He can tell you where Thanatos is being held.”

“Phineas...” Frank said. “Wasn’t there a story about him?”

Iris nodded reluctantly. “In the old days, he committed horrible crimes. He used his gift of sight for evil. Jupiter sent the harpies to plague him. The Argonauts—including your ancestor, by the way—”

“The prince of Pylos?”

Iris hesitated. “Yes, Frank. Though his gift, his story...*that* you must discover on your own. Suffice it to say, the Argonauts drove away the harpies in exchange for Phineas’s help. That was eons ago, but I understand Phineas has returned to the mortal world. You’ll find him in Portland, Oregon, which is on your way north. But you must promise me one thing. If he’s still plagued by harpies, do *not* kill them, no matter what Phineas promises you. Win his help some other way. The harpies are not evil. They’re my sisters.”

“Your sisters?”

“I know. I don’t look old enough to be the harpies’ sister, but it’s true. And Frank...there’s another problem. If you’re determined to leave, you’ll have to clear those basilisks off the hill.”

“You mean the snakes?”

“Yes,” Iris said. “Basilisk means ‘little crown,’ which is a cute name for something that’s not very cute. I’d prefer not to have them killed. They’re living creatures, after all. But you won’t be able to leave until they’re gone. If your friends try to battle them...well, I foresee see bad things happening. Only *you* have the ability to kill the monsters.”

“But how?”

She glanced down at the floor. Frank realized that she was looking at his spear.

“I wish there was another way,” she said. “If you had some weasels, for instance. Weasels are deadly to basilisks.”

“Fresh out of weasels,” Frank admitted.

“Then you will have to use your father’s gift. Are you sure you wouldn’t like to live here instead? We make excellent lactose-free rice milk.”

Frank rose. “How do I use the spear?”

“You’ll have to handle that on your own. I can’t advocate violence. While you’re doing battle, I’ll check on your friends. I hope Fleecy found the right medicinal herbs. The last time, we had a mix-up....Well, I don’t think those heroes *wanted* to be daisies.”

The goddess stood. Her glasses flashed, and Frank saw his own reflection in the lenses. He looked serious and grim, nothing like the little boy he’d seen in those rainbow images.

“One last bit of advice, Frank,” she said. “You’re destined to die holding that piece of firewood, watching it burn. But perhaps if you didn’t keep it yourself. Perhaps if you trusted someone enough to hold it for you...”

Frank’s fingers curled around the tinder. “Are you offering?”

Iris laughed gently. “Oh, dear, no. I’d lose it in this collection. It would get mixed up with my crystals, or I’d sell it as a driftwood paperweight by accident. No, I meant a demigod friend. Someone close to your heart.”

Hazel, Frank thought immediately. There was no one he trusted more. But how could he confess his secret? If he admitted how weak he was, that his whole life depended on a half-burned stick...Hazel would never see him as a hero. He’d never be her knight in armor. And how could he expect her to take that kind of burden from him?

He wrapped up the tinder and slipped it back into his coat. “Thanks ... thanks, Iris.”

She squeezed his hand. “Don’t lose hope, Frank. Rainbows always stand for hope.”

She made her way toward the back of the store, leaving Frank alone.

“Hope,” Frank grumbled. “I’d rather have a few good weasels.”

He picked up his father’s spear and marched out to face the basilisks.

FRANK

FRANK MISSED HIS BOW.

He wanted to stand on the porch and shoot the snakes from a distance. A few well-placed exploding arrows, a few craters in the hillside—problem solved.

Unfortunately, a quiver full of arrows wouldn't do Frank much good if he couldn't shoot them. Besides, he had no idea where the basilisks were. They'd stopped blowing fire as soon as he came outside.

He stepped off the porch and leveled his golden spear. He didn't like fighting up close. He was too slow and bulky. He'd done okay during the war games, but this was real. There were no giant eagles ready to snatch him up and take him to the medics if he made a mistake.

You can be anything. His mother's voice echoed in his mind.

Great, he thought. I want to be good with a spear. And immune to poison—and fire.

Something told Frank his wish had not been granted. The spear felt just as awkward in his hands.

Patches of flame still smoldered on the hillside. The acrid smoke burned in Frank's nose. The withered grass crunched under his feet.

He thought about those stories his mother used to tell—generations of heroes who had battled Hercules, fought dragons, and sailed monster-infested seas. Frank didn't understand how he could have evolved from a line like that, or how his family had migrated from Greece through the Roman Empire all the way to China, but some unsettling ideas were starting to form. For the first time, he started to wonder about this Prince of Pylos, and his great-grandfather Shen Lun's disgrace at Camp Jupiter, and what the family powers might be.

The gift has never kept our family safe, Grandmother had warned.

A reassuring thought as Frank hunted poisonous fire-breathing devil snakes.

The night was quiet except for the crackle of brush fires. Every time a breeze made the grass rustle, Frank thought about the grain spirits who'd captured Hazel. Hopefully they'd gone south with the giant Polybotes. Frank didn't need any more problems right now.

He crept downhill, his eyes stinging from the smoke. Then, about twenty feet ahead, he saw a burst of flame.

He considered throwing his spear. Stupid idea. Then he'd be without a weapon. Instead he advanced toward the fire.

He wished he had the gorgon's blood vials, but they were back at the boat. He wondered if gorgon blood could cure basilisk poison....But even if he had the vials and managed to choose the right one, he doubted he'd have time to take it before he crumbled to dust like his bow.

He emerged in a clearing of burned grass and found himself face-to-face with a basilisk.

The snake rose up on its tail. It hissed, and expanded the collar of white spikes around its neck. *Little crown*, Frank remembered. That's what "basilisk" meant. He had thought basilisks were huge dragon like monsters that could petrify you with their eyes. Somehow the real basilisk was even more terrible. As tiny as it was, this extra-small package of fire, poison, and evil would be much harder to kill than a large, bulky lizard. Frank had seen how fast it could move.

The monster fixed its pale yellow eyes on Frank.

Why wasn't it attacking?

Frank's golden spear felt cold and heavy. The dragon-tooth point dipped toward the ground all on its own—like a dowsing rod searching for water.

"Stop that." Frank struggled to lift the spear. He'd have enough trouble jabbing the monster without his spear fighting against him. Then he heard the grass rustle on either side of him. The other two basilisks slithered into the clearing.

Frank had walked straight into an ambush.

FRANK

FRANK SWEEPED HIS SPEAR BACK AND FORTH. “Stay back!” His voice sounded squeaky. “I’ve got . . . um...amazing powers—and stuff.”

The basilisks hissed in three-part harmony. Maybe they were laughing.

The spear tip was almost too heavy to lift now, as if the jagged white triangle of bone was trying to touch the earth. Then something clicked in the back of Frank’s mind: Mars had said the tip was a dragon’s tooth. Hadn’t there been some story about dragon’s teeth planted in the ground? Something he’d read in monster class at camp...?

The basilisks circled him, taking their time. Maybe they were hesitating because of the spear. Maybe they just couldn’t believe how stupid Frank was.

It seemed like madness, but Frank let the spear tip drop. He drove it into the ground. *Crack.*

When he lifted it out, the tip was gone—broken off in the dirt.

Wonderful. Now he had a golden stick.

Some crazy part of him wanted to bring out his piece of firewood. If he was going to die anyway, maybe he could set off a massive blaze—incinerate the basilisks, so at least his friends could get away.

Before he could get up the courage, the ground rumbled at his feet. Dirt spewed everywhere, and a skeletal hand clawed the air. The basilisks hissed and backed up.

Frank couldn’t blame them. He watched in horror as a human skeleton crawled out of the ground. It took on flesh as if someone were pouring gelatin over its bones, covering them in glowing, transparent gray skin. Then ghostly clothes enveloped it—a muscle shirt, camo pants, and army boots. Everything about the creature was gray: gray clothes on gray flesh on gray bones.

It turned toward Frank. Its skull grinned beneath an expressionless gray face.

Frank whimpered like a puppy. His legs shook so badly he had to support himself with the spear shaft. The skeleton warrior was waiting, Frank realized—waiting for orders.

“Kill the basilisks!” he yelled. “Not me!”

The skeletal warrior leaped into action. He grabbed the nearest snake, and though his gray flesh began to smoke on contact, he strangled the basilisk with one hand and flung down its limp body. The other two basilisks hissed with rage. One sprang at Frank, but he knocked it aside with the butt of his spear.

The other snake belched fire directly in the skeleton’s face. The warrior marched forward and stomped the basilisk’s head under his boot.

Frank turned toward the last basilisk, which was curled at the edge of the clearing studying them. Frank’s Imperial gold spear shaft was steaming, but unlike his bow, it didn’t seem to be crumbling from the basilisk’s touch. The skeleton warrior’s right foot and hand were slowly dissolving from poison. His head was on fire, but otherwise he looked pretty good.

The basilisk did the smart thing. It turned to flee. In a blur of motion, the skeleton pulled something from his shirt and flung it across the clearing, impaling the basilisk in the dirt. Frank thought it was a knife. Then he realized it was one of the skeleton’s own ribs.

Frank was glad his stomach was empty. “That...that was *gross*.”

The skeleton stumbled over to the basilisk. It pulled out its rib and used it to cut off the creature’s head. The basilisk dissolved into ashes. Then the skeleton decapitated the other two monster carcasses and kicked all the ashes to disperse them. Frank remembered the two gorgons in the Tiber—the way the river had pulled apart their remains to keep them from re-forming. “You’re making sure they don’t come back,” Frank realized.

“Or slowing them down, anyway.”

The skeleton warrior stood at attention in front of Frank. Its poisoned foot and hand were mostly gone. Its head was still burning.

“What—what are you?” Frank asked. He wanted to add, *Please don’t hurt me*.

The skeleton saluted with its stump of a hand. Then it began to crumble, sinking back into the ground.

“Wait!” Frank said. “I don’t even know what to call you! Tooth Man? Bones? Gray?”

As its face disappeared beneath the dirt, the warrior seemed to grin at the last name—or maybe that was just its skeletal teeth showing. Then it was gone, leaving Frank alone with his pointless spear.

“Gray,” he muttered. “Okay ... but...”

He examined the tip of his spear. Already, a new dragon tooth was starting to grow out of the golden shaft.

You get three charges out of it, Mars had said, so use it wisely.

Frank heard footsteps behind him. Percy and Hazel ran into the clearing. Percy looked better, except he was carrying a tie-dyed man satchel from R.O.F.L.—definitely *not* his style. Riptide was in his hand. Hazel had drawn her *spatha*.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Percy turned in a circle, looking for enemies. “Iris told us you were out here battling the basilisks by yourself, and we were like, *What?* We came as fast as we could. What happened?”

“I’m not sure,” Frank admitted.

Hazel crouched next to the dirt where Gray disappeared. “I sense death. Either my brother has been here or...the basilisks are dead?”

Percy stared at him in awe. “You killed them *all?*”

Frank swallowed. He already felt like enough of a misfit without trying to explain his new undead minion.

Three charges. Frank could call on Gray twice more. But he’d sensed malevolence in the skeleton. It was no pet. It was a vicious, undead killing force, barely controlled by the power of Mars. Frank got the feeling it would do what he said—but if his friends happened to be in the line of fire, oh well. And if Frank was a little slow giving it directions, it might start killing whatever was in its path, including its master.

Mars had told him the spear would give him breathing room until he learned to use his mother’s talents. Which meant Frank needed to learn those talents—*fast*.

“Thanks a lot, Dad,” he grumbled.

“What?” Hazel asked. “Frank, are you okay?”

“I’ll explain later,” he said. “Right now, there’s a blind man in Portland we’ve got to see.”

PERCY

PERCY ALREADY FELT LIKE THE lamest demigod in the history of lame. The purse was the final insult.

They'd left R.O.F.L. in a hurry, so maybe Iris hadn't meant the bag as a criticism. She'd quickly stuffed it with vitamin-enriched pastries, dried fruit leather, macrobiotic beef jerky, and a few crystals for good luck. Then she'd shoved it at Percy:

Here, you'll need this. Oh, that looks good. The purse—sorry, *masculine accessory bag*—was rainbow tie-dyed with a peace symbol stitched in wooden beads and the slogan *Hug the Whole World*. Percy wished it said *Hug the Commode*. He felt like the bag was a comment on his mas sive, incredible uselessness. As they sailed north, he put the man satchel as far away from him as he could, but the boat was small.

He couldn't believe how he'd broken down when his friends had needed him. First, he'd been dumb enough to leave them alone when he had run back to the boat, and Hazel had gotten kidnapped. Then he'd watched that army marching south and had some kind of nervous breakdown.

Embarrassing? Yeah. But he couldn't help it. When he'd seen those evil centaurs and Cyclopes, it had seemed so wrong, so backward, that he thought his head would explode. And the giant Polybotes...that giant had given him a feeling the opposite of what he felt when he stood in the ocean. Percy's energy had drained out of him, leaving him weak and feverish, like his insides were eroding.

Iris's medicinal tea had helped his body feel better, but his mind still hurt. He'd heard stories about amputees who had phantom pains where their missing legs and arms used to be. That's how his mind felt—like his missing memories were aching.

Worst of all, the farther north Percy went, the more those memories faded. He had started to feel better at Camp Jupiter, remembering random names and faces. But now even Annabeth's face was getting dimmer. At R.O.F.L., when he'd tried to send an Iris-message to Annabeth, Fleecy had just shaken her head sadly.

It's like you're dialing somebody, she said, but you've forgotten the number. Or someone is jamming the signal. Sorry, dear. I just can't connect you.

He was terrified that he'd lose Annabeth's face completely when he got to Alaska. Maybe he'd wake up one day and not remember her name.

Still, he had to concentrate on the quest. The sight of that enemy army had shown him what they were up against. It was early in the morning of June 21, now. They had to get to Alaska, find Thanatos, locate the legion's standard, and make it back to Camp Jupiter by the evening of June 24. Four days. Meanwhile, the enemy had only a few hundred miles to march.

Percy guided the boat through the strong currents off the northern California coast. The wind was cold, but it felt good, clearing some of the confusion from his head. He bent his will to push the boat as hard as he could. The hull rattled as the *Pax* plowed its way north.

Meanwhile, Hazel and Frank traded stories about the events at Rainbow Organic Foods. Frank explained about the blind seer Phineas in Portland, and how Iris had said that he might be able to tell them where to find Thanatos. Frank wouldn't say how he had managed to kill the basilisks, but Percy got the feeling it had something to do with the broken point of his spear. Whatever had happened, Frank sounded more scared of the spear than the basilisks.

When he was done, Hazel told Frank about their time with Fleecy.

"So this Iris-message worked?" Frank asked.

Hazel gave Percy a sympathetic look. She didn't mention his failure to contact Annabeth.

"I got in touch with Reyna," she said. "You're supposed to throw a coin into a rainbow and say this incantation, like *O Iris, goddess of the rainbow, accept my offering*. Except Fleecy kind of changed it. She gave us her—what did she call it—her direct number? So I had to say, *O Fleecy, do me a solid. Show Reyna at Camp Jupiter*. I felt kind of stupid, but it worked. Reyna's image appeared in the rainbow, like in a two-way video call. She was in the baths. Scared her out of her mind."

“That I would’ve paid to see,” Frank said. “I mean—her expression. Not, you know, the baths.”

“Frank!” Hazel fanned her face like she needed air. It was an old-fashioned gesture, but cute, somehow. “Anyway, we told Reyna about the army, but like Percy said, she pretty much already knew. It doesn’t change anything. She’s doing what she can to shore up the defenses. Unless we unleash Death, and get back with the eagle—”

“The camp can’t stand against that army,” Frank finished. “Not without help.”

After that, they sailed in silence.

Percy kept thinking about Cyclopes and centaurs. He thought about Annabeth, the satyr Grover, and his dream of a giant warship under construction.

You came from somewhere, Reyna had said.

Percy wished he could remember. He could call for help. Camp Jupiter shouldn’t have to fight alone against the giants. There must be allies out there.

He fingered the beads on his necklace, the lead *probatio* tablet, and the silver ring Reyna had given him. Maybe in Seattle he’d be able to talk to her sister Hylla. She might send help—assuming she didn’t kill Percy on sight.

After a few more hours of navigating, Percy’s eyes started to droop. He was afraid he’d pass out from exhaustion. Then he caught a break. A killer whale surfaced next to the boat, and Percy struck up a mental conversation with him.

It wasn’t exactly like talking, but it went something like this: *Could you give us a ride north,* Percy asked, *like as close to Portland as possible?*

Eat seals, the whale responded. *Are you seals?*

No, Percy admitted. *I’ve got a man satchel full of macrobiotic beef jerky, though.*

The whale shuddered. *Promise not to feed me this, and I will take you north. Deal.*

Soon Percy had made a makeshift rope harness and strapped it around the whale’s upper body. They sped north under whale-power, and at Hazel and Frank’s insistence, Percy settled in for a nap.

His dreams were as disjointed and scary as ever.

He imagined himself on Mount Tamalpais, north of San Francisco, fighting at the old Titan stronghold. That didn’t make sense. He hadn’t been with the

Romans when they had attacked, but he saw it all clearly: a Titan in armor, Annabeth and two other girls fighting at Percy's side. One of the girls died in the battle. Percy knelt over her, watching as she dissolved into stars.

Then he saw the giant warship in its dry dock. The bronze dragon figurehead glinted in the morning light. The riggings and armaments were complete, but something was wrong. A hatch in the deck was open, and smoke poured from some kind of engine. A boy with curly black hair was cursing as he pounded the engine with a wrench. Two other demigods squatted next to him, watching with concern. One was a teenage guy with short blond hair. The other was a girl with long dark hair.

"You realize it's the solstice," the girl said. "We're supposed to leave today."

"I know that!" The curly-haired mechanic whacked the engine a few more times. "Could be the fizzrockets. Could be the samophlange. Could be Gaea messing with us again. I'm not sure!"

"How long?" the blond guy asked.

"Two, three days?"

"They may not have that long," the girl warned.

Something told Percy that she meant Camp Jupiter. Then the scene shifted again.

He saw a boy and his dog roaming over the yellow hills of California. But as the image became clearer, Percy realized it wasn't a boy. It was a Cyclops in ragged jeans and a flannel shirt. The dog was a shambling mountain of black fur, easily as big as a rhino. The Cyclops carried a massive club over his shoulder, but Percy didn't feel that he was an enemy. He kept yelling Percy's name, calling him...brother?

"He smells farther away," the Cyclops moaned to the dog. "Why does he smell farther?"

"ROOF!" the dog barked, and Percy's dream changed again.

He saw a range of snowy mountains, so tall they broke the clouds. Gaea's sleeping face appeared in the shadows of the rocks.

Such a valuable pawn, she said soothingly. Do not fear, Percy Jackson. Come north! Your friends will die, yes. But I will preserve you for now. I have great plans for you.

In a valley between the mountains lay a massive field of ice. The edge plunged into the sea, hundreds of feet below, with sheets of frost constantly

crumbling into the water. On top of the ice field stood a legion camp—ramparts, moats, towers, barracks, just like Camp Jupiter except three times as large. At the crossroads outside the *principia*, a figure in dark robes stood shackled to the ice. Percy's vision swept past him, into the headquarters. There, in the gloom, sat a giant even bigger than Polybotes. His skin glinted gold. Displayed behind him were the tattered, frozen banners of a Roman legion, including a large, golden eagle with its wings spread.

We await you, the giant's voice boomed. While you fumble your way north, trying to find me, my armies will destroy your precious camps—first the Romans, then the others. You cannot win, little demigod.

Percy lurched awake in cold gray daylight, rain falling on his face.

"I thought *I* slept heavily," Hazel said. "Welcome to Portland."

Percy sat up and blinked. The scene around him was so different from his dream, he wasn't sure which was real. The *Pax* floated on an iron-black river through the middle of a city. Heavy clouds hung low overhead. The cold rain was so light, it seemed suspended in the air. On Percy's left were industrial warehouses and railroad tracks. To his right was a small downtown area—an almost cozy-looking cluster of towers between the banks of the river and a line of misty forested hills.

Percy rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. "How did we get here?"

Frank gave him a look like, *You won't believe this*. "The killer whale took us as far as the Columbia River. Then he passed the harness to a couple of twelve-foot sturgeons."

Percy thought Frank had said *surgeons*. He had this weird image of giant doctors in scrubs and face masks, pulling their boat upstream. Then he realized Frank meant sturgeons, like the fish. He was glad he hadn't said anything. Would have been embarrassing, his being son of the sea god and all.

"Anyway," Frank continued, "the sturgeons pulled us for a long time. Hazel and I took turns sleeping. Then we hit this river—"

"The Willamette," Hazel offered.

"Right," Frank said. "After that, the boat kind of took over and navigated us here all by itself. Sleep okay?"

As the *Pax* glided south, Percy told them about his dreams. He tried to focus on the positive: a warship might be on the way to help Camp Jupiter. A friendly

Cyclops and a giant dog were looking for him. He didn't mention what Gaea had said: *Your friends will die.*

When Percy described the Roman fort on the ice, Hazel looked troubled.

"So Alcyoneus is on a glacier," she said. "That doesn't narrow it down much. Alaska has hundreds of those."

Percy nodded. "Maybe this seer dude Phineas can tell us which one."

The boat docked itself at a wharf. The three demigods stared up at the buildings of drizzly downtown Portland.

Frank wiped the rain off his flat-top hair.

"So now we find a blind man in the rain," Frank said.

"Yay."

PERCY

IT WASN'T AS HARD AS THEY THOUGHT. The screaming and the weed whacker helped.

They'd brought lightweight Polartec jackets with their supplies, so they bundled up against the cold rain and walked for a few blocks through the mostly deserted streets. This time Percy was smart and brought most of his supplies from the boat. He even stuffed the macrobiotic jerky in his coat pocket, in case he needed to threaten any more killer whales.

They saw some bicycle traffic and a few homeless guy shuddled in doorways, but the majority of Portlanders seemed to be staying indoors.

As they made their way down Glisan Street, Percy looked longingly at the folks in the cafés enjoying coffee and pastries. He was about to suggest that they stop for breakfast when he heard a voice down the street yelling: "HA! TAKE THAT, STUPID CHICKENS!" followed by the revving of a small engine and a lot of squawking.

Percy glanced at his friends. "You think—?"

"Probably," Frank agreed.

They ran toward the sounds.

The next block over, they found a big open parking lot with tree-lined sidewalks and rows of food trucks facing the streets on all four sides. Percy had seen food trucks before, but never so many in once place. Some were simple white metal boxes on wheels, with awnings and serving counters. Others were painted blue or purple or polka-dotted, with big banners out front and colorful menu boards and tables like do-it-yourself sidewalk cafés. One advertised Korean/Brazilian fusion tacos, which sounded like some kind of top-secret radioactive cuisine. Another offered sushi on a stick. A third was selling deep-fried ice cream sandwiches. The smell was amazing—dozens of different

kitchens cooking at once.

Percy's stomach rumbled. Most of the food carts were open for business, but there was hardly anyone around. They could get anything they wanted! Deep-fried ice cream sandwiches? Oh, man, that sounded *way* better than wheat germ.

Unfortunately, there was more happening than just cooking. In the center of the lot, behind all the food trucks, an old man in a bathrobe was running around with a weed whacker, screaming at a flock of bird-ladies who were trying to steal food off a picnic table.

"Harpies," said Hazel. "Which means—"

"That's Phineas," Frank guessed.

They ran across the street and squeezed between the Korean/Brazilian truck and a Chinese egg roll burrito vendor.

The backs of the food trucks weren't nearly as appetizing as the fronts. They were cluttered with stacks of plastic buckets, overflowing garbage cans, and makeshift clotheslines hung with wet aprons and towels. The parking lot itself was nothing but a square of cracked asphalt, marbled with weeds. In the middle was a picnic table piled high with food from all the different trucks.

The guy in the bathrobe was old and fat. He was mostly bald, with scars across his forehead and a rim of stringy white hair. His bathrobe was spattered with ketchup, and he kept stumbling around in fuzzy pink bunny slippers, swinging his gas-powered weed whacker at the half-dozen harpies who were hovering over his picnic table.

He was clearly blind. His eyes were milky white, and usually he missed the harpies by a lot, but he was still doing a pretty good job fending them off.

"Back, dirty chickens!" he bellowed.

Percy wasn't sure why, but he had a vague sense that harpies were supposed to be plump. These looked like they were starving. Their human faces had sunken eyes and hollow cheeks. Their bodies were covered in molting feathers, and their wings were tipped with tiny, shriveled hands. They wore ragged burlap sacks for dresses. As they dived for the food, they seemed more desperate than angry. Percy felt sorry for them.

WHIRRRR! The old man swung his weed whacker. He grazed one of the harpies' wings. The harpy yelped in pain and fluttered off, dropping yellow feathers as she flew.

Another harpy circled higher than the rest. She looked younger and smaller

than the others, with bright-red feathers.

She watched carefully for an opening, and when the old man's back was turned, she made a wild dive for the table. She grabbed a burrito in her clawed feet, but before she could escape, the blind man swung his weed whacker and smacked her in the back so hard, Percy winced. The harpy yelped, dropped the burrito, and flew off.

"Hey, stop it!" Percy yelled.

The harpies took that the wrong way. They glanced over at the three demigods and immediately fled. Most of them fluttered away and perched in the trees around the square, staring dejectedly at the picnic table. The red-feathered one with the hurt back flew unsteadily down Glisan Street and out of sight.

"Ha!" The blind man yelled in triumph and killed the power on his weed whacker. He grinned vacantly in Percy's direction. "Thank you, strangers! Your help is most appreciated."

Percy bit back his anger. He hadn't meant to help the old man, but he remembered that they needed information from him.

"Uh, whatever." He approached the old guy, keeping one eye on the weed whacker. "I'm Percy Jackson. This is—"

"Demigods!" the old man said. "I can always smell demigods."

Hazel frowned. "Do we smell that bad?"

The old man laughed. "Of course not, my dear. But you'd be surprised how sharp my other senses became once I was blinded. I'm Phineas. And you—wait, don't tell me—"

He reached for Percy's face and poked him in the eyes.

"Ow!" Percy complained.

"Son of Neptune!" Phineas exclaimed. "I thought I smelled the ocean on you, Percy Jackson. I'm also a son of Neptune, you know."

"Hey...yeah. Okay." Percy rubbed his eyes. Just his luck he was related to this grubby old dude. He hoped all sons of Neptune didn't share the same fate. First, you start carrying a man satchel. Next thing you know, you're running around in a bathrobe and pink bunny slippers, chasing chickens with a weed whacker.

Phineas turned to Hazel. "And here...Oh my, the smell of gold and deep earth. Hazel Levesque, daughter of Pluto. And next to you—the son of Mars. But there's more to your story, Frank Zhang—"

“Ancient blood,” Frank muttered. “Prince of Pylos. Blah, blah, blah.”

“Periclymenus, exactly! Oh, he was a nice fellow. I loved the Argonauts!”

Frank’s mouth fell open. “W-wait. Perry *who*?”

Phineas grinned. “Don’t worry. I know about your family. That story about your great-grandfather? He didn’t *really* destroy the camp. Now, what an interesting group. Are you hungry?”

Frank looked like he’d been run over by a truck, but Phineas had already moved on to other matters. He waved his hand at the picnic table. In the nearby trees, the harpies shrieked miserably. As hungry as Percy was, he couldn’t stand to think about eating with those poor bird ladies watching him.

“Look, I’m confused,” Percy said. “We need some information. We were told—”

“—that the harpies were keeping my food away from me,” Phineas finished, “and if you helped me, I’d help you.”

“Something like that,” Percy admitted.

Phineas laughed. “That’s old news. Do I look like I’m missing any meals?”

He patted his belly, which was the size of an overinflated basketball.

“Um ... no,” Percy said.

Phineas waved his weed whacker in an expansive gesture. All three of them ducked.

“Things have changed, my friends!” he said. “When I first got the gift of prophecy, eons ago, it’s true Jupiter cursed me. He sent the harpies to steal my food. You see, I had a bit of a big mouth. I gave away too many secrets that the gods wanted kept.” He turned to Hazel. “For instance, you’re supposed to be dead. And you—” He turned to Frank. “Your life depends on a burned stick.”

Percy frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Hazel blinked like she’d been slapped. Frank looked like the truck had backed up and run over him again.

“And you,” Phineas turned to Percy, “well now, you don’t even know who you are! I could tell you, of course, but...ha! What fun would that be? And Brigid O’Shaughnessy shot Miles Archer in *The Maltese Falcon*. And Darth Vader is actually Luke’s father. And the winner of the next Super Bowl will be ___”

“Got it,” Frank muttered.

Hazel gripped her sword like she was tempted to pommel-whip the old man. “So you talked too much, and the gods cursed you. Why did they stop?”

“Oh, they didn’t!” The old man arched his bushy eyebrows like, *Can you believe it?* “I had to make a deal with the Argonauts. They wanted information too, you see. I told them to kill the harpies, and I’d cooperate. Well, they drove those nasty creatures away, but Iris wouldn’t let them kill the harpies. An outrage! So *this* time, when my patron brought me back to life—”

“Your patron?” Frank asked.

Phineas gave him a wicked grin. “Why, Gaea, of course.

Who do you think opened the Doors of Death? Your girl friend here understands. Isn’t Gaea your patron, too?”

Hazel drew her sword. “I’m not his—I don’t—Gaea is not my patron!”

Phineas looked amused. If he had heard the sword being drawn, he didn’t seem concerned. “Fine, if you want to be *noble* and stick with the losing side, that’s your business. But Gaea is waking. She’s already rewritten the rules of life and death! I’m alive again, and in exchange for my help—a prophecy here, a prophecy there—I get my fondest wish. The tables have been turned, so to speak. Now I can eat all I want, all day long, and the harpies have to watch and starve.”

He revved his weed whacker, and the harpies wailed in the trees.

“They’re cursed!” the old man said. “They can eat only food from my table, and they can’t leave Portland. Since the Doors of Death are open, they can’t even die. It’s beautiful!”

“Beautiful?” Frank protested. “They’re living creatures. Why are you so mean to them?”

“They’re monsters!” Phineas said. “And *mean*? Those feather-brained demons tormented me for years!”

“But it was their duty,” Percy said, trying to control himself. “Jupiter ordered them to.”

“Oh, I’m mad at Jupiter, too,” Phineas agreed. “In time, Gaea will see that the gods are properly punished. Horrible job they’ve done, ruling the world. But for now, I’m enjoying Portland. The mortals take no notice of me. They think I’m just a crazy old man shooing away pigeons!”

Hazel advanced on the seer. “You’re awful!” she told Phineas. “You belong in the Fields of Punishment!”

Phineas sneered. "One dead person to another, girlie? I wouldn't be talking. You started this whole thing! If it weren't for you, Alcyoneus wouldn't be alive!"

Hazel stumbled back.

"Hazel?" Frank's eyes got as wide as quarters. "What's he talking about?"

"Ha!" Phineas said. "You'll find out soon enough, Frank Zhang. Then we'll see if you're still sweet on your girlfriend."

But that's not what you're here about, is it? You want to find Thanatos. He's being kept at Alcyoneus's lair. I can tell you where that is. Of course I can. But you'll have to do me a favor."

"Forget it," Hazel snapped. "You're working for the enemy."

We should send you back to the Underworld ourselves."

"You could try." Phineas smiled. "But I doubt I'd stay dead very long. You see, Gaea has shown me the easy way back. And with Thanatos in chains, there's no one to keep me down! Besides, if you kill me, you won't get my secrets."

Percy was tempted to let Hazel use her sword. In fact he wanted to strangle the old man himself.

Camp Jupiter, he told himself. *Saving the camp is more important.* He remembered Alcyoneus taunting him in his dreams. If they wasted time searching through Alaska looking for the giant's lair, Gaea's armies would destroy the Romans...and Percy's other friends, wherever they were.

He gritted his teeth. "What's the favor?"

Phineas licked his lips greedily. "There's one harpy who's quicker than the rest."

"The red one," Percy guessed.

"I'm blind! I don't know colors!" the old man grouched. "At any rate, she's the only one I have trouble with. She's wily, that one. Always does her own thing, never roosts with the others. She gave me these."

He pointed at the scars on his forehead.

"Capture that harpy," he said. "Bring her to me. I want her tied up where I can keep an eye on her...ah, so to speak. Harpies hate being tied up. It causes them extreme pain. Yes, I'll enjoy that. Maybe I'll even feed her so that she lasts longer."

Percy looked at his friends. They came to a silent agreement: they would

never help this creepy old man. On the other hand, they had to get his information. They needed a Plan B.

“Oh, go talk among yourselves,” Phineas said breezily. “I don’t care. Just remember that without my help, your quest will fail. And everyone you love in the world will die. Now, off with you! Bring me a harpy!”

PERCY

“WE’LL NEED SOME OF YOUR FOOD.” Percy shouldered his way around the old man and snatched stuff off the picnic table—a covered bowl of Thai noodles in mac-and-cheese sauce, and a tubular pastry that looked like a combination burrito and cinnamon roll.

Before he could lose control and smash the burrito in Phineas’s face, Percy said, “Come on, guys.” He led his friends out of the parking lot.

They stopped across the street. Percy took a deep breath, trying to calm down. The rain had slowed to a halfhearted drizzle. The cold mist felt good on his face.

“That man...” Hazel smacked the side of a bus-stop bench.

“He needs to die. *Again.*”

It was hard to tell in the rain, but she seemed to be blinking back tears. Her long curly hair was plastered down the sides of her face. In the gray light, her gold eyes looked more like tin.

Percy remembered how confident she’d acted when they first met—taking control of the situation with the gorgons and ushering him to safety. She’d comforted him at the shrine of Neptune and made him feel welcome at camp.

Now he wanted to return the favor, but he wasn’t sure how. She looked lost, bedraggled, and thoroughly depressed.

Percy wasn’t surprised that she had come back from the Underworld. He’d suspected that for a while—the way she avoided talking about her past, the way Nico di Angelo had been so secretive and cautious.

But that didn’t change how Percy saw her. She seemed... well, *alive*, like a regular kid with a good heart, who deserved to grow up and have a future. She wasn’t a ghoul like Phineas.

“We’ll get him,” Percy promised. “He’s *nothing* like you, Hazel. I don’t care

what he says.”

She shook her head. “You don’t know the whole story. I should have been sent to Punishment. I—I’m just as bad—”

“No, you’re not!” Frank balled his fists. He looked around like he was searching for anybody who might disagree with him—enemies he could hit for Hazel’s sake. “She’s a good person!” he yelled across the street. A few harpies squawked in the trees, but no one else paid them any attention.

Hazel stared at Frank. She reached out tentatively, as if she wanted to take his hand but was afraid he might evaporate.

“Frank...” she stammered. “I—I don’t...”

Unfortunately, Frank seemed wrapped up in his own thoughts.

He slung his spear off his back and gripped it uneasily.

“I could intimidate that old man,” he offered, “maybe scare him—”

“Frank, it’s okay,” Percy said. “Let’s keep that as a backup plan, but I don’t think Phineas can be scared into cooperating. Besides, you’ve only got two more uses out of the spear, right?”

Frank scowled at the dragon’s-tooth point, which had grown back completely overnight. “Yeah. I guess....”

Percy wasn’t sure what the old seer had meant about Frank’s family history—his great-grandfather destroying camp, his Argonaut ancestor, and the bit about a burned stick controlling Frank’s life. But it had clearly shaken Frank up. Percy decided not to ask for explanations. He didn’t want the big guy reduced to tears, especially in front of Hazel.

“I’ve got an idea.” Percy pointed up the street. “The red-feathered harpy went that way. Let’s see if we can get her to talk to us.”

Hazel looked at the food in his hands. “You’re going to use that as bait?”

“More like a peace offering,” Percy said. “Come on. Just try to keep the other harpies from stealing this stuff, okay?”

Percy uncovered the Thai noodles and unwrapped the cinnamon burrito. Fragrant steam wafted into the air. They walked down the street, Hazel and Frank with their weapons out. The harpies fluttered after them, perching on trees, mailboxes, and flagpoles, following the smell of food.

Percy wondered what the mortals saw through the Mist. Maybe they thought the harpies were pigeons and the weapons were lacrosse sticks or something. Maybe they just thought the Thai mac and cheese was so good it needed an

armed escort.

Percy kept a tight grip on the food. He'd seen how quickly the harpies could snatch things. He didn't want to lose his peace offering before he found the red-feathered harpy.

Finally he spotted her, circling above a stretch of parkland that ran for several blocks between rows of old stone buildings. Paths stretched through the park under huge maple and elm trees, past sculptures and playgrounds and shady benches. The place reminded Percy of...some other park. Maybe in his hometown? He couldn't remember, but it made him feel homesick.

They crossed the street and found a bench to sit on, next to a big bronze sculpture of an elephant.

"Looks like Hannibal," Hazel said.

"Except it's Chinese," Frank said. "My grandmother has one of those." He flinched. "I mean, hers isn't twelve feet tall. But she imports stuff...from China. We're Chinese." He looked at Hazel and Percy, who were trying hard not to laugh. "Could I just die from embarrassment now?" he asked.

"Don't worry about it, man," Percy said. "Let's see if we can make friends with the harpy."

He raised the Thai noodles and fanned the smell upward—spicy peppers and cheesy goodness. The red harpy circled lower.

"We won't hurt you," Percy called up in a normal voice. "We just want to talk. Thai noodles for a chance to talk, okay?"

The harpy streaked down in a flash of red and landed on the elephant statue.

She was painfully thin. Her feathery legs were like sticks. Her face would have been pretty except for her sunken cheeks. She moved in jerky birdlike twitches, her coffee-brown eyes darting restlessly, her fingers clawing at her plumage, her earlobes, her shaggy red hair.

"Cheese," she muttered, looking sideways. "Ella doesn't like cheese."

Percy hesitated. "Your name is Ella?"

"Ella. Aella. 'Harpy.' In English. In Latin. Ella doesn't like cheese." She said all that without taking a breath or making eye contact. Her hands snatched at her hair, her burlap dress, the raindrops, whatever moved.

Quicker than Percy could blink, she lunged, snatched the cinnamon burrito, and appeared atop the elephant again.

"Gods, she's fast!" Hazel said.

“And *heavily* caffeinated,” Frank guessed.

Ella sniffed the burrito. She nibbled at the edge and shuddered from head to foot, cawing like she was dying. “Cinnamon is good,” she pronounced. “Good for harpies. Yum.”

She started to eat, but the bigger harpies swooped down. Before Percy could react, they began pummeling Ella with their wings, snatching at the burrito.

“Nnnnnnooo.” Ella tried to hide under her wings as her sisters ganged up on her, scratching with their claws. “N-no,” she stuttered. “N-n-no!”

“Stop it!” Percy yelled. He and his friends ran to help, but it was too late. A big yellow harpy grabbed the burrito and the whole flock scattered, leaving Ella cowering and shivering on top of the elephant.

Hazel touched the harpy’s foot. “I’m so sorry. Are you okay?”

Ella poked her head out of her wings. She was still trembling. With her shoulders hunched, Percy could see the bleeding gash on her back where Phineas had hit her with the weed whacker. She picked at her feathers, pulling out tufts of plumage. “S-small Ella,” she stuttered angrily. “W-weak Ella. No cinnamon for Ella. Only cheese.”

Frank glared across the street, where the other harpies were sitting in a maple tree, tearing the burrito to shreds. “We’ll get you something else,” he promised.

Percy set down the Thai noodles. He realized that Ella was different, even for a harpy. But after watching her get picked on, he was sure of one thing: whatever else happened, he was going to help her.

“Ella,” he said, “we want to be your friends. We can get you more food, but —”

“*Friends*,” Ella said. “‘Ten seasons. 1994 to 2004.’” She glanced sideways at Percy, then looked in the air and started reciting to the clouds. “‘A half-blood of the eldest gods, shall reach sixteen against all odds.’ Sixteen. You’re sixteen. Page sixteen, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. ‘Ingredients: Bacon, Butter.’”

Percy’s ears were ringing. He felt dizzy, like he’d just plunged a hundred feet underwater and back up again. “Ella...what was that you said?”

“‘Bacon.’” She caught a raindrop out of the air. “‘Butter.’”

“No, before that. Those lines...I *know* those lines.”

Next to him, Hazel shivered. “It does sound familiar, like...I don’t know, like a prophecy. Maybe it’s something she heard Phineas say?”

At the name *Phineas*, Ella squawked in terror and flew away.

“Wait!” Hazel called. “I didn’t mean—Oh, gods, I’m stupid.”

“It’s all right.” Frank pointed. “Look.”

Ella wasn’t moving as quickly now. She flapped her way to the top of a three-story red brick building and scuttled out of sight over the roof. A single red feather fluttered down to the street.

“You think that’s her nest?” Frank squinted at the sign on the building. “Multnomah County Library?”

Percy nodded. “Let’s see if it’s open.”

They ran across the street and into the lobby.

A library wouldn’t have been Percy’s first choice for someplace to visit. With his dyslexia, he had enough trouble reading signs. A whole building full of books? That sounded about as much fun as Chinese water torture or getting his teeth extracted.

As they jogged through the lobby, Percy figured Annabeth would like this place. It was spacious and brightly lit, with big vaulted windows. Books and architecture, that was definitely her....

He froze in his tracks.

“Percy?” Frank asked. “What’s wrong?”

Percy tried desperately to concentrate. Where had those thoughts come from? Architecture, books...Annabeth had taken him to the library once, back home in—in—The memory faded. Percy slammed his fist into the side of a bookshelf.

“Percy?” Hazel asked gently.

He was so angry, so frustrated with his missing memories that he wanted to punch another bookshelf, but his friends’ concerned faces brought him back to the present.

“I’m—I’m all right,” he lied. “Just got dizzy for a sec. Let’s find a way to the roof.”

It took them a while, but they finally found a stairwell with roof access. At the top was a door with a handle alarm, but someone had propped it open with a copy of *War and Peace*.

Outside, Ella the harpy huddled in a nest of books under a makeshift cardboard shelter.

Percy and his friends advanced slowly, trying not to scare her. Ella didn't pay them any attention. She picked at her feathers and muttered under her breath, like she was practicing lines for a play.

Percy got within five feet and knelt down. "Hi. Sorry we scared you. Look, I don't have much food, but..."

He took some of the macrobiotic jerky out of his pocket. Ella lunged and snatched it immediately. She huddled back in her nest, sniffing the jerky, but sighed and tossed it away. "N-not from his table. Ella cannot eat. Sad. Jerky would be good for harpies." "Not from... Oh, right," Percy said. "That's part of the curse. You can only eat his food."

"There has to be a way," Hazel said.

"Photosynthesis," Ella muttered. "Noun. Biology. The synthesis of complex organic materials.' 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...'"

"What is she saying?" Frank whispered.

Percy stared at the mound of books around her. They all looked old and mildewed. Some had prices written in marker on the covers, like the library had gotten rid of them in a clearance sale.

"She's quoting books," Percy guessed.

"*Farmer's Almanac 1965*," Ella said. "'Start breeding animals, January twenty-sixth.'"

"Ella," he said, "have you read all of these?"

She blinked. "More. More downstairs. Words. Words calm Ella down. Words, words, words."

Percy picked up a book at random—a tattered copy of *A History of Horseracing*. "Ella, do you remember the, um, third paragraph on page sixty-two—"

"Secretariat," Ella said instantly, "'favored three to two-in the 1973 Kentucky Derby, finished at standing track record of one fifty-nine and two fifths.'"

Percy closed the book. His hands were shaking. "Word for word."

"That's amazing," Hazel said.

"She's a genius chicken," Frank agreed.

Percy felt uneasy. He was starting to form a terrible idea about why Phineas wanted to capture Ella, and it wasn't because she'd scratched him. Percy

remembered that line she'd recited, *A half-blood of the eldest gods*. He was sure it was about *him*.

"Ella," he said, "we're going to find a way to break the curse. Would you like that?"

"It's Impossible," she said. "'Recorded in English by Perry Como, 1970.'"

"Nothing's impossible," Percy said. "Now, look, I'm going to say his name. You don't have to run away. We're going to save you from the curse. We just need to figure out a way to beat ... Phineas."

He waited for her to bolt, but she just shook her head vigorously. "N-n-no! No Phineas. Ella is quick. Too quick for him. B-but he wants to ch-chain Ella. He hurts Ella."

She tried to reach the gash on her back.

"Frank," Percy said, "you have first-aid supplies?"

"On it." Frank brought out a thermos full of nectar and explained its healing properties to Ella. When he scooted closer, she recoiled and started to shriek. Then Hazel tried, and Ella let her pour some nectar on her back. The wound began to close.

Hazel smiled. "See? That's better."

"Phineas is bad," Ella insisted. "And weed whackers. And cheese."

"Absolutely," Percy agreed. "We won't let him hurt you again. We need to figure out how to trick him, though. You harpies must know him better than anybody. Is there any way we can trick him?"

"N-no," Ella said. "Tricks are for kids. *50 Tricks to Teach Your Dog*, by Sophie Collins, call number six-three-six—"

"Okay, Ella." Hazel spoke in a soothing voice, like she was trying to calm a horse. "But does Phineas have any weaknesses?"

"Blind. He's blind."

Frank rolled his eyes, but Hazel continued patiently, "Right. Besides that?"

"Chance," she said. "Games of chance. Two to one. Bad odds. Call or fold."

Percy's spirits rose. "You mean he's a gambler?"

"Phineas s-sees big things. Prophecies. Fates. God stuff. Not small stuff. Random. Exciting. And he is blind."

Frank rubbed his chin. "Any idea what she means?"

Percy watched the harpy pick at her burlap dress. He felt incredibly sorry for

her, but he was also starting to realize just how smart she was.

“I think I get it,” he said. “Phineas sees the future. He knows tons of important events. But he can’t see small things—like random occurrences, spontaneous games of chance. That makes gambling exciting for him. If we can tempt him into making a bet...”

Hazel nodded slowly. “You mean if he loses, he has to tell us where Thanatos is. But what do we have to wager? What kind of game do we play?”

“Something simple, with high stakes,” Percy said. “Like two choices. One you live, one you die. And the prize has to be something Phineas wants...I mean, besides Ella. That’s off the table.”

“Sight,” Ella muttered. “Sight is good for blind men.

Healing...nope, nope. Gaea won’t do that for Phineas. Gaea keeps Phineas blind, dependent on Gaea. Yep.”

Frank and Percy exchanged a meaningful look. “Gorgon’s blood,” they said simultaneously.

“What?” Hazel asked.

Frank brought out the two ceramic vials he’d retrieved from the Little Tiber. “Ella’s a genius,” he said. “Unless we die.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Percy said. “I’ve got a plan.”

PERCY

THE OLD MAN WAS RIGHT WHERE they'd left him, in the middle of the food truck parking lot. He sat on his picnic bench with his bunny slippers propped up, eating a plate of greasy shish kebab. His weed whacker was at his side. His bathrobe was smeared with barbecue sauce.

"Welcome back!" he called cheerfully. "I hear the flutter of nervous little wings. You've brought me my harpy?"

"She's here," Percy said. "But she's not yours."

Phineas sucked the grease off his fingers. His milky eyes seemed fixed on a point just above Percy's head. "I see...Well, actually, I'm blind, so I *don't* see. Have you come to kill me, then? If so, good luck completing your quest."

"I've come to gamble."

The old man's mouth twitched. He put down his shishkebab and leaned toward Percy. "A gamble...how interesting. Information in exchange for the harpy? Winner take all?"

"No," Percy said. "The harpy isn't part of the deal."

Phineas laughed. "Really? Perhaps you don't understand her value."

"She's a person," Percy said. "She isn't for sale."

"Oh, please! You're from the Roman camp, aren't you? Rome was *built* on slavery. Don't get all high and mighty with me. Besides, she isn't even human. She's a monster. A wind spirit. A minion of Jupiter."

Ella squawked. Just getting her into the parking lot had been a major challenge, but now she started backing away, muttering, "'Jupiter. Hydrogen and helium. Sixty-three satellites.' No minions. Nope."

Hazel put her arm around Ella's wings. She seemed to be the only one who could touch the harpy without causing lots of screaming and twitching.

Frank stayed at Percy's side. He held his spear ready, as if the old man might

charge them.

Percy brought out the ceramic vials. “I have a different wager. We’ve got two flasks of gorgon’s blood. One kills. One heals. They look exactly the same. Even we don’t know which is which. If you choose the right one, it could cure your blindness.”

Phineas held out his hands eagerly. “Let me feel them. Let me smell them.”

“Not so fast,” Percy said. “First you agree to the terms.”

“Terms...” Phineas was breathing shallowly. Percy could tell he was hungry to take the offer. “Prophecy *and* sight ... I’d be unstoppable. I could *own* this city. I’d build my palace here, surrounded by food trucks. I could capture that harpy myself!”

“N-noo,” Ella said nervously. “Nope, nope, nope.”

A villainous laugh is hard to pull off when you’re wearing pink bunny slippers, but Phineas gave it his best shot. “Very well, demigod. What are your terms?”

“You get to choose a vial,” Percy said. “No uncorking, no sniffing before you decide.”

“That’s not fair! I’m blind.”

“And I don’t have your sense of smell,” Percy countered. “You can hold the vials. And I’ll swear on the River Styx that they look identical. They’re exactly what I told you: gorgon’s blood, one vial from the left side of the monster, one from the right. And I swear that none of us knows which is which.”

Percy looked back at Hazel. “Uh, you’re our Underworld expert. With all this weird stuff going on with Death, is an oath on the River Styx still binding?”

“Yes,” she said, without hesitation. “To break such a vow...Well, just don’t do it. There are worse things than death.” Phineas stroked his beard. “So I choose which vial to drink. You have to drink the other one. We swear to drink at the same time.”

“Right,” Percy said.

“The loser dies, obviously,” Phineas said. “That kind of poison would probably keep even *me* from coming back to life...for a long time, at least. My essence would be scattered and degraded. So I’m risking quite a lot.”

“But if you win, you get everything,” Percy said. “If Idie, my friends will swear to leave you in peace and not take revenge. You’d have your sight back, which even Gaea won’t give you.”

The old man's expression soured. Percy could tell he'd struck a nerve. Phineas wanted to see. As much as Gaea had given him, he resented being kept in the dark.

"If I lose," the old man said, "I'll be dead, unable to give you information. How does that help you?"

Percy was glad he'd talked this through with his friends ahead of time. Frank had suggested the answer.

"You write down the location of Alcyoneus's lair ahead of time," Percy said. "Keep it to yourself, but swear on the River Styx it's specific and accurate. You also have to swear that if you lose and die, the harpies will be released from their curse."

"Those are high stakes," Phineas grumbled. "You face death, Percy Jackson. Wouldn't it be simpler just to hand over the harpy?"

"Not an option."

Phineas smiled slowly. "So you *are* starting to understand her worth. Once I have my sight, I'll capture her myself, you know. Whoever controls that harpy... well, I was a king once. This gamble could make me a king again."

"You're getting ahead of yourself," Percy said. "Do we have a deal?"

Phineas tapped his nose thoughtfully. "I can't foresee the outcome. Annoying how that works. A completely unexpected gamble...it makes the future cloudy. But I can tell you this, Percy Jackson—a bit of free advice. If you survive today, you're not going to like your future. A big sacrifice is coming, and you won't have the courage to make it. That will cost you dearly. It will cost the *world* dearly. It might be easier if you just choose the poison."

Percy's mouth tasted like Iris's sour green tea. He wanted to think the old man was just psyching him out, but something told him the prediction was true. He remembered Juno's warning when he'd chosen to go to Camp Jupiter: *You will feel pain, misery, and loss beyond anything you've ever known. But you might have a chance to save your old friends and family.*

In the trees around the parking lot, the harpies gathered to watch as if they sensed what was at stake. Frank and Hazel studied Percy's face with concern. He'd assured them the odds weren't as bad as fifty-fifty. He *did* have a plan. Of course, the plan could backfire. His chance of survival might be a hundred percent—or zero. He hadn't mentioned that.

"Do we have a deal?" he asked again.

Phineas grinned. “I swear on the River Styx to abide by the terms, just as you have described them. Frank Zhang, you’re the descendant of an Argonaut. I trust your word. If I win, do you and your friend Hazel swear to leave me in peace, and not seek revenge?”

Frank’s hands were clenched so tight Percy thought he might break his gold spear, but he managed to grumble, “I swear it on the River Styx.”

“I also swear,” Hazel said.

“Swear,” Ella muttered. “Swear not by the moon, the inconstant moon.”

Phineas laughed. “In that case, find me something to write with. Let’s get started.”

Frank borrowed a napkin and a pen from a food truck vendor. Phineas scribbled something on the napkin and put it in his bathrobe pocket. “I swear this is the location of Alcyoneus’s lair. Not that you’ll live long enough to read it.”

Percy drew his sword and swept all the food off the picnic table. Phineas sat on one side. Percy sat on the other.

Phineas held out his hands. “Let me feel the vials.”

Percy gazed at the hills in the distance. He imagined the shadowy face of a sleeping woman. He sent his thoughts into the ground beneath him and hoped the goddess was listening.

Okay, Gaea, he said. I’m calling your bluff. You say I’m a valuable pawn. You say you’ve got plans for me, and you’re going to spare me until I make it north. Who’s more valuable to you—me, or this old man? Because one of us is about to die.

Phineas curled his fingers in a grasping motion. “Losing your nerve, Percy Jackson? Let me have them.”

Percy passed him the vials.

The old man compared their weight. He ran his fingers along the ceramic surfaces. Then he set them both on the table and rested one hand lightly on each. A tremor passed through the ground—a mild earthquake, just strong enough to make Percy’s teeth chatter. Ella cawed nervously.

The vial on the left seemed to shake slightly more than the one on the right.

Phineas grinned wickedly. He closed his fingers around the left-hand vial. “You were a fool, Percy Jackson. I choose this one. Now we drink.”

Percy took the vial on the right. His teeth were chattering.

The old man raised his vial. "A toast to the sons of Neptune."

They both uncorked their vials and drank.

Immediately, Percy doubled over, his throat burning. His mouth tasted like gasoline.

"Oh, gods," Hazel said behind him.

"Nope!" Ella said. "Nope, nope, nope."

Percy's vision blurred. He could see Phineas grinning in triumph, sitting up straighter, blinking his eyes in anticipation.

"Yes!" he cried. "Any moment now, my sight will return!"

Percy had chosen wrong. He'd been stupid to take such a risk. He felt like broken glass was working its way through his stomach, into his intestines.

"Percy!" Frank gripped his shoulders. "Percy, you can't die!"

He gasped for breath...and suddenly his vision cleared.

At the same moment, Phineas hunched over like he'd been punched.

"You—you can't!" the old man wailed. "Gaea, you—you—"

He staggered to his feet and stumbled away from the table, clutching his stomach. "I'm too valuable!"

Steam came out of his mouth. A sickly yellow vapor rose from his ears, his beard, his blind eyes.

"Unfair!" he screamed. "You tricked me!"

He tried to claw the piece of paper out of his robe pocket, but his hands crumbled, his fingers turning to sand.

Percy rose unsteadily. He didn't feel *cured* of anything in particular. His memory hadn't magically returned. But the pain had stopped.

"No one tricked you," Percy said. "You made your choice freely, and I hold you to your oath." The blind king wailed in agony. He turned in a circle, steaming and slowly disintegrating until there was nothing left but an old, stained bathrobe and a pair of bunny slippers.

"Those," Frank said, "are the most disgusting spoils of war *ever*."

A woman's voice spoke in Percy's mind. *A gamble, Percy Jackson. It was a sleepy whisper, with just a hint of grudging admiration. You forced me to choose, and you are more important to my plans than the old seer. But do not press your luck. When your death comes, I promise it will be much more painful than gorgon's blood.*

Hazel prodded the robe with her sword. There was nothing underneath—no sign that Phineas was trying to re-form. She looked at Percy in awe. “That was either the bravest thing I’ve ever seen, or the stupidest.”

Frank shook his head in disbelief. “Percy, how did you know? You were so confident he’d choose the poison.”

“Gaea,” Percy said. “She *wants* me to make it to Alaska. She thinks...I’m not sure. She thinks she can use me as part of her plan. She influenced Phineas to choose the wrong vial.”

Frank stared in horror at the remains of the old man. “Gaea would kill her own servant rather than you? That’s what you were betting on?”

“Plans,” Ella muttered. “Plans and plots. The lady in the ground. Big plans for Percy. Macrobiotic jerky for Ella.”

Percy handed her the whole bag of jerky and she squeaked with joy. “Nope, nope, nope,” she muttered, half-singing. “Phineas, nope. Food and words for Ella, yep.”

Percy crouched over the bathrobe and pulled the old man’s note out of the pocket. It read: *HUBBARD GLACIER*.

All that risk for two words. He handed the note to Hazel.

“I know where that is,” she said. “It’s pretty famous. But we’ve got a long, long way to go.”

In the trees around the parking lot, the other harpies finally overcame their shock. They squawked with excitement and flew at the nearest food trucks, diving through the service windows and raiding the kitchens. Cooks shouted in many languages. Trucks shook back and forth. Feathers and food boxes flew everywhere.

“We’d better get back to the boat,” Percy said. “We’re running out of time.”

HAZEL

EVEN BEFORE SHE GOT ON THE BOAT, Hazel felt queasy.

She kept thinking about Phineas with steam coming out of his eyes, his hands crumbling to dust. Percy had assured her that she wasn't like Phineas. But she *was*. She'd done something even worse than torment harpies.

You started this whole thing! Phineas had said. *If it weren't for you, Alcyoneus wouldn't be alive!*

As the boat sped down the Columbia River, Hazel tried to forget. She helped Ella make a nest out of old books and magazines they'd liberated from the library's recycling bin.

They hadn't really planned on taking the harpy with them, but Ella acted like the matter was decided.

"Friends," she muttered. *"Ten seasons. 1994 to 2004.' Friends melt Phineas and give Ella jerky. Ella will go with her friends."*

Now she was roosting comfortably in the stern, nibbling bits of jerky and reciting random lines from Charles Dickens and *50 Tricks to Teach Your Dog*.

Percy knelt in the bow, steering them toward the ocean with his freaky mind-over-water powers. Hazel sat next to Frank on the center bench, their shoulders touching, which made her feel as jittery as a harpy.

She remembered how Frank stood up for her in Portland, shouting, "She's a good person!" like he was ready to take on anybody who denied it.

She remembered the way he had looked on the hillside in Mendocino, alone in a clearing of poisoned grass with his spear in hand, fires burning all around him and the ashes of three basilisks at his feet.

A week ago, if someone had suggested that Frank was a child of Mars, Hazel would have laughed. Frank was much too sweet and gentle for that. She had always felt protective of him because of his clumsiness and his knack for getting

into trouble.

Since they'd left camp, she saw him differently. He had more courage than she'd realized. He was the one looking out for *her*. She had to admit that the change was kind of nice.

The river widened into the ocean. The *Pax* turned north. As they sailed, Frank kept her spirits up by telling her silly jokes—*Why did the Minotaur cross the road? How many fauns does it take to change a lightbulb?* He pointed out buildings along the coastline that reminded him of places in Vancouver.

The sky started to darken, the sea turning the same rusty color as Ella's wings. June 21 was almost over. The Feast of Fortuna would happen in the evening, exactly seventy-two hours from now.

Finally Frank brought out some food from his pack—sodas and muffins he'd scavenged from Phineas's table. He passed them around.

"It's okay, Hazel," he said quietly. "My mom used to say you shouldn't try to carry a problem alone. But if you don't want to talk about it, that's okay."

Hazel took a shaky breath. She was afraid to talk—not just because she was embarrassed. She didn't want to black out and slip into the past.

"You were right," she said, "when you guessed I came back from the Underworld. I'm...I'm an *escapee*. I shouldn't be alive."

She felt like a dam had broken. The story flooded out. She explained how her mother had summoned Pluto and fallen in love with the god. She explained her mother's wish for all the riches in the earth, and how that had turned into Hazel's curse. She described her life in New Orleans—everything except her boyfriend Sammy. Looking at Frank, she couldn't bring herself to talk about that.

She described the Voice, and how Gaea had slowly taken over her mother's mind. She explained how they had moved to Alaska, how Hazel had helped to raise the giant Alcyoneus, and how she had died, sinking the island into Resurrection Bay.

She knew Percy and Ella were listening, but she spoke mostly to Frank. When she had finished, she was afraid to look at him. She waited for him to move away from her, maybe tell her she *was* a monster after all.

Instead, he took her hand. "You sacrificed yourself to stop the giant from waking. I could never be that brave."

She felt her pulse throbbing in her neck. "It wasn't bravery. I let my mother die. I cooperated with Gaea too long. I almost let her win."

“Hazel,” said Percy. “You stood up to a goddess all by yourself. You did the right...” His voice trailed off, as if he’d had an unpleasant thought. “What happened in the Underworld...I mean, after you died? You should’ve gone to Elysium. But if Nico brought you back—”

“I didn’t go to Elysium.” Her mouth felt dry as sand. “Please don’t ask...”

But it was too late. She remembered her descent into the darkness, her arrival on the banks of the River Styx, and her consciousness began to slip.

“Hazel?” Frank asked.

“Slip Sliding Away,” Ella muttered. “Number five U.S. single. Paul Simon. Frank, go with her. Simon says, Frank, go with her.”

Hazel had no idea what Ella was talking about, but her vision darkened as she clung to Frank’s hand.

She found herself back in the Underworld, and this time Frank was at her side.

They stood in Charon’s boat, crossing the Styx. Debris swirled in the dark waters—a deflated birthday balloon, a child’s pacifier, a little plastic bride and groom from the top of a cake—all the remnants of human lives cut short.

“Wh-where are we?” Frank stood at her side, shimmering with a ghostly purple light as if he’d become a Lar.

“It’s my past.” Hazel felt strangely calm. “It’s just an echo. Don’t worry.”

The boatman turned and grinned. One moment he was a handsome African man in an expensive silk suit. The next moment he was a skeleton in a dark robe. “Course you shouldn’t worry,” he said with a British accent. He addressed Hazel, as if he couldn’t see Frank at all. “Told you I’d take you across, didn’t I? ’Sall right you don’t have a coin. Wouldn’t be proper, leaving Pluto’s daughter on the wrong side of the river.”

The boat slid onto a dark beach. Hazel led Frank to the black gates of Erebus. The spirits parted for them, sensing she was a child of Pluto. The giant three-headed dog Cerberus growled in the gloom, but he let them pass. Inside the gates, they walked into a large pavilion and stood before the judges’ bench. Three black-robed figures in golden masks stared down at Hazel.

Frank whimpered. “Who—?”

“They’ll decide my fate,” she said. “Watch.”

Just as before, the judges asked her no questions. They simply looked into

her mind, pulling thoughts from her head and examining them like a collection of old photos.

“Thwarted Gaea,” the first judge said. “Prevented Alcyoneus from waking.”

“But she raised the giant in the first place,” the second judge argued. “Guilty of cowardice, weakness.”

“She is young,” said the third judge. “Her mother’s life hung in the balance.”

“My mother.” Hazel found the courage to speak. “Where is she? What is her fate?”

The judges regarded her, their golden masks frozen in creepy smiles. “Your mother...”

The image of Marie Levesque shimmered above the judges. She was frozen in time, hugging Hazel as the cave collapsed, her eyes shut tight.

“An interesting question,” the second judge said. “The division of fault.”

“Yes,” said the first judge. “The child died for a noble cause. She prevented many deaths by delaying the giant’s rise. She had courage to stand against the might of Gaea.”

“But she acted too late,” the third judge said sadly. “She is guilty of aiding and abetting an enemy of the gods.”

“The mother influenced her,” said the first judge. “The child can have Elysium. Eternal Punishment for Marie Levesque.”

“No!” Hazel shouted. “No, please! That’s not fair.”

The judges tilted their heads in unison. Gold masks, Hazel thought. Gold has always been cursed for me. She wondered if the gold was poisoning their thoughts somehow, so that they’d never give her a fair trial.

“Beware, Hazel Levesque,” the first judge warned. “Would you take full responsibility? You could lay this guilt on your mother’s soul. That would be reasonable. You were destined for great things. Your mother diverted your path. See what you might have been....”

Another image appeared above the judges. Hazel saw herself as a little girl, grinning, with her hands covered in finger paint. The image aged. Hazel saw herself growing up—her hair became longer, her eyes sadder. She saw herself on her thirteenth birthday, riding across the fields on her borrowed horse. Sammy laughed as he raced after her: *What are you running from? I’m not that ugly, am I?* She saw herself in Alaska, trudging down Third Street in the snow and darkness on her way home from school.

Then the image aged even more. Hazel saw herself at twenty. She looked so much like her mother, her hair gathered back in braids, her golden eyes flashing with amusement. She wore a white dress—a wedding dress? She was smiling so warmly, Hazel knew instinctively she must be looking at someone special—someone she loved.

The sight didn't make her feel bitter. She didn't even wonder whom she would have married. Instead she thought: *My mother might've looked like this if she'd let go of her anger, if Gaea hadn't twisted her.*

"You lost this life," the first judge said simply. "Special circumstances. Elysium for you. Punishment for your mother."

"No," Hazel said. "No, it wasn't all her fault. She was misled. She *loved* me. At the end, she tried to protect me."

"Hazel," Frank whispered. "What are you doing?"

She squeezed his hand, urging him to be silent. The judges paid him no attention.

Finally the second judge sighed. "No resolution. Not enough good. Not enough evil."

"The blame must be divided," the first judge agreed. "Both souls will be consigned to the Fields of Asphodel. I'm sorry, Hazel Levesque. You could have been a hero."

She passed through the pavilion, into yellow fields that went on forever. She led Frank through a crowd of spirits to a grove of black poplar trees.

"You gave up Elysium," Frank said in amazement, "so your mother wouldn't suffer?"

"She didn't deserve Punishment," Hazel said.

"But...what happens now?"

"Nothing," Hazel said. "Nothing...for all eternity."

They drifted aimlessly. Spirits around them chattered like bats—lost and confused, not remembering their past or even their names.

Hazel remembered everything. Perhaps that was because she was a daughter of Pluto, but she never forgot who she was, or why she was there.

"Remembering made my afterlife harder," she told Frank, who still drifted next to her as a glowing purple Lar. "So many times I tried to walk to my father's palace...." She pointed to a large black castle in the distance. "I could never reach it. I can't leave the Fields of Asphodel."

“Did you ever see your mother again?”

Hazel shook her head. “She wouldn’t know me, even if I could find her. These spirits...it’s like an eternal dream for them, an endless trance. This is the best I could do for her.”

Time was meaningless, but after an eternity, she and Frank sat together under a black poplar tree, listening to the screams from the Fields of Punishment. In the distance, under the artificial sunlight of Elysium, the Isles of the Blest glittered like emeralds in a sparkling blue lake. White sails cut across water and the souls of great heroes basked on the beaches in perpetual bliss.

“You didn’t deserve Asphodel,” Frank protested. “You should be with the heroes.”

“This is just an echo,” Hazel said. “We’ll wake up, Frank. It only *seems* like forever.”

“That’s not the point!” he protested. “Your life was taken from you. You were going to grow up to be a beautiful woman. You...”

His face turned a darker shade of purple. “You were going to marry someone,” he said quietly. “You would have had a good life. You lost all that.”

Hazel swallowed back a sob. It hadn’t been this hard in Asphodel the first time, when she was on her own. Having Frank with her made her feel so much sadder. But she was determined not to get angry about her fate.

Hazel thought about that image of herself as an adult, smiling and in love. She knew it wouldn’t take much bitterness to sour her expression and make her look exactly like Queen Marie. *I deserve better*, her mother always said. Hazel couldn’t allow herself to feel that way.

“I’m sorry, Frank,” she said. “I think your mother was wrong. Sometimes sharing a problem doesn’t make it easier to carry.”

“But it does.” Frank slipped his hand into his coat pocket.

“In fact...since we’ve got eternity to talk, there’s something I want to tell you.”

He brought out an object wrapped in cloth, about the same size as a pair of glasses. When he unfolded it, Hazel saw a half-burned piece of driftwood, glowing with purple light.

She frowned. “What is...” Then the truth hit her, as cold and harsh as a blast of winter wind. “Phineas said your life depends on a burned stick—”

“It’s true,” Frank said. “This is my lifeline, literally.”

He told her how the goddess Juno had appeared when he was a baby, how his grandmother had snatched the piece of wood from the fireplace. “Grandmother said I had gifts—some talent we got from our ancestor, the Argonaut. That, and my dad’s being Mars...” He shrugged. “I’m supposed to be too powerful or something. That’s why my life can burn up so easily. Iris said I would die holding this, watching it burn.”

Frank turned the piece of tinder in his fingers. Even in his ghostly purple form, he looked so big and sturdy. Hazel figured he would be huge when he was an adult—as strong and healthy as an ox. She couldn’t believe his life depended on something as small as a stick.

“Frank, how can you carry it around with you?” she asked. “Aren’t you terrified something will happen to it?”

“That’s why I’m telling you.” He held out the firewood. “I know it’s a lot to ask, but would you keep it for me?”

Hazel’s head spun. Until now, she’d accepted Frank’s presence in her blackout. She’d led him along, numbly replaying her past, because it seemed only fair to show him the truth.

But now she wondered if Frank was really experiencing this with her, or if she was just imagining his presence. Why would he trust her with his life?

“Frank,” she said, “you *know* who I am. I’m Pluto’s daughter. Everything I touch goes wrong. Why would you trust me?”

“You’re my best friend.” He placed the firewood in her hands. “I trust you more than anybody.”

She wanted to tell him he was making a mistake. She wanted to give it back. But before she could say anything, a shadow fell over them.

“Our ride is here,” Frank guessed.

Hazel had almost forgotten she was reliving her past. Nicodi Angelo stood over her in his black overcoat, his Stygian iron sword at his side. He didn’t notice Frank, but he locked eyes with Hazel and seemed to read her whole life.

“You’re different,” he said. “A child of Pluto. You remember your past.”

“Yes,” Hazel said. “And you’re alive.”

Nico studied her like he was reading a menu, deciding whether or not to order.

“I’m Nico di Angelo,” he said. “I came looking for my sister. Death has gone missing, so I thought...I thought I could bring her back and no one would

notice.”

“Back to life?” Hazel asked. “Is that possible?”

“It should have been.” Nico sighed. “But she’s gone. She chose to be reborn into a new life. I’m too late.”

“I’m sorry.”

He held out his hand. “You’re my sister too. You deserve another chance. Come with me.”

X X X

HAZEL

“HAZEL.” PERCY WAS SHAKING HER SHOULDER. “Wake up. We’ve reached Seattle.”

She sat up groggily, squinting in the morning sunlight. “Frank?”

Frank groaned, rubbing his eyes. “Did we just...was I just—?”

“You both passed out,” Percy said. “I don’t know why, but Ella told me not to worry about it. She said you were...sharing?”

“Sharing,” Ella agreed. She crouched in the stern, preening her wing feathers with her teeth, which didn’t look like a very effective form of personal hygiene. She spit out some red fluff. “Sharing is good. No more blackouts. Biggest American blackout, August 14, 2003. Hazel shared. No more blackouts.” Percy scratched his head. “Yeah...we’ve been having conversations like that all night. I still don’t know what she’s stalking about.”

Hazel pressed her hand against her coat pocket. She could feel the piece of firewood, wrapped in cloth.

She looked at Frank. “You *were* there.”

He nodded. He didn’t say anything, but his expression was clear: He’d meant what he said. He wanted her to keep the piece of tinder safe. She wasn’t sure whether she felt honored or scared. No one had ever trusted her with something so important.

“Wait,” Percy said. “You mean you guys *shared* a blackout? Are you guys both going to pass out from now on?”

“Nope,” Ella said. “Nope, nope, nope. No more blackouts. More books for Ella. Books in Seattle.”

Hazel gazed over the water. They were sailing through a large bay, making their way toward a cluster of downtown buildings. Neighborhoods rolled across a series of hills. From the tallest one rose an odd white tower with a saucer on

the top, like a spaceship from the old Flash Gordon movies Sammy used to love.

No more blackouts? Hazel thought. After enduring them for so long, the idea seemed too good to be true.

How could Ella be sure they were gone? Yet Hazel *did* feel different . . . more grounded, as if she wasn't trying to live in two time periods anymore. Every muscle in her body began to relax. She felt as if she'd finally slipped out of a lead jacket she'd been wearing for months. Somehow, having Frank with her during the blackout had helped. She'd relived her entire past, right through to the present. No wall she had to worry about was the future—assuming she*had* one.

Percy steered the boat toward the downtown docks. As they got closer, Ella scratched nervously at her nest of books.

Hazel started to feel edgy, too. She wasn't sure why. It was a bright, sunny day, and Seattle looked like a beautiful place, with inlets and bridges, wooded islands dotting the bay, and snowcapped mountains rising in the distance. Still, she felt as if she were being watched.

“Um...why are we stopping here?” she asked.

Percy showed them the silver ring on his necklace. “Reyna has a sister here. She asked me to find her and show her this.”

“Reyna has a *sister*?” Frank asked, like the idea terrified him.

Percy nodded. “Apparently Reyna thinks her sister could send help for the camp.”

“Amazons,” Ella muttered. “Amazon country. Hmm. Ella will find libraries instead. Doesn't like Amazons. Fierce. Shields. Swords. Pointy. Ouch.”

Frank reached for his spear. “Amazons? Like...female warriors?”

“That would make sense,” Hazel said. “If Reyna's sister is also a daughter of Bellona, I can see why she'd join the Amazons. But...is it safe for us to be here?”

“Nope, nope, nope,” Ella said. “Get books instead. No Amazons.”

“We have to try,” Percy said. “I promised Reyna. Besides, the *Pax* isn't doing too great. I've been pushing it pretty hard.”

Hazel looked down at her feet. Water was leaking between the floorboards. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” Percy agreed. “We'll either need to fix it or find a new boat. I'm pretty much holding it together with my willpower at this point. Ella, do you have any idea where we can find the Amazons?”

“And, um,” Frank said nervously, “they don’t, like, kill men on sight, do they?”

Ella glanced at the downtown docks, only a few hundred yards away. “Ella will find friends later. Ella will fly away now.”

And she did.

“Well...” Frank picked a single red feather out of the air. “That’s encouraging.”

They docked at the wharf. They barely had time to unload their supplies before the *Pax* shuddered and broke into pieces. Most of it sank, leaving only a board with a painted eye and another with the letter *P* bobbing in the waves.

“Guess we’re not fixing it,” Hazel said. “What now?”

Percy stared at the steep hills of downtown Seattle. “We hope the Amazons will help.”

They explored for hours. They found some great salty caramel chocolate at a candy store. They bought some coffee so strong, Hazel’s head felt like a vibrating gong. They stopped at a sidewalk café and had some excellent grilled salmon sandwiches.

Once they saw Ella zooming between high-rise towers, a large book clutched in each foot. But they found no Amazons. All the while, Hazel was aware of the time ticking by. June 22 now, and Alaska was still a long way away.

Finally they wandered south of downtown, into a plaza surrounded by smaller glass and brick buildings. Hazel’s nerves started tingling. She looked around, sure she was being watched.

“There,” she said.

The office building on their left had a single word etched on the glass doors: AMAZON.

“Oh,” Frank said. “Uh, no, Hazel. That’s a modern thing. They’re a company, right? They sell stuff on the Internet. They’re not actually Amazons.”

“Unless...” Percy walked through the doors. Hazel had a bad feeling about this place, but she and Frank followed.

The lobby was like an empty fish tank—glass walls, a glossy black floor, a few token plants, and pretty much nothing else. Against the back wall, a black stone staircase led up and down. In the middle of the room stood a young woman in a black pantsuit, with long auburn hair and a security guard’s earpiece. Her

name tag said Kinzie. Her smile was friendly enough, but her eyes reminded Hazel of the policemen in New Orleans who used to patrol the French Quarter at night. They always seemed to look *through* you, as if they were thinking about who might attack them next.

Kinzie nodded at Hazel, ignoring the boys. “May I help you?”

“Um...I hope so,” Hazel said. “We’re looking for Amazons.”

Kinzie glanced at Hazel’s sword, then Frank’s spear, though neither should have been visible through the Mist.

“This is the main campus for Amazon,” she said cautiously. “Did you have an appointment with someone, or—”

“Hylla,” Percy interrupted. “We’re looking for a girl named—”

Kinzie moved so fast, Hazel’s eyes almost couldn’t follow. She kicked Frank in the chest and sent him flying backward across the lobby. She pulled a sword out of thin air, swept Percy off his feet with the flat of the blade, and pressed the point under his chin.

Too late, Hazel reached for her sword. A dozen more girls in black flooded up the staircase, swords in hand, and surrounded her.

Kinzie glared down at Percy. “First rule: Males don’t speak without permission. Second rule, trespassing on our territory is punishable by death. You’ll meet Queen Hylla, all right. She’ll be the one deciding your fate.”

The Amazons confiscated the trio’s weapons and marched them down so many flights of stairs, Hazel lost count.

Finally they emerged in a cavern so big it could have accommodated ten high schools, sports fields and all. Stark fluorescent lights glowed along the rock ceiling. Conveyor belts wound through the room like water slides, carrying boxes in every direction. Aisles of metal shelves stretched out forever, stacked high with crates of merchandise. Cranes hummed and robotic arms whirred, folding cardboard boxes, packing shipments, and taking things on and off the belts. Some of the shelves were so tall they were only accessible by ladders and catwalks, which ran across the ceiling like theater scaffolding.

Hazel remembered newsreels she’d seen as a child. She’d always been impressed by the scenes of factories building planes and guns for the war effort—hundreds and hundreds of weapons coming off the line every day. But that was nothing compared to *this*, and almost all the work was being done by

computers and robots. The only humans Hazel could see were some black-suited security women patrolling the catwalks, and some men in orange jumpsuits, like prison uniforms, driving forklifts through the aisles, delivering more pallets of boxes. The men wore iron collars around their necks.

“You keep *slaves*?” Hazel knew it might be dangerous to speak, but she was so outraged she couldn’t stop herself.

“The men?” Kinzie snorted. “They’re not slaves. They just know their place. Now, move.”

They walked so far, Hazel’s feet began to hurt. She thought they must surely be getting to the end of the warehouse when Kinzie opened a large set of double doors and led them into another cavern, just as big as the first.

“The *Underworld* isn’t this big,” Hazel complained, which probably wasn’t true, but it felt that way to her feet.

Kinzie smiled smugly. “You admire our base of operations? Yes, our distribution system is worldwide. It took many years and most of our fortune to build. Now, finally, we’re turning a profit. The mortals don’t realize they are funding the Amazon kingdom. Soon, we’ll be richer than any mortal nation. Then—when the weak mortals depend on us for everything—the revolution will begin!”

“What are you going to do?” Frank grumbled. “Cancel free shipping?”

A guard slammed the hilt of her sword into his gut. Percy tried to help him, but two more guards pushed him back at sword point.

“You’ll learn respect,” Kinzie said. “It’s males like you who have ruined the mortal world. The only harmonious society is one run by women. We are stronger, wiser—”

“More humble,” Percy said. The guards tried to hit him, but Percy ducked. “Stop it!” Hazel said. Surprisingly, the guards listened. “Hylla is going to judge us, right?” Hazel asked. “So take us to her. We’re wasting time.” Kinzie nodded. “Perhaps you’re right. We have more important problems. And time...time is definitely an issue.” “What do you mean?” Hazel asked. A guard grunted. “We could take them straight to Otrera.

Might win her favor that way.” “No!” Kinzie snarled. “I’d sooner wear an iron collar and drive a forklift. Hylla is queen.” “Until tonight,” another guard muttered. Kinzie gripped her sword. For a second Hazel thought the

Amazons might start fighting one another, but Kinzie seemed to get her

anger under control. “Enough,” she said. “Let’s go.” They crossed a lane of forklift traffic, navigated a maze of conveyor belts, and ducked under a row of robotic arms that were packing up boxes.

Most of the merchandise looked pretty ordinary: books, electronics, baby diapers. But against one wall sat a war chariot with a big bar code on the side. Hanging from the yoke was a sign that read: ONLY ONE LEFT IN STOCK. ORDER SOON! (MORE ON THE WAY)

Finally they entered a smaller cavern that looked like a combination loading zone and throne room. The walls were lined with metal shelves six stories high, decorated with war banners, painted shields, and the stuffed heads of dragons, hydras, giant lions, and wild boars. Standing guard along either side were dozens of forklifts modified for war. An iron-collared male drove each machine, but an Amazon warrior stood on a platform in back, manning a giant mounted crossbow. The prongs of each forklift had been sharpened into oversized sword blades.

The shelves in this room were stacked with cages containing live animals. Hazel couldn’t believe what she was seeing—black mastiffs, giant eagles, a lion-eagle hybrid that must’ve been a gryphon, and a red ant the size of a compact car.

She watched in horror as a forklift zipped into the room, picked up a cage with a beautiful white pegasus, and sped away while the horse whinnied in protest.

“What are you doing to that poor animal?” Hazel demanded.

Kinzie frowned. “The pegasus? It’ll be fine. Someone must’ve ordered it. The shipping and handling charges are steep, but—”

“You can *buy* a pegasus online?” Percy asked.

Kinzie glared at him. “Obviously *you* can’t, male. But Amazons can. We have followers all over the world. They need supplies. This way.”

At the end of the warehouse was a dais constructed from pallets of books: stacks of vampire novels, walls of James Patterson thrillers, and a throne made from about a thousand copies of something called *The Five Habits of Highly Aggressive Women*.

At the base of the steps, several Amazons in camouflage were having a heated argument while a young woman—Queen Hylla, Hazel assumed—watched and listened from her throne.

Hylla was in her twenties, lithe and lean as a tiger. She wore a black leather

jumpsuit and black boots. She had no crown, but around her waist was a strange belt made of interlocking gold links, like the pattern of a labyrinth. Hazel couldn't believe how much she looked like Reyna—a little older, perhaps, but with the same long black hair, the same dark eyes, and the same hard expression, like she was trying to decide which of the Amazons before her most deserved death.

Kinzie took one look at the argument and grunted with distaste. "Otrera's agents, spreading their lies."

"What?" Frank asked.

Then Hazel stopped so abruptly, the guards behind her stumbled. A few feet from the queen's throne, two Amazons guarded a cage. Inside was a beautiful horse—not the winged kind, but a majestic and powerful stallion with a honey-colored coat and a black mane. His fierce brown eyes regarded Hazel, and she could swear he looked impatient, as if thinking: *About time you got here.*

"It's him," Hazel murmured.

"Him, who?" Percy asked.

Kinzie scowled in annoyance, but when she saw where Hazel was looking, her expression softened. "Ah, yes. Beautiful, isn't he?"

Hazel blinked to make sure she wasn't hallucinating. It was the same horse she'd chased in Alaska. She was *sure* of it...but that was impossible. No horse could live that long.

"Is he..." Hazel could hardly control her voice. "Is he for sale?"

The guards all laughed.

"That's Arion," Kinzie said patiently, as if she understood Hazel's fascination. "He's a royal treasure of the Amazons—to be claimed only by our most courageous warrior, if you believe the prophecy."

"Prophecy?" Hazel asked.

Kinzie's expression became pained, almost embarrassed. "Never mind. But no, he's not for sale."

"Then why is he in a cage?"

Kinzie grimaced. "Because...he is difficult."

Right on cue, the horse slammed his head against the cage door. The metal bars shuddered, and the guards retreated nervously.

Hazel wanted to free that horse. She wanted it more than anything she had ever wanted before. But Percy, Frank, and a dozen Amazon guards were staring

at her, so she tried to mask her emotions. “Just asking,” she managed. “Let’s see the queen.”

The argument at the front of the room grew louder. Finally the queen noticed Hazel’s group approaching, and she snapped, “Enough!”

The arguing Amazons shut up immediately. The queen waved them aside and beckoned Kinzie forward.

Kinzie shoved Hazel and her friends toward the throne. “My queen, these demigods—”

The queen shot to her feet. “You!”

She glared at Percy Jackson with murderous rage.

Percy muttered something in Ancient Greek that Hazel was pretty sure the nuns at St. Agnes wouldn’t have liked.

“Clipboard,” he said. “Spa. Pirates.”

This made no sense to Hazel, but the queen nodded. She stepped down from her dais of best sellers and drew a dagger from her belt.

“You were incredibly foolish to come here,” she said. “You destroyed my home. You made my sister and me exiles and prisoners.”

“Percy,” Frank said uneasily. “What’s the scary woman with the dagger talking about?”

“Circe’s Island,” Percy said. “I just remembered. The gorgon’s blood—maybe it’s starting to heal my mind. The Sea of Monsters. Hylla...she welcomed us at the docks, took us to see her boss. Hylla worked for the sorceress.”

Hylla bared her perfect white teeth. “Are you telling me you’ve had amnesia? You know, I might actually believe you.

Why else would you be stupid enough to come here?”

“We’ve come in peace,” Hazel insisted. “What did Percy do?”

“Peace?” The queen raised her eyebrows at Hazel. “What did he *do*? This *male* destroyed Circe’s school of magic!”

“Circe turned me into a guinea pig!” Percy protested.

“No excuses!” Hylla said. “Circe was a wise and generous employer. I had room and board, a good health plan, dental, pet leopards, free potions—everything! And *this* demigod with his friend, the blonde—”

“Annabeth.” Percy tapped his forehead like he wanted the memories to come back faster. “That’s right. I was there with Annabeth.”

“You released our captives—Blackbeard and his pirates.” She turned to Hazel. “Have you ever been kidnapped by pirates? It isn’t fun. They burned our spa to the ground. My sister and I were their prisoners for months. Fortunately we were daughters of Bellona. We learned to fight quickly. If we hadn’t...” She shuddered. “Well, the pirates learned to respect us. Eventually we made our way to California where we—” She hesitated as if the memory was painful. “Where my sister and I parted ways.”

She stepped toward Percy until they were nose-to-nose. She ran her dagger under his chin. “Of course, I survived and prospered. I have risen to be queen of the Amazons. So perhaps I should thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Percy said.

The queen dug her knife in a little deeper. “Never mind. I think I’ll kill you.”

“Wait!” Hazel yelled. “Reyna sent us! Your sister! Look at the ring on his necklace.”

Hylla frowned. She lowered her knife to Percy’s necklace until the point rested on the silver ring. The color drained from her face.

“Explain this.” She glared at Hazel. “Quickly.”

Hazel tried. She described Camp Jupiter. She told the Amazons about Reyna being their praetor, and the army of monsters that was marching south. She told them about their quest to free Thanatos in Alaska.

As Hazel talked, another group of Amazons entered the room. One was taller and older than the rest, with plaited silver hair and fine silk robes like a Roman matron. The other Amazons made way for her, treating her with such respect that Hazel wondered if she was Hylla’s mother—until she noticed how Hylla and the older woman stared daggers at each other.

“So we need your help,” Hazel finished her story. “Reyna needs your help.”

Hylla gripped Percy’s leather cord and yanked it off his neck—beads, ring, *probatio* tablet and all. “Reyna...that foolish girl—”

“Well!” the older woman interrupted. “Romans need our help?” She laughed, and the Amazons around her joined in.

“How many times did we battle the Romans in my day?” the woman asked. “How many times have they killed our sisters in battle? When I was queen—”

“Otrera,” Hylla interrupted, “you are here as a guest. You are *not* queen anymore.”

The older woman spread her hands and made a mocking bow. “As you say—”

at least, until tonight. But I speak the truth, *Queen* Hylla.” She said the word like a taunt. “I’ve been brought back by the Earth Mother herself! I bring tidings of a new war. Why should Amazons follow Jupiter, that foolish king of Olympus, when we can follow a *queen*? When I take command—”

“If you take command,” Hylla said. “But for now, I am queen. My word is law.”

“I see.” Otrera looked at the assembled Amazons, who were standing very still, as if they’d found themselves in a pit with two wild tigers. “Have we become so weak that we listen to *male* demigods? Will you spare the life of this son of Neptune, even though he once destroyed your home? Perhaps you’ll let him destroy your *new* home, too!”

Hazel held her breath. The Amazons looked back and forth between Hylla and Otrera, watching for any sign of weakness.

“I will pass judgment,” Hylla said in an icy tone, “once I have all the facts. That is how *I* rule—by reason, not fear. First, I will talk with this one.” She jabbed a finger toward Hazel. “It is my duty to hear out a female warrior before I sentence her or her allies to death. That is the Amazon way. Or have your years in the Underworld muddled your memory, Otrera?”

The older woman sneered, but she didn’t try to argue.

Hylla turned to Kinzie. “Take these males to the holding cells. The rest of you, leave us.”

Otrera raised her hand to the crowd. “As our *queen* commands. But any of you who would like to hear more about Gaea, and our glorious future with her, come with me!”

About half the Amazons followed her out of the room. Kinzie snorted with disgust, then she and her guards hauled Percy and Frank away.

Soon Hylla and Hazel were alone except for the queen’s personal guards. At Hylla’s signal, even they moved out of earshot.

The queen turned toward Hazel. Her anger dissolved, and Hazel saw desperation in her eyes. The queen looked like one of her caged animals being whisked off on a conveyor belt.

“We must talk,” Hylla said. “We don’t have much time. By midnight, I will most likely be dead.”

HAZEL

HAZEL CONSIDERED MAKING A RUN FOR IT.

She didn't trust Queen Hylla, and she certainly didn't trust that other lady, Otrera. Only three guards were left in the room. All of them kept their distance.

Hylla was armed with just a dagger. This deep underground, Hazel might be able to cause an earthquake in the throne room, or summon a big pile of schist or gold. If she could cause a distraction, she might be able to escape and find her friends.

Unfortunately, she'd seen the Amazons fight. Even though the queen had only a dagger, Hazel suspected she could use it pretty well. And Hazel was unarmed. They hadn't searched her, which meant thankfully they hadn't taken Frank's firewood from her coat pocket, but her sword was gone.

The queen seemed to be reading her thoughts. "Forget about escape. Of course, we'd respect you for trying. But we'd have to kill you."

"Thanks for the warning."

Hylla shrugged. "The least I can do. I believe you come in peace. I believe Reyna sent you."

"But you won't help?"

The queen studied the necklace she'd taken from Percy. "It's complicated," she said. "Amazons have always had a rocky relationship with other demigods—especially *male* demigods. We fought for King Priam in the Trojan War, but Achilles killed our queen, Penthesilea. Years before that, Hercules stole Queen Hippolyta's belt—this belt I'm wearing. It took us centuries to recover it. Long before that, at the very beginning of the Amazon nation, a hero named Bellerophon killed our first queen, Otrera."

"You mean the lady—"

"—who just left, yes. Otrera, our first queen, daughter of Ares."

“Mars?”

Hylla made a sour face. “No, definitely *Ares*. Otrera lived long before Rome, in a time when all demigods were Greek. Unfortunately, some of our warriors still prefer the old ways. Children of *Ares*...they are always the worst.”

“The old ways...” Hazel had heard rumors about Greek demigods. Octavian believed they existed and were secretly plotting against Rome. But she’d never really believed it, even when Percy came to camp. He just didn’t strike her as an evil, scheming Greek. “You mean the Amazons are a mix...Greek and Roman?”

Hylla continued to examine the necklace—the clay beads, the *probatio* tablet. She slipped Reyna’s silver ring off the cord and put it on her own finger. “I suppose they don’t teach you about that at Camp Jupiter. The gods have many aspects. Mars, *Ares*. Pluto, Hades. Being immortal, they tend to accumulate personalities. They are Greek, Roman, American—a combination of all the cultures they’ve influenced over the eons. Do you understand?”

“I—I’m not sure. Are all Amazons demigods?”

The queen spread her hands. “We all have *some* immortal blood, but many of my warriors are descended from demigods. Some have been Amazons for countless generations. Others are children of minor gods. Kinzie, the one who brought you here, is the daughter of a nymph. Ah—here she is now.”

The girl with the auburn hair approached the queen and bowed.

“The prisoners are safely locked away,” Kinzie reported. “But...”

“Yes?” the queen asked.

Kinzie swallowed like she had a bad taste in her mouth. “Otrera made sure *her* followers are guarding the cells. I’m sorry, my queen.”

Hylla pursed her lips. “No matter. Stay with us, Kinzie. We were just talking about our, ah, situation.”

“Otrera,” Hazel guessed. “Gaea brought her back from the dead to throw you Amazons into civil war.”

The queen exhaled. “If that was her plan, it is working. Otrera is a legend among our people. She plans to take back the throne and lead us to war against the Romans. Many of my sisters will follow her.”

“Not all,” Kinzie grumbled.

“But Otrera is a spirit!” Hazel said. “She isn’t even—”

“Real?” The queen studied Hazel carefully. “I worked with the sorceress Circe for many years. I know a returned soul when I see one. When did *you* die,

Hazel—Nineteen twenty? Nineteen thirty?”

“Nineteen forty-two,” Hazel said. “But—but I wasn’t sent by Gaea. I came back to *stop* her. This is my second chance.”

“Your second chance...” Hylla gazed at the rows of battle forklifts, now empty. “I know about second chances. That boy,

Percy Jackson—he destroyed my old life. You wouldn’t have recognized me back then. I wore dresses and makeup. I was a glorified secretary, an accursed Barbie doll.”

Kinzie made a three-fingered claw over her heart, like the voodoo gestures Hazel’s mom once used for warding off the Evil Eye.

“Circe’s island was a safe place for Reyna and me,” the queen continued. “We were daughters of the war goddess, Bellona. I wanted to protect Reyna from all that violence. Then Percy Jackson unleashed the pirates. They kidnapped us, and Reyna and I learned to be tough. We found out that we were good with weapons. The past four years, I’ve wanted to *kill* Percy Jackson for what he made us endure.”

“But Reyna became the praetor of Camp Jupiter,” Hazel said. “You became the queen of the Amazons. Maybe this was your destiny.”

Hylla fingered the necklace in her hand. “I may not be queen for much longer.”

“You will prevail!” Kinzie insisted.

“As the Fates decree,” Hylla said without enthusiasm.

“You see, Hazel, Otrera has challenged me to a duel. Every Amazon has that right. Tonight at midnight, we’ll battle for the throne.”

“But...you’re good, right?” Hazel asked.

Hylla managed a dry smile. “Good, yes, but Otrera is the founder of the Amazons.”

“She’s a lot older. Maybe she’s out of practice, having been dead for so long.”

“I hope you’re right, Hazel. You see, it’s a battle to the death....”

She waited for that to sink in. Hazel remembered what Phineas had said in Portland—how he had had a shortcut back from death, thanks to Gaea. She remembered how the gorgons had tried to re-form in the Tiber.

“Even if you kill her,” Hazel said, “she’ll just come back. As long as Thanatos is chained, she won’t stay dead.”

“Exactly,” Hylla said. “Otrera has already told us that she *can’t* die. So even if I manage to defeat her tonight, she’ll simply return and challenge me again tomorrow. There is no law against challenging the queen multiple times. She can insist on fighting me every night, until she finally wears me down. I can’t win.”

Hazel gazed at the throne. She imagined Otrera sitting there with her fine robes and her silver hair, ordering her warriors to attack Rome. She imagined the voice of Gaeafilling this cavern.

“There has to be a way,” she said. “Don’t Amazons have...special powers or something?”

“No more than other demigods,” Hylla said. “We can die, just like any mortal. There *is* a group of archers who follow the goddess Artemis. They are often mistaken for Amazons, but the Hunters forsake the company of men in exchange for almost endless life. We Amazons—we would prefer to live life to the fullest. We love, we fight, we die.”

“I thought you hated men.”

Hylla and Kinzie both laughed.

“Hate men?” said the queen. “No, no, we like men. We just like to show them who’s in charge. But that’s beside the point. If I could, I would rally our troops and ride to my sister’s aid. Unfortunately, my power is tenuous. When I am killed in combat—and it’s only a matter of time—Otrera will be queen. She will march to Camp Jupiter with our forces, but she will not go to help my sister. She’ll go to join the giant’s army.”

“We’ve got to stop her,” Hazel said. “My friends and I killed Phineas, one of Gaea’s other servants in Portland. Maybe we can help!”

The queen shook her head. “You can’t interfere. As queen, I must fight my own battles. Besides, your friends are imprisoned. If I let them go, I’ll look weak. Either *I* execute you three as trespassers, or Otrera will do so when she becomes queen.”

Hazel’s heart sank. “So I guess we’re both dead. Me for the second time.”

In the corner cage, the stallion Arion whinnied angrily. He reared and slammed his hooves against the bars.

“The horse seems to feel your despair,” the queen said. “Interesting. He’s immortal, you know—the son of Neptune and Ceres.”

Hazel blinked. “Two gods had a horse for a kid?”

“Long story.”

“Oh.” Hazel’s face felt hot with embarrassment.

“He’s the fastest horse in the world,” Hylla said. “Pegasus is more famous, with his wings, but Arion runs like the wind over land and sea. No creature is faster. It took us years to capture him—one of our greatest prizes. But it did us no good. The horse will not allow anyone to ride him. I think he hates Amazons. And he is expensive to keep. He will eat anything, but he prefers gold.”

The back of Hazel’s neck tingled. “He eats gold?”

She remembered the horse following her in Alaska so many years ago. She had thought he was eating nuggets of gold that appeared in her footsteps.

She knelt and pressed her hand against the floor. Immediately, the stone cracked. A chunk of gold ore the size of a plum was pushed out of the earth. Hazel stood, examining her prize.

Hylla and Kinzie stared at her.

“How did you...?” The queen gasped. “Hazel, be careful!”

Hazel approached the stallion’s cage. She put her hand between the bars, and Arion gingerly ate the chunk of gold from her palm.

“Unbelievable,” Kinzie said. “The last girl who tried that—”

“Now has a metal arm,” the queen finished. She studied Hazel with new interest, as if deciding whether or not to say more. “Hazel...we spent years hunting for this horse. It was foretold that the most courageous female warrior would someday master Arion and ride him to victory, ushering in a new era of prosperity for the Amazons. Yet *no* Amazon can touch him, much less control him. Even Otrera tried and failed. Two others died attempting to ride him.”

That probably should’ve worried Hazel, but she couldn’t imagine this beautiful horse hurting her. She put her hand through the bars again and stroked Arion’s nose. He nuzzled her arm, murmuring contentedly, as if asking, *More gold? Yum.*

“I would feed you more, Arion.” Hazel glanced pointedly at the queen. “But I think I’m scheduled for an execution.”

Queen Hylla looked from Hazel to the horse and back again. “Unbelievable.”

“The prophecy,” Kinzie said. “Is it possible...?”

Hazel could almost see the gears turning inside the queen’s head, formulating a plan. “You have courage, Hazel Levesque. And it seems Arion has chosen you. Kinzie?”

“Yes, my queen?”

“You said Otrera’s followers are guarding the cells?”

Kinzie nodded. “I should have foreseen that. I’m sorry—”

“No, it’s fine.” The queen’s eyes gleamed—the way Hannibal the elephant’s did whenever he was unleashed to destroy a fortress. “It would be embarrassing for Otrera if her followers failed in their duties—if, for instance, they were overcome by an outsider and a prison break occurred.”

Kinzie began to smile. “Yes, my queen. Most embarrassing.”

“Of course,” Hylla continued, “none of my guards would know a *thing* about this. Kinzie would *not* spread the word to allow an escape.”

“Certainly not,” Kinzie agreed.

“And we couldn’t help you.” The queen raised her eyebrows at Hazel. “But if you somehow overpowered the guards and freed your friends...if, for instance, you took one of the guards’ Amazon cards—”

“With one-click purchasing enabled,” Kinzie said, “which will open the jail cells with one click.”

“If—gods forbid!—something like that were to happen,” the queen continued, “you would find your friends’ weapons and supplies in the guard station next to the cells. And who knows? If you made your way back to this throne room while I was off preparing for my duel...well, as I mentioned, Arion is a very fast horse. It would be a shame if he were stolen and used for an escape.”

Hazel felt like she’d been plugged into a wall socket. Electricity surged through her whole body. Arion...Arion could be hers. All she had to do was rescue her friends and fight her way through an entire nation of highly trained warriors. “Queen Hylla,” she said, “I—I’m not much of a fighter.”

“Oh, there are many kinds of fighting, Hazel. I have a feeling you’re quite resourceful. And if the prophecy is correct, you will help the Amazon nation achieve prosperity. If you succeed on your quest to free Thanatos, for instance —”

“—then Otrera wouldn’t come back if she were killed,”

Hazel said. “You’d only have to defeat her...um, every night until we succeed.”

The queen nodded grimly. “It seems we both have impossible tasks ahead of us.”

“But you’re trusting me,” said Hazel. “And I trust you. You *will* win, as

many times as it takes.”

Hylla held out Percy’s necklace and poured it into Hazel’s hands.

“I hope you’re right,” the queen said. “But the sooner you succeed the better, yes?”

Hazel slipped the necklace into her pocket. She shook the queen’s hand, wondering if it was possible to make a friend so fast—especially one who was about to send her to jail.

“This conversation never happened,” Hylla told Kinzie. “Take our prisoner to the cells and hand her over to Otrera’s guards. And, Kinzie, be sure you leave before anything unfortunate happens. I don’t want my loyal followers held accountable for a prison break.”

The queen smiled mischievously, and for the first time, Hazel felt jealous of Reyna. She wished that *she* had a sister like this.

“Good-bye, Hazel Levesque,” the queen said. “If we both die tonight...well, I’m glad I met you.”

H A Z E L

THE AMAZON JAIL WAS AT THE TOP OF a storage aisle, sixty feet in the air.

Kinzie led her up three different ladders to a metal catwalk, then tied Hazel's hands loosely behind her back and pushed her along past crates of jewelry.

A hundred feet ahead, under the harsh glow of fluorescent lights, a row of chain-link cages hung suspended from cables. Percy and Frank were in two of the cages, talking to each other in hushed tones. Next to them on the catwalk, three bored-looking Amazon guards leaned against their spears and gazed at little black tablets in their hands like they were reading.

Hazel thought the tablets looked too thin for books. Then it occurred to her they might be some sort of tiny—what did modern people call them?—laptop computers. SecretAmazon technology, perhaps. Hazel found the idea almost as unsettling as the battle forklifts downstairs.

“Get moving, girl,” Kinzie ordered, loud enough for the guards to hear. She prodded Hazel in the back with her sword.

Hazel walked as slowly as she could, but her mind was racing. She needed to come up with a brilliant rescue plan. So far she had nothing. Kinzie had made sure she could break her bonds easily, but she'd still be empty-handed against three trained warriors, and she had to act before they put her in a cage.

She passed a pallet of crates marked **24-CARAT BLUE TOPAZ RINGS**, then another labeled **SILVER FRIENDSHIP BRACELETS**. An electronic display next to the friendship bracelets read: *People who bought this item also bought GARDEN GNOMESOLAR PATIO LIGHT and FLAMING SPEAR OF DEATH. Buy all three and save 12%!*

Hazel froze. Gods of Olympus, she was stupid.

Silver. Topaz. She sent out her senses, searching for precious metals, and her brain almost exploded from the feedback. She was standing next to a six-story-

tall mountain of jewelry. But in front of her, from here to the guards, was nothing but prison cages.

“What is it?” Kinzie hissed. “Keep moving! They’ll get suspicious.”

“Make them come here,” Hazel muttered over her shoulder.

“Why—”

“Please.”

The guards frowned in their direction.

“What are you staring at?” Kinzie yelled at them. “Here’s the third prisoner. Come get her.”

The nearest guard set down her reading tablet. “Why can’t you walk another thirty paces, Kinzie?”

“Um, because—”

“*Ooof!*” Hazel fell to her knees and tried to put on her best seasick face. “I’m feeling nauseous! Can’t...walk. Amazons ... too ... scary.”

“There you go,” Kinzie told the guards. “Now, are you going to come take the prisoner, or should I tell Queen Hylla you’re not doing your duty?”

The nearest guard rolled her eyes and trudged over. Hazel had hoped the other two guards would come too, but she’d have to worry about that later.

The first guard grabbed Hazel’s arm. “Fine. I’ll take custody of the prisoner. But if I were you, Kinzie, I wouldn’t worry about Hylla. She won’t be queen much longer.”

“We’ll see, Doris.” Kinzie turned to leave. Hazel waited until her steps receded down the catwalk.

The guard Doris pulled on Hazel’s arm. “Well? Come on.”

Hazel concentrated on the wall of jewelry next to her: forty large boxes of silver bracelets. “Not...feeling so good.”

“You are *not* throwing up on me,” Doris growled. She tried to yank Hazel to her feet, but Hazel went limp, like a kid throwing a fit in a store. Next to her, the boxes began to tremble.

“Lulu!” Doris yelled to one of her comrades. “Help me with this lame little girl.”

Amazons named Doris and Lulu? Hazel thought. Okay ...

The second guard jogged over. Hazel figured this was her best chance. Before they could haul her to her feet, she yelled, “Ooooh!” and flattened herself

against the catwalk.

Doris started to say, “Oh, give me a—”

The entire pallet of jewelry exploded with a sound like a thousand slot machines hitting the jackpot. A tidal wave of silver friendship bracelets poured across the catwalk, washing Doris and Lulu right over the railing.

They would’ve fallen to their deaths, but Hazel wasn’t *that* mean. She summoned a few hundred bracelets, which leaped at the guards and lashed around their ankles, leaving them hanging upside down from the bottom of the catwalk, screaming like lame little girls.

Hazel turned toward the third guard. She broke her bonds, which were about as sturdy as toilet paper. She picked up one of the fallen guards’ spears. She was terrible with spears, but she hoped the third Amazon didn’t know that.

“Should I kill you from here?” Hazel snarled. “Or are you going to make me come over there?”

The guard turned and ran.

Hazel shouted over the side to Doris and Lulu. “Amazon cards! Pass them up, unless you want me to undo those friendship bracelets and let you drop!”

Four and a half seconds later, Hazel had two Amazon cards. She raced over to the cages and swiped a card. The doors popped open.

Frank stared at her in astonishment. “Hazel, that was...*amazing*.”

Percy nodded. “I will never wear jewelry again.”

“Except this.” Hazel tossed him his necklace. “Our weapons and supplies are at the end of the catwalk. We should hurry. Pretty soon—”

Alarms began wailing throughout the cavern.

“Yeah,” she said, “that’ll happen. Let’s go!”

The first part of the escape was easy. They retrieved their things with no problem, then started climbing down the ladder. Every time Amazons swarmed beneath them, demanding their surrender, Hazel made a crate of jewelry explode, burying their enemies in a Niagara Falls of gold and silver. When they got to the bottom of the ladder, they found a scene that looked like Mardi Gras Armageddon—Amazons trapped up to their necks in bead necklaces, several more upside down in a mountain of amethyst earrings, and a battle forklift buried in silver charm bracelets.

“You, Hazel Levesque,” Frank said, “are entirely *freaking* incredible.”

She wanted to kiss him right there, but they had no time. They ran back to the throne room.

They stumbled across one Amazon who must've been loyal to Hylla. As soon as she saw the escapees, she turned away like they were invisible.

Percy started to ask, "What the—"

"Some of them *want* us to escape," Hazel said. "I'll explain later."

The second Amazon they met wasn't so friendly. She was dressed in full armor, blocking the throne-room entrance. She spun her spear with lightning speed, but this time Percy was ready. He drew Riptide and stepped into battle. As the Amazon jabbed at him, he sidestepped, cut her spear shaft in half, and slammed the hilt of his sword against her helmet.

The guard crumpled.

"Mars Almighty," Frank said. "How did you—that wasn't any Roman technique!"

Percy grinned. "The *graecus* has some moves, my friend. After you."

They ran into the throne room. As promised, Hylla and her guards had cleared out. Hazel dashed over to Arion's cage and swiped an Amazon card across the lock. Instantly the stallion burst forth, rearing in triumph.

Percy and Frank stumbled backward.

"Um...is that thing *tame*?" Frank said.

The horse whinnied angrily.

"I don't think so," Percy guessed. "He just said, '*I will trample you to death, silly Chinese Canadian baby man.*'"

"You speak horse?" Hazel asked.

"'Baby man'?" Frank spluttered.

"Speaking to horses is a Poseidon thing," Percy said. "Uh, I mean a Neptune thing."

"Then you and Arion should get along fine," Hazel said. "He's a son of Neptune too."

Percy turned pale. "Excuse me?"

If they hadn't been in such a bad situation, Percy's expression might have made her laugh. "The point is, he's fast. He can get us out of here."

Frank did not look thrilled. "Three of us can't fit on one horse, can we? We'll fall off, or slow him down, or—"

Arion whinnied again.

“Ouch,” Percy said. “Frank, the horse says you’re a—you know, actually, I’m not going to translate that. Anyway, he says there’s a chariot in the warehouse, and he’s willing to pull it.”

“There!” someone yelled from the back of the throne room. A dozen Amazons charged in, followed by males in orange jumpsuits. When they saw Arion, they backed up quickly and headed for the battle forklifts.

Hazel vaulted onto Arion’s back.

She grinned down at her friends. “I remember seeing that chariot. Follow me, guys!”

She galloped into the larger cavern and scattered a crowd of males. Percy knocked out an Amazon. Frank swept two more off their feet with his spear. Hazel could feel Arion straining to run. He wanted to go full speed, but he needed more room. They had to make it outside.

Hazel bowled into a patrol of Amazons, who scattered in terror at the sight of the horse. For once, Hazel’s *spatha* felt exactly the right length. She swung it at everyone who came within reach. No Amazon dared challenge her.

Percy and Frank ran after her. Finally they reached the chariot. Arion stopped by the yoke, and Percy set to work with the reins and harness.

“You’ve done this before?” Frank asked.

Percy didn’t need to answer. His hands flew. In no time the chariot was ready. He jumped aboard and yelled, “Frank, come on! Hazel, go!”

A battle cry went up behind them. A full army of Amazons stormed into the warehouse. Otrera herself stood astride a battle forklift, her silver hair flowing as she swung her mounted crossbow toward the chariot. “Stop them!” she yelled.

Hazel spurred Arion. They raced across the cavern, weaving around pallets and forklifts. An arrow whizzed past Hazel’s head. Something exploded behind her, but she didn’t look back.

“The stairs!” Frank yelled. “No way this horse can pull a chariot up that many flights of—OH MY GODS!”

Thankfully the stairs were wide enough for the chariot, because Arion didn’t even slow down. He shot up the steps with the chariot rattling and groaning. Hazel glanced back a few times to make sure Frank and Percy hadn’t fallen off. Their knuckles were white on the sides of the chariot, their teeth chattering like windup Halloween skulls.

Finally they reached the lobby. Arion crashed through the main doors into the plaza and scattered a bunch of guys in business suits.

Hazel felt the tension in Arion's rib cage. The fresh air was making him crazy to run, but Hazel pulled back on his reins.

"Ella!" Hazel shouted at the sky. "Where are you? We have to leave!"

For a horrible second, she was afraid the harpy might be too far away to hear. She might be lost, or captured by the Amazons.

Behind them a battle forklift clattered up the stairs and roared through the lobby, a mob of Amazons behind it.

"Surrender!" Otrera screamed.

The forklift raised its razor-sharp tines.

"Ella!" Hazel cried desperately.

In a flash of red feathers, Ella landed in the chariot. "Ella is here. Amazons are pointy. Go now."

"Hold on!" Hazel warned. She leaned forward and said, "Arion, run!"

The world seemed to elongate. Sunlight bent around them. Arion shot away from the Amazons and sped through downtown Seattle. Hazel glanced back and saw a line of smoking pavement where Arion's hooves had touched the ground. He thundered toward the docks, leaping over cars, barreling through intersections.

Hazel screamed at the top of her lungs, but it was a scream of delight. For the first time in her life—in her *two* lives—she felt absolutely unstoppable. Arion reached the water and leaped straight off the docks.

Hazel's ears popped. She heard a roar that she later realized was a sonic boom, and Arion tore over Puget Sound, seawater turning to steam in his wake as the skyline of Seattle receded behind them.

FRANK

FRANK WAS RELIEVED WHEN THE WHEELS FELL OFF.

He'd already thrown up twice from the back of the chariot, which was not fun at the speed of sound. The horse seemed to bend time and space as he ran, blurring the landscape and making Frank feel like he'd just drunk a gallon of whole milk without his lactose-intolerance medicine. Ella didn't help matters. She kept muttering: "Seven hundred and fifty miles per hour. Eight hundred. Eight hundred and three. Fast. Very fast."

The horse sped north across Puget Sound, zooming past islands and fishing boats and very surprised pods of whales. The landscape ahead began to look familiar—Crescent Beach, Boundary Bay. Frank had gone sailing here once on a school trip. They'd crossed into Canada.

The horse rocketed onto dry land. He followed Highway 99 north, running so fast, the cars seemed to be standing still.

Finally, just as they were getting into Vancouver, the chariot wheels began to smoke.

"Hazel!" Frank yelled. "We're breaking up!"

She got the message and pulled the reins. The horse didn't seem happy about it, but he slowed to subsonic as they zipped through the city streets. They crossed the Ironworkers bridge into North Vancouver, and the chariot started to rattle dangerously. At last Arion stopped at the top of a wooded hill. He snorted with satisfaction, as if to say, *That's how we run, fools*. The smoking chariot collapsed, spilling Percy, Frank, and Ella onto the wet, mossy ground.

Frank stumbled to his feet. He tried to blink the yellow spots out of his eyes. Percy groaned and started unhitching Arion from the ruined chariot. Ella fluttered around in dizzy circles, bonking into the trees and muttering, "Tree. Tree. Tree. Tree."

Only Hazel seemed unaffected by the ride. Grinning with pleasure, she slid off the horse's back. "That was fun!"

"Yeah." Frank swallowed back his nausea. "So much fun."

Arion whinnied.

"He says he needs to eat," Percy translated. "No wonder. He probably burned about six million calories."

Hazel studied the ground at her feet and frowned. "I'm not sensing any gold around here....Don't worry, Arion. I'll find you some. In the meantime, why don't you go graze? We'll meet you—"

The horse zipped off, leaving a trail of steam in his wake.

Hazel knit her eyebrows. "Do you think he'll come back?"

"I don't know," Percy said. "He seems kind of...spirited."

Frank almost hoped the horse would stay away. He didn't say that, of course. He could tell Hazel was distressed by the idea of losing her new friend. But Arion scared him, and Frank was pretty sure the horse knew it.

Hazel and Percy started salvaging supplies from the chariot wreckage. There had been a few boxes of random Amazon merchandise in the front, and Ella shrieked with delight when she found a shipment of books. She snatched up a copy of *The Birds of North America*, fluttered to the nearest branch, and began scratching through the pages so fast, Frank wasn't sure if she was reading or shredding.

Frank leaned against a tree, trying to control his vertigo. He still hadn't recovered from his Amazon imprisonment—getting kicked across the lobby, disarmed, caged, and insulted as a *baby man* by an egomaniacal horse. That hadn't exactly helped his self-esteem.

Even before that, the vision he had shared with Hazel had left him rattled. He felt closer to her now. He knew he'd done the right thing in giving her the piece of firewood. A huge weight had been taken off his shoulders.

On the other hand, he'd seen the Underworld firsthand. He had felt what it was like to sit forever doing nothing, just regretting your mistakes. He'd looked up at those creepy goldmasks on the judges of the dead and realized that *he* would stand before them someday, maybe very soon.

Frank had always dreamed of seeing his mother again when he died. But maybe that wasn't possible for demigods. Hazel had been in Asphodel for something like seventy years and never found her mom. Frank hoped he and his

mom would both end up in Elysium. But if Hazel hadn't gotten there—sacrificing her life to stop Gaea, taking responsibility for her actions so that her mother wouldn't end up in Punishment—what chance did Frank have? He'd never done anything that heroic.

He straightened and looked around, trying to get his bearings.

To the south, across Vancouver Harbor, the downtown skyline gleamed red in the sunset. To the north, the hills and rain forests of Lynn Canyon Park snaked between the subdivisions of North Vancouver until they gave way to the wilderness.

Frank had explored this park for years. He spotted a bend in the river that looked familiar. He recognized a dead pine tree that had been split by lightning in a nearby clearing. Frank knew this hill.

"I'm practically home," he said. "My grandmother's house is right over there."

Hazel squinted. "How far?"

"Just over the river and through the woods."

Percy raised an eyebrow. "Seriously? To Grandmother's house we go?"

Frank cleared his throat. "Yeah, anyway."

Hazel clasped her hands in prayer. "Frank, *please* tell me she'll let us spend the night. I know we're on a deadline, but we've got to rest, right? And Arion saved us some time. Maybe we could get an actual cooked meal?"

"And a hot shower?" Percy pleaded. "And a bed with, like, sheets and a pillow?"

Frank tried to imagine Grandmother's face if he showed up with two heavily armed friends and a harpy. Everything had changed since his mother's funeral, since the morning the wolves had taken him south. He'd been so angry about leaving. Now, he couldn't imagine going back.

Still, he and his friends were exhausted. They'd been traveling for more than two days without decent food or sleep. Grandmother could give them supplies. And maybe she could answer some questions that were brewing in the back of Frank's mind—a growing suspicion about his family gift.

"It's worth a try," Frank decided. "To Grandmother's house we go."

Frank was so distracted, he would have walked right into the ogres' camp. Fortunately Percy pulled him back.

They crouched next to Hazel and Ella behind a fallen log and peered into the clearing.

“Bad,” Ella murmured. “This is bad for harpies.”

It was fully dark now. Around a blazing campfire sat half a dozen shaggy-haired humanoids. Standing up, they probably would’ve been eight feet tall—tiny compared to the giant Polybotes or even the Cyclopes they’d seen in California, but that didn’t make them any less scary. They wore only knee-length surfer shorts. Their skin was sunstroke red—covered with tattoos of dragons, hearts, and bikini-clad women. Hanging from a spit over the fire was a skinned animal, maybe a boar, and the ogres were tearing off chunks of meat with their clawlike fingernails, laughing and talking as they ate, baring pointy teeth. Next to the ogres sat several mesh bags filled with bronze spheres like cannonballs. The spheres must have been hot, because they steamed in the cool evening air.

Two hundred yards beyond the clearing, the lights of the Zhang mansion glowed through the trees. *So close*, Frank thought. He wondered if they could sneak around the monsters, but when he looked left and right, he saw more campfires in either direction, as if the ogres had surrounded the property. Frank’s fingers dug into the tree bark. His grandmother might be alone inside the house, trapped.

“What are these guys?” he whispered.

“Canadians,” Percy said.

Frank leaned away from him. “*Excuse me?*”

“Uh, no offense,” Percy said. “That’s what Annabeth called them when I fought them before. She said they live in the north, in Canada.”

“Yeah, well,” Frank grumbled, “we’re *in* Canada. *I’m* Canadian. But I’ve never seen *those* things before.”

Ella plucked a feather from her wings and turned it in her fingers. “Laistrygonians,” she said. “Cannibals. Northern giants. Sasquatch legend. Yep, yep. They’re not birds. Not birds of North America.”

“That’s what they’re called,” Percy agreed. “Laistry—uh, whatever Ella said.”

Frank scowled at the dudes in the clearing. “They *could* be mistaken for Bigfoot. Maybe that’s where the legend came from. Ella, you’re pretty smart.”

“Ella is smart,” she agreed. She shyly offered Frank her feather.

“Oh...thanks.” He stuck the feather in his pocket, then noticed Hazel was

glaring at him. “What?” he asked.

“Nothing.” She turned to Percy. “So your memory is coming back? Do you remember how you beat these guys?”

“Sort of,” Percy said. “It’s still fuzzy. I think I had help. We killed them with Celestial bronze, but that was before ... you know.”

“Before Death got kidnapped,” Hazel said. “So now, they might not die at all.”

Percy nodded. “Those bronze cannonballs...those are bad news. I think we used some of them against the giants. They catch fire and blow up.”

Frank’s hand went to his coat pocket. Then he remembered Hazel had his piece of driftwood. “If we cause any explosions,” he said, “the ogres at the other camps will come running. I think they’ve surrounded the house, which means there could be fifty or sixty of these guys in the woods.”

“So it’s a trap.” Hazel looked at Frank with concern. “What about your grandmother? We’ve got to help her.”

Frank felt a lump in his throat. Never in a million years had he thought his grandmother would need rescuing, but now he started running combat scenarios in his mind—the way he had back at camp during the war games.

“We need a distraction,” he decided. “If we can draw this group into the woods, we might sneak through without alerting the others.”

“I wish Arion was here,” Hazel said. “I could get the ogres to chase me.”

Frank slipped his spear off his back. “I’ve got another idea.”

Frank didn’t want to do this. The idea of summoning Gray scared him even more than Hazel’s horse. But he didn’t see another way.

“Frank, you can’t charge out there!” Hazel said. “That’s suicide!”

“I’m not charging,” Frank said. “I’ve got a friend. Just...nobody scream, okay?”

He jabbed the spear into the ground, and the point broke off.

“Oops,” Ella said. “No spear point. Nope, nope.”

The ground trembled. Gray’s skeletal hand broke the surface. Percy fumbled for his sword, and Hazel made a sound like a cat with a hairball. Ella disappeared and rematerialized at the top of the nearest tree.

“It’s okay,” Frank promised. “He’s under control!”

Gray crawled out of the ground. He showed no sign of damage from his

previous encounter with the basilisks. He was good as a new in his camouflage and combat boots, translucent gray flesh covering his bones like glowing Jell-O. He turned his ghostly eyes toward Frank, waiting for orders.

“Frank, that’s a *spartus*,” Percy said. “A skeleton warrior. They’re evil. They’re killers. They’re—”

“I know,” Frank said bitterly. “But it’s a gift from Mars. Right now that’s all I’ve got. Okay, Gray. Your orders: attack that group of ogres. Lead them off to the west, causing a diversion so we can—”

Unfortunately, Gray lost interest after the word “ogres.” Maybe he only understood simple sentences. He charged toward the ogres’ campfire.

“Wait!” Frank said, but it was too late. Gray pulled two of his own ribs from his shirt and ran around the fire, stabbing the ogres in the back with such blinding speed they didn’t even have time to yell. Six extremely surprised-looking Laistrygonians fell sideways like a circle of dominoes and crumbled into dust.

Gray stomped around, kicking their ashes apart as they tried to re-form. When he seemed satisfied that they weren’t coming back, Gray stood at attention, saluted smartly in Frank’s direction, and sank into the forest floor.

Percy stared at Frank. “How—”

“No Laistrygonians.” Ella fluttered down and landed next to them. “Six minus six is zero. Spears are good for subtraction. Yep.”

Hazel looked at Frank as if he’d turned into a zombie skeleton himself. Frank thought his heart might shatter, but he couldn’t blame her. Children of Mars were all about violence. Mars’s symbol was a bloody spear for good reason. Why shouldn’t Hazel be appalled?

He glared down at broken tip of his spear. He wished he had *any* father but Mars. “Let’s go,” he said. “My grandmother might be in trouble.”

FRANK

THEY STOPPED AT THE FRONT PORCH. As Frank had feared, a loose ring of campfires glowed in the woods, completely surrounding the property, but the house itself seemed untouched.

Grandmother's wind chimes jangled in the night breeze. Her wicker chair sat empty, facing the road. Lights shone through the downstairs windows, but Frank decided against ringing the doorbell. He didn't know how late it was, or if Grandmother was asleep or even home. Instead he checked the stone elephant statue in the corner—a tiny duplicate of the one in Portland. The spare key was still tucked under its foot.

He hesitated at the door.

“What's wrong?” Percy asked.

Frank remembered the morning he'd opened this door for the military officer who had told him about his mother. He remembered walking down these steps to her funeral, holding his piece of firewood in his coat for the first time. He remembered standing here and watching the wolves come out of the woods—Lupa's minions, who would lead him to Camp Jupiter. That seemed so long ago, but it had only been six weeks.

Now he was back. Would Grandmother hug him? Would she say, *Frank, thank the gods you've come! I'm surrounded by monsters!*

More likely she'd scold him, or mistake them for intruders and chase them off with a frying pan.

“Frank?” Hazel asked.

“Ella is nervous,” the harpy muttered from her perch on the railing. “The elephant—the elephant is looking at Ella.”

“It'll be fine.” Frank's hand was shaking so badly he could barely fit the key in the lock. “Just stay together.”

Inside, the house smelled closed-up and musty. Usually the air was scented with jasmine incense, but all the burners were empty.

They examined the living room, the dining room, the kitchen. Dirty dishes were stacked in the sink, which wasn't right. Grandmother's maid came every day—unless she'd been scared off by the giants.

Or eaten for lunch, Frank thought. Ella had said the Laistrygonians were cannibals.

He pushed that thought aside. Monsters ignored regular mortals. At least, they *usually* did.

In the parlor, Buddha statues and Taoist immortals grinned at them like psycho clowns. Frank remembered Iris, the rainbow goddess, who'd been dabbling in Buddhism and Taoism. Frank figured one visit to this creepy old house would cure her of that.

Grandmother's large porcelain vases were strung with cobwebs. Again—that wasn't right. She insisted that her collection be dusted regularly. Looking at the porcelain, Frank felt a twinge of guilt for having destroyed so many pieces the day of the funeral. It seemed silly to him now—getting angry at Grandmother when he had so many others to be angry at: Juno, Gaea, the giants, his dad Mars. *Especially* Mars.

The fireplace was dark and cold.

Hazel hugged her chest as if to keep the piece of firewood from jumping into the hearth. "Is that—"

"Yeah," Frank said. "That's it."

"That's what?" Percy asked.

Hazel's expression was sympathetic, but that just made Frank feel worse. He remembered how terrified, how repulsed she had looked when he had summoned Gray.

"It's the fireplace," he told Percy, which sounded stupidly obvious. "Come on. Let's check upstairs."

The steps creaked under their feet. Frank's old room was the same. None of his things had been touched—his extra bow and quiver (he'd have to grab those later), his spelling awards from school (yeah, he probably was the only non-dyslexic spelling champion demigod in the world, as if he weren't enough of a freak already), and his photos of his mom—in her flak jacket and helmet, sitting on a Humvee in Kandahar Province; in her soccer coach uniform, the season

she'd coached Frank's team; in her military dress uniform, her hands on Frank's shoulders, the time she'd visited his school for career day.

"Your mother?" Hazel asked gently. "She's beautiful."

Frank couldn't answer. He felt a little embarrassed—a sixteen-year-old guy with a bunch of pictures of his mom.

How hopelessly lame was that? But mostly he felt sad. Six weeks since he'd been here. In some ways it seemed like forever. But when he looked at his mom's smiling face in those photos, the pain of losing her was as fresh as ever.

They checked the other bedrooms. The middle two were empty. A dim light flickered under the last door—Grandmother's room.

Frank knocked quietly. No one answered. He pushed open her door. Grandmother lay in bed, looking gaunt and frail, her white hair spread around her face like a basilisk's crown. A single candle burned on the nightstand. At her bedside sat a large man in beige Canadian Forces fatigues. Despite the gloom, he wore dark sunglasses with blood red light glowing behind the lenses.

"Mars," Frank said.

The god looked up impassively. "Hey, kid. Come on in. Tell your friends to take a hike."

"Frank?" Hazel whispered. "What do mean, *Mars*? Is your grandmother ... is she okay?"

Frank glanced at his friends. "You don't see him?"

"See who?" Percy gripped his sword. "Mars? Where?"

The war god chuckled. "Nah, they can't see me. Figured it was better this time. Just a private conversation—father/son, right?"

Frank clenched his fists. He counted to ten before he trusted himself to speak.

"Guys, it's...it's nothing. Listen, why don't you take the middle bedrooms?"

"Roof," Ella said. "Roofs are good for harpies."

"Sure," Frank said in a daze. "There's probably food in the kitchen. Would you give me a few minutes alone with my grandmother? I think she—"

His voice broke. He wasn't sure if he wanted to cry or scream or punch Mars in the glasses—maybe all three.

Hazel laid her hand on his arm. "Of course, Frank. Come on, Ella, Percy."

Frank waited until his friends' steps receded. Then he walked into the

bedroom and closed the door.

“Is it really you?” he asked Mars. “This isn’t a trick or illusion or something?”

The god shook his head. “You’d prefer it if it wasn’t me?”

“Yes,” Frank confessed.

Mars shrugged. “Can’t blame you. Nobody welcomes war—not if they’re smart. But war finds everyone sooner or later. It’s inevitable.”

“That’s stupid,” Frank said. “War isn’t inevitable. It kills people. It—”

“—took your mom,” Mars finished.

Frank wanted to smack the calm look off his face, but maybe that was just Mars’s aura making him feel aggressive. He looked down at his grandmother, sleeping peacefully. He wished she would wake up. If anyone could take on a war god, his grandmother could.

“She’s ready to die,” Mars said. “She’s been ready for weeks, but she’s holding on for you.”

“For me?” Frank was so stunned he almost forgot his anger. “Why? How could she know I was coming back? *I didn’t know!*”

“The Laistrygonians outside knew,” Mars said. “I imagine a certain goddess told them.”

Frank blinked. “Juno?”

The war god laughed so loudly the windows rattled, but Grandmother didn’t even stir. “Juno? Boar’s whiskers, kid. Not Juno! You’re Juno’s secret weapon. She wouldn’t sell you out. No, I meant Gaea. Obviously she’s been keeping track of you. I think you worry her more than Percy or Jason or any of the seven.”

Frank felt like the room was tilting. He wished there were another chair to sit in. “The seven...you mean in the ancient prophecy, the Doors of Death? I’m one of the seven? And Jason, and—”

“Yes, yes.” Mars waved his hand impatiently. “Come on, boy. You’re supposed to be a good tactician. Think it through! Obviously your friends are being groomed for that mission too, assuming you make it back from Alaska alive. Juno aims to unite the Greeks and Romans and send them against the giants. She believes it’s the only way to stop Gaea.”

Mars shrugged, clearly unconvinced of the plan. “Anyway, Gaea doesn’t want you to be one of the seven. Percy Jackson...she believes she can control

him. All of the others have weaknesses she can exploit. But *you*—you worry her. She'd rather kill you right away. That's why she summoned the Laistrygonians. They've been here for days, waiting."

Frank shook his head. Was Mars playing some kind of trick? No way would a *goddess* be worried about Frank, especially when there was somebody like Percy Jackson to worry about.

"No weaknesses?" he asked. "I'm nothing *but* weaknesses. My life depends on a piece of wood!"

Mars grinned. "You're selling yourself short. Anyway, Gaea has these Laistrygonians convinced that if they eat the last member of your family—that being *you*—they'll inherit your family gift. Whether that's true or not, I don't know. But the Laistrygonians are hungry to try."

Frank's stomach twisted into a knot. Gray had killed six of the ogres, but judging from the campfires around the property, there were dozens more—all waiting to cook Frank for breakfast.

"I'm going to throw up," he said.

"No, you're not." Mars snapped his fingers, and Frank's queasiness disappeared. "Battle jitters. Happens to everybody."

"But my grandmother—"

"Yeah, she's been waiting to talk to you. The ogres have left her alone so far. She's the bait, see? Now that you're here, I imagine they've already smelled your presence. They'll attack in the morning."

"Get us out of here, then!" Frank demanded. "Snap your fingers and blow up the cannibals."

"Ha! That would be fun. But I don't fight my kids' battles for them. The Fates have clear ideas about what jobs belong to gods, and what has to be done by mortals. This is *your* quest, kid. And, uh, in case you haven't figured it out yet, your spear won't be ready to use again for twenty-four hours, so I hope you've learned how to use the family gift. Otherwise, you're gonna be breakfast for cannibals."

The family gift. Frank had wanted to talk with Grandmother about it, but now he had no one to consult but Mars. He stared at the war god, who was smiling with absolutely no sympathy.

"Periclymenus." Frank sounded out the word carefully, like a spelling-bee challenge. "He was my ancestor, a Greek prince, an Argonaut. He died fighting

Hercules.”

Mars rolled his hand in a “*go on*” gesture.

“He had an ability that helped him in combat,” Frank said. “Some sort of gift from the gods. My mom said he fought like a swarm of bees.”

Mars laughed. “True enough. What else?”

“Somehow, the family got to China. I think, like in the days of the Roman Empire, one of Pericylmenus’s descendants served in a legion. My mom used to talk about a guy named Seneca Gracchus, but he also had a Chinese name, Sung Guo. I think—well, this is the part I don’t know, but Reyna always said there were many lost legions. The Twelfth founded Camp Jupiter. Maybe there was another legion that disappeared into the east.”

Mars clapped silently. “Not bad, kid. Ever heard of the Battle of Carrhae? Huge disaster for the Romans. They fought these guys called the Parthians on the eastern border of the empire. Fifteen thousand Romans died. Ten thousand more were taken prisoner.”

“And one of the prisoners was my ancestor SenecaGracchus?”

“Exactly,” Mars agreed. “The Parthians put the captured legionnaires to work, since they were pretty good fighters. Except then Parthia got invaded again from the other direction—”

“By the Chinese,” Frank guessed. “And the Roman prisoners got captured again.”

“Yeah. Kind of embarrassing. Anyway, that’s how a Roman legion got to China. The Romans eventually put down roots and built a new hometown called ___”

“Li-Jien,” Frank said. “My mother said that was our ancestral home. Li-Jien. *Legion.*”

Mars looked pleased. “Now you’re getting it. And old Seneca Gracchus, he had your family’s gift.”

“My mom said he fought dragons,” Frank remembered. “She said he was... he was the most powerful dragon of all.”

“He was good,” Mars admitted. “Not good enough to avoid the bad luck of his legion, but good. He settled in China, passed the family gift to his kids, and so on. Eventually your family emigrated to North America and got involved with Camp Jupiter—”

“Full circle,” Frank finished. “Juno said I would bring the family full circle.”

“We’ll see.” Mars nodded at his grandmother. “She wanted to tell you all this herself, but I figured I’d cover some of it since the old bird hasn’t got much strength. So do you understand your gift?”

Frank hesitated. He had an idea, but it seemed crazy—even crazier than a family moving from Greece to Rome to China to Canada. He didn’t want to say it aloud. He didn’t want to be wrong and have Mars laugh at him. “I—I think so. But against an army of those ogres—”

“Yeah, it’ll be tough.” Mars stood and stretched. “When your grandmother wakes up in the morning, she’ll offer you some help. Then I imagine she’ll die.”

“What? But I have to save her! She can’t just leave me.”

“She’s lived a full life,” Mars said. “She’s ready to move on. Don’t be selfish.”

“Selfish!”

“The old woman only stuck around this long out of a sense of duty. Your mom was the same way. That’s why I loved her. She always put her duty first, ahead of everything. Even her life.”

“Even me.”

Mars took off his sunglasses. Where his eyes should’ve been, miniature spheres of fire boiled like nuclear explosions. “Self-pity isn’t helpful, kid. It isn’t worthy of you. Even without the family gift, your mom gave you your most important traits—bravery, loyalty, brains. Now you’ve got to decide how to use them. In the morning, listen to your grandmother. Take her advice. You can still free Thanatos and save the camp.”

“And leave my grandmother behind to die.”

“Life is only precious because it ends, kid. Take it from a god. You mortals don’t know how lucky you are.”

“Yeah,” Frank muttered. “Real lucky.”

Mars laughed—a harsh metallic sound. “Your mom used to tell me this Chinese proverb. Eat bitter—”

“*Eat bitter, taste sweet,*” Frank said. “I hate that proverb.”

“But it’s true. What do they call it these days—no pain, no gain? Same concept. You do the easy thing, the appealing thing, the *peaceful* thing, mostly it turns out sour in the end. But if you take the hard path—ah, *that’s* how you reap the sweet rewards. Duty. Sacrifice. They mean something.”

Frank was so disgusted he could hardly speak. *This* was his father?

Sure, Frank understood about his mom being a hero. He understood she'd saved lives and been really brave. But she'd left him alone. That wasn't fair. It wasn't right.

"I'll be going," Mars promised. "But first—you said you were weak. That's not true. You want to know why Juno spared you, Frank? Why that piece of wood didn't burn yet?"

It's because you've got a role to play. You think you're not as good as the other Romans. You think Percy Jackson is better than you."

"He is," Frank grumbled. "He battled *you* and won."

Mars shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe so. But every hero has a fatal flaw. Percy Jackson? He's too loyal to his friends. He can't give them up, not for anything. He was told that, years ago. And someday soon, he's going to face a sacrifice he can't make. Without you, Frank—without your sense of duty—he's going to fail. The whole war will go sideways, and Gaea will destroy our world."

Frank shook his head. He couldn't hear this.

"War is a duty," Mars continued. "The only real choice is whether you accept it, and what you fight for. The legacy of Rome is on the line—five thousand years of law, order, civilization. The gods, the traditions, the cultures that shaped the world you live in: it's all going to crumble, Frank, unless you win this. I think that's worth fighting for. Think about it."

"What's mine?" Frank asked.

Mars raised an eyebrow. "Your what?"

"Fatal flaw. You said all heroes have one."

The god smiled dryly. "You gotta answer that yourself, Frank. But you're finally asking the right questions. Now, get some sleep. You need the rest."

The god waved his hand. Frank's eyes felt heavy. He collapsed, and everything went dark.

"Fai," said a familiar voice, harsh and impatient.

Frank blinked his eyes. Sunlight streamed into the room.

"Fai, get up. As much as I would like to slap that ridiculous face of yours, I am in no condition to get out of bed."

"Grandmother?"

She came into focus, looking down at him from the bed. He lay sprawled on the floor. Someone had put a blanket over him during the night and a pillow

under his head, but he had no idea how it had happened.

“Yes, my silly ox.” Grandmother still looked horribly weak and pale, but her voice was as steely as ever. “Now, get up. The ogres have surrounded the house. We have much to discuss if you and your friends are to escape here alive.”

FRANK

ONE LOOK OUT THE WINDOW, and Frank knew he was in trouble.

At the edge of the lawn, the Laistrygonians were stacking bronze cannonballs. Their skin gleamed red. Their shaggy hair, tattoos, and claws didn't look any prettier in the morning light.

Some carried clubs or spears. A few confused ogres carried surfboards, like they'd shown up at the wrong party. All of them were in a festive mood—giving each other high fives, tying plastic bibs around their necks, breaking out the knives and forks. One ogre had fired up a portable barbecue and was dancing in an apron that said **KISS THE COOK**.

The scene would've been almost funny, except Frank knew *he* was the main course.

"I've sent your friends to the attic," Grandmother said.

"You can join them when we're done."

"The attic?" Frank turned. "You told me I could never go in there."

"That's because we keep *weapons* in the attic, silly boy. Do you think this is the first time monsters have attacked our family?"

"Weapons," Frank grumbled. "Right. I've *never* handled weapons before."

Grandmother's nostrils flared. "Was that sarcasm, Fai Zhang?"

"Yes, Grandmother."

"Good. There may be hope for you yet. Now, sit. You must eat."

She waved her hand at the nightstand, where someone had set a glass of orange juice and a plate of poached eggs and bacon on toast—Frank's favorite breakfast.

Despite his troubles, Frank suddenly felt hungry. He looked at Grandmother in astonishment. "Did you—"

“Make you breakfast? By Buddha’s monkey, of course not! And it wasn’t the house staff. Too dangerous for them here. No, your girlfriend Hazel made that for you. And brought you a blanket and pillow last night. And picked out some clean clothes for you in your bedroom. By the way, you should shower. You smell like burning horse hair.”

Frank opened and closed his mouth like a fish. He couldn’t make sounds come out. *Hazel* had done all that for him? Frank had been sure he’d destroyed any chance with her last night when he had summoned Gray.

“She’s...um...she’s not—”

“Not your girlfriend?” Grandmother guessed. “Well, she *should* be, you dolt! Don’t let her get away. You need strong women in your life, if you haven’t noticed. Now, to business.”

Frank ate while Grandmother gave him a sort of military briefing. In the daylight, her skin was so translucent, her veins seemed to glow. Her breathing sounded like a crackly paper bag inflating and deflating, but she spoke with firmness and clarity.

She explained that the ogres had been surrounding the house for three days, waiting for Frank to show up.

“They want to cook you and eat you,” she said distastefully, “which is ridiculous. You’d taste terrible.”

“Thank you, Grandmother.”

She nodded. “I admit, I was somewhat pleased when they said you were coming back. I am glad to see you one last time, even if your clothes are dirty and you need a haircut. Is this how you represent your family?”

“I’ve been a little busy, Grandmother.”

“No excuse for sloppiness. At any rate, your friends have slept and eaten. They are taking stock of the weapons in the attic. I told them you would be along shortly, but there are too many ogres to fend off for long. We must speak of your escape plan. Look in my nightstand.”

Frank opened the drawer and pulled out a sealed envelope.

“You know the airfield at the end of the park?” Grandmother asked. “Could you find it again?”

Frank nodded mutely. It was about three miles to the north, down the main road through the canyon. Grandmother had taken him there sometimes when she would charter planes to bring in special shipments from China.

“There is a pilot standing by to leave at a moment’s notice,” Grandmother said. “He is an old family friend. I have a letter for him in that envelope, asking him to take you north.”

“But—”

“Do not argue, boy,” she muttered. “Mars has been visiting me these last few days, keeping me company. He told me of your quest. Find Death in Alaska and release him. Do your duty.”

“But if I succeed, you’ll die. I’ll never see you again.”

“That is true,” Grandmother agreed. “But I’ll die anyway. I’m old. I thought I made that clear. Now, did your praetor give you letters of introduction?”

“Uh, yes, but—”

“Good. Show those to the pilot as well. He’s a veteran of the legion. In case he has any doubts, or gets cold feet, those credentials will make him honor-bound to help you in any way possible. All you have to do is reach the airfield.”

The house rumbled. Outside a ball of fire exploded in midair, lighting up the entire room.

“The ogres are getting restless,” Grandmother said. “We must hurry. Now, about your powers, I hope you’ve figured them out.”

“Uh...”

Grandmother muttered some curses in rapid-fire

Mandarin. “Gods of your ancestors, boy! Have you learned nothing?”

“Yes!” He stammered out the details of his discussion with Mars the night before, but he felt much more tongue-tied in front of Grandmother. “The gift of Periclymenus...I think, I think he was a son of Poseidon, I mean Neptune, I mean...” Frank spread his hands. “The sea god.”

Grandmother nodded grudgingly. “He was the *grandson* of Poseidon, but good enough. How did your brilliant intellect arrive at this fact?”

“A seer in Portland...he said something about my great-grandfather, Shen Lun. The seer said he was blamed for the 1906 earthquake that destroyed San Francisco and the old location of Camp Jupiter.”

“Go on.”

“At camp, they said a descendant of Neptune had caused the disaster. Neptune is the god of earthquakes. But...but I don’t think great-grandfather actually did it. Causing earthquakes isn’t our gift.”

“No,” Grandmother agreed. “But yes, he was blamed. He was unpopular as a descendant of Neptune. He was unpopular because his real gift was much stranger than causing earthquakes. And he was unpopular because he was Chinese. A Chinese boy had never before claimed Roman blood. An ugly truth—but there is no denying it. He was falsely accused, forced out in shame.”

“So...if he didn’t do anything wrong, why did you tell me to apologize for him?”

Grandmother’s cheeks flushed. “Because apologizing for something you didn’t do is better than dying for it! I wasn’t sure if the camp would hold you to blame. I did not know if the prejudice of the Romans had eased.”

Frank swallowed down his breakfast. He’d been teased in school and on the streets sometimes, but not that much, and never at Camp Jupiter. Nobody at camp, not once, had made fun of him for being Asian. Nobody cared about that. They only made fun of him because he was clumsy and slow. He couldn’t imagine what it had been like for his great-grandfather, accused of destroying the entire camp, drummed out of the legion for something he didn’t do.

“And our real gift?” Grandmother asked. “Have you at least figured out what it is?”

His mother’s old stories swirled in Frank’s head. *Fighting like a swarm of bees. He was the greatest dragon of all.* He remembered his mother’s appearing next to him in the backyard, as if she’d flown from the attic. He remembered her coming out of the woods, saying that she’d given a mama grizzly bear directions.

“*You can be anything,*” Frank said. “That’s what she always told me.”

Grandmother huffed. “Finally, a dim light goes on in that head of yours. Yes, Fai Zhang. Your mother was not simply boosting your self-esteem. She was telling you the *literal* truth.”

“But...” Another explosion shook the house. Ceiling plaster fell like snow. Frank was so bewildered he barely noticed.

“*Anything?*”

“Within reason,” Grandmother said. “Living things. It helps if you know the creature well. It also helps if you are in a life-and-death situation, such as combat. Why do you look so surprised, Fai? You have always said you are not comfort able in your own body. We *all* feel that way—all of us with the blood of Pylos. This gift was only given *once* to a mortal family. We are unique among

demigods. Poseidon must have been feeling especially generous when he blessed our ancestor—or especially spiteful. The gift has often proven a curse. It did not save your mother....”

Outside, a cheer went up from the ogres. Someone shouted, “Zhang! Zhang!”

“You must go, silly boy,” Grandmother said. “Our time is up.”

“But—I don’t know how to use my power. I’ve never—I can’t—”

“You can,” Grandmother said. “Or you will not survive to realize your destiny. I don’t like this Prophecy of Seven that Mars told me about. Seven is an unlucky number in Chinese—a ghost number. But there is nothing we can do about that. Now, go! Tomorrow evening is the Feast of Fortuna. You have no time to waste. Don’t worry about me. I will die in my own time, in my own way. I have no intention of being devoured by those ridiculous ogres. Go!”

Frank turned at the door. He felt like his heart was being squeezed through a juicer, but he bowed formally. “Thank you, Grandmother,” he said. “I will make you proud.”

She muttered something under her breath. Frank almost thought she had said, *You have.*

He stared at her, dumbfounded, but her expression immediately soured. “Stop gaping, boy! Go shower and dress! Comb your hair! My last image of you, and you show me messy hair?”

He patted down his hair and bowed again.

His last image of Grandmother was of her glaring out the window, as if thinking about the terrible scolding she would give the ogres when they invaded her home.

FRANK

FRANK TOOK THE QUICKEST POSSIBLE SHOWER, put on the clothes Hazel had set out—an olive-green shirt with beige cargo pants, really?—then grabbed his spare bow and quiver and bounded up the attic stairs.

The attic was full of weapons. His family had collected enough ancient armaments to supply an army. Shields, spears, and quivers of arrows hung along one wall—almost as many as in the Camp Jupiter armory. At the back window, a scorpion crossbow was mounted and loaded, ready for action. At the front window stood something that looked like a machine gun with a cluster of barrels.

“Rocket launcher?” he wondered aloud.

“Nope, nope,” said a voice from the corner. “Potatoes. Ella doesn’t like potatoes.”

The harpy had made a nest for herself between two old steamer trunks. She was sitting in a pile of Chinese scrolls, reading seven or eight at once.

“Ella,” Frank said, “where are the others?”

“Roof.” She glanced upward, then returned to her reading, alternately picking at her feathers and turning pages. “Roof. Ogre-watching. Ella doesn’t like ogres. Potatoes.”

“Potatoes?” Frank didn’t understand until he swiveled the machine gun around. Its eight barrels were loaded with spuds. At the base of the gun, a basket was filled with more edible ammunition.

He looked out the window—the same window his mom had watched him from when he had met the bear. Down in the yard, the ogres were milling around, shoving each other, occasionally yelling at the house, and throwing bronze cannonballs that exploded in midair.

“They have cannonballs,” Frank said. “And we have a potato gun.”

“Starch,” Ella said thoughtfully. “Starch is bad for ogres.”

The house shook from another explosion. Frank needed to reach the roof and see how Percy and Hazel were doing, but he felt bad leaving Ella alone.

He knelt next to her, careful not to get too close. “Ella, it’s not safe here with the ogres. We’re going to be flying to Alaska soon. Will you come with us?”

Ella twitched uncomfortably. “Alaska. Six hundred twenty-six thousand, four hundred twenty-five square miles.

State mammal: the moose.”

Suddenly she switched to Latin, which Frank could just barely follow thanks to his classes at Camp Jupiter:

“To the north, beyond the gods, lies the legion’s crown. Falling from ice, the son of Neptune shall drown—” She stopped and scratched her disheveled red hair. “Hmm. Burned. The rest is burned.”

Frank could hardly breathe. “Ella, was...was that a prophecy? Where did you read that?”

“Moose,” Ella said, savoring the word. “Moose. Moose. Moose.”

The house shook again. Dust rained down from the rafters. Outside, an ogre bellowed, “Frank Zhang! Show yourself!”

“Nope,” Ella said. “Frank shouldn’t. Nope.”

“Just...stay here, okay?” Frank said. “I’ve got to go help Hazel and Percy.”

He pulled down the ladder to the roof.

“Morning,” Percy said grimly. “Beautiful day, huh?” He wore the same clothes as the day before—jeans, his purple T-shirt, and Polartec jacket—but they’d obviously been freshly washed. He held his sword in one hand and a garden hose in the other. Why there was a garden hose on the roof, Frank wasn’t sure, but every time the giants sent up a cannonball, Percy summoned a high-powered blast of water and detonated the sphere in midair. Then Frank remembered—*his* family was descended from Poseidon, too. Grandmother had said their house had been attacked before. Maybe they had put a hose up here for just that reason.

Hazel patrolled the widow’s walk between the two attic gables. She looked so good, it made Frank’s chest hurt. She wore jeans, a cream-colored jacket, and a white shirt that made her skin look as warm as cocoa. Her curly hair fell around her shoulders. When she came close, Frank could smell jasmine shampoo.

She gripped her sword. When she glanced at Frank, her eyes flashed with concern. “Are you okay?” she asked. “Why are you smiling?”

“Oh, uh, nothing,” he managed. “Thanks for breakfast. And the clothes. And...not hating me.”

Hazel looked baffled. “Why would I hate you?”

Frank’s face burned. He wished he’d kept his mouth shut, but it was too late now. *Don’t let her get away*, his grandmother had said. *You need strong women.*

“It’s just...last night,” he stammered. “When I summoned the skeleton. I thought...I thought that you thought...I was repulsive ... or something.”

Hazel raised her eyebrows. She shook her head in dismay. “Frank, maybe I was surprised. Maybe I was scared of that thing. But repulsed? The way you commanded it, so confident and everything—like, *Oh, by the way, guys, I have this all-powerful spartus we can use.* I couldn’t believe it. I wasn’t repulsed, Frank. I was impressed.”

Frank wasn’t sure he’d heard her right. “You were...impressed ... by *me*?”

Percy laughed. “Dude, it *was* pretty amazing.”

“Honest?” Frank asked.

“Honest,” Hazel promised. “But right now, we have other problems to worry about. Okay?”

She gestured at the army of ogres, who were getting increasingly bold, shuffling closer and closer to the house.

Percy readied the garden hose. “I’ve got one more trick up my sleeve. Your lawn has a sprinkler system. I can blow it up and cause some confusion down there, but that’ll destroy your water pressure. No pressure, no hose, and those cannonballs are going to plow right into the house.”

Hazel’s praise was still ringing in Frank’s ears, making it difficult to think. Dozens of ogres were camped on his lawn, waiting to tear him apart, and Frank could barely control the urge to grin.

Hazel didn’t hate him. She was impressed.

He forced himself to concentrate. He remembered what his grandmother had told him about the nature of his gift, and how he had to leave her here to die.

You’ve got a role to play, Mars had said.

Frank couldn’t believe he was Juno’s secret weapon, or that this big Prophecy of the Seven depended on him. But Hazel and Percy were counting on him. He had to do his best.

He thought about that weird partial prophecy Ella had recited in the attic, about the son of Neptune drowning.

You don't understand her true value, Phineas had told them in Portland. The old blind man had thought that controlling Ella would make him a king.

All these puzzle pieces swirled around in Frank's mind. He got the feeling that when they finally connected, they would create a picture he didn't like.

"Guys, I've got an escape plan." He told his friends about the plane waiting at the airfield, and his grandmother's note for the pilot. "He's a legion veteran. He'll help us."

"But Arion's not back," Hazel said. "And what about your grandmother? We can't just leave her."

Frank choked back a sob. "Maybe—maybe Arion will find us. As for my grandmother...she was pretty clear. She said she'd be okay."

It wasn't exactly the truth, but it was as much as Frank could manage.

"There's another problem," Percy said. "I'm not good with air travel. It's dangerous for a son of Neptune."

"You'll have to risk it...and so will I," Frank said. "By the way, we're related." Percy almost stumbled off the roof. "What?"

Frank gave them the five-second version: "Periclymenus.

Ancestor on my mom's side. Argonaut. Grandson of Poseidon."

Hazel's mouth fell open. "You're a—a descendant of Neptune? Frank, that's —"

"Crazy? Yeah. And there's this ability my family has, supposedly. But I don't know how to use it. If I can't figure it out—"

Another massive cheer went up from the Laistrygonians. Frank realized they were staring up at him, pointing and waving and laughing. They had spotted their breakfast.

"Zhang!" they yelled. "Zhang!"

Hazel stepped closer to him. "They keep doing that. Why are they yelling your name?"

"Never mind," Frank said. "Listen, we've got to protect Ella, take her with us."

"Of course," Hazel said. "The poor thing needs our help."

"No," Frank said. "I mean yes, but it's not just that. She recited a prophecy

downstairs. I think...I think it was about *this* quest.”

He didn’t want to tell Percy the bad news, about a son of Neptune drowning, but he repeated the lines.

Percy’s jaw tightened. “I don’t know how a son of Neptune can drown. I can breathe underwater. But the crown of the legion—”

“That’s got to be the eagle,” Hazel said.

Percy nodded. “And Ella recited something like this once before, in Portland—a line from the old Great Prophecy.”

“The what?” Frank asked.

“Tell you later.” Percy turned his garden hose and shot another cannonball out of the sky.

It exploded in an orange fireball. The ogres clapped with appreciation and yelled, “Pretty! Pretty!”

“The thing is,” Frank said, “Ella remembers everything she reads. She said something about the page being burned, like she’d read a damaged text of prophecies.”

Hazel’s eyes widened. “Burned books of prophecy? You don’t think—but that’s impossible!”

“The books Octavian wanted, back at camp?” Percy guessed.

Hazel whistled under her breath. “The lost Sibylline books that outlined the entire destiny of Rome. If Ella actually read a copy somehow, and memorized it —”

“Then she’s the most valuable harpy in the world,” Frank said. “No wonder Phineas wanted to capture her.”

“Frank Zhang!” an ogre shouted from below. He was bigger than the rest, wearing a lion’s cape like a Roman standard bearer and a plastic bib with a lobster on it. “Come down, son of Mars! We’ve been waiting for you. Come, be our honored guest!”

Hazel gripped Frank’s arm. “Why do I get the feeling that ‘honored guest’ means the same thing as ‘dinner’?”

Frank wished Mars were still there. He could use somebody to snap his fingers and make his battle jitters go away.

Hazel believes in me, he thought. I can do this.

He looked at Percy. “Can you drive?”

“Sure. Why?”

“Grandmother’s car is in the garage. It’s an old Cadillac. The thing is like a tank. If you can get it started—”

“We’ll still have to break through a line of ogres,” Hazel said.

“The sprinkler system,” Percy said. “Use it as a distraction?”

“Exactly,” Frank said. “I’ll buy you as much time as I can. Get Ella, and get in the car. I’ll try to meet you in the garage, but don’t wait for me.”

Percy frowned. “Frank—”

“Give us your answer, Frank Zhang!” the ogre yelled up. “Come down, and we will spare the others—your friends, your poor old granny. We only want you!”

“They’re lying,” Percy muttered.

“Yeah, I got that,” Frank agreed. “Go!”

His friends ran for the ladder.

Frank tried to control the beating of his heart. He grinned and yelled, “Hey, down there! Who’s hungry?” The ogres cheered as Frank paced along the widow’s walk and waved like a rock star.

Frank tried to summon his family power. He imagined himself as a fire-breathing dragon. He strained and clenched his fist and thought about dragons so hard, beads of sweat popped up on his forehead. He wanted to sweep down on the enemy and destroy them. That would be extremely cool. But nothing happened. He had no clue how to change himself. He had never even seen a real dragon. For a panicky moment, he wondered if Grandmother had played some sort of cruel joke on him. Maybe he’d misunderstood the gift. Maybe Frank was the only member of the family who hadn’t inherited it. That would be just his luck.

The ogres started to become restless. The cheering turned to catcalls. A few Laistrygonians hefted their cannonballs.

“Hold on!” Frank yelled. “You don’t want to char me, do you? I won’t taste very good that way.”

“Come down!” they yelled. “Hungry!”

Time for Plan B. Frank just wished he had one.

“Do you promise to spare my friends?” Frank asked. “Do you swear on the River Styx?”

The ogres laughed. One threw a cannonball that arced over Frank's head and blew up the chimney. By some miracle, Frank wasn't hit with shrapnel.

"I'll take that as a *no*," he muttered. Then he shouted down:

"Okay, fine! You win! I'll be right down. Wait there!" The ogres cheered, but their leader in the lion's-skin cape scowled suspiciously. Frank wouldn't have much time. He descended the ladder into the attic. Ella was gone. He hoped that was a good sign. Maybe they'd gotten her to the Cadillac. He grabbed an extra quiver of arrows labeled assorted varieties in his mother's neat printing. Then he ran to the machine gun.

He swiveled the barrel, took aim at the lead ogre, and pressed the trigger. Eight high-powered spuds blasted the giant in the chest, propelling him backward with such force that he crashed into a stack of bronze cannonballs, which promptly exploded, leaving a smoking crater in the yard.

Apparently starch *was* bad for ogres.

While the rest of the monsters ran around in confusion, Frank pulled his bow and rained arrows on them. Some of the missiles detonated on impact. Others splintered like buckshot and left the giants with some painful new tattoos. One hit an ogre and instantly turned him into a potted rosebush.

Unfortunately, the ogres recovered quickly. They began throwing cannonballs—dozens at a time. The whole house groaned under the impact. Frank ran for the stairs. The attic disintegrated behind him. Smoke and fire poured down the second-floor hallway.

"Grandmother!" he cried, but the heat was so intense, he couldn't reach her room. He raced to the ground floor, clinging to the banister as the house shook and huge chunks of the ceiling collapsed.

The base of the staircase was a smoking crater. He leaped over it and stumbled through the kitchen. Choking from the ash and soot, he burst into the garage. The Cadillac's headlights were on. The engine was running and the garage door was opening.

"Get in!" Percy yelled.

Frank dove in the back next to Hazel. Ella was curled up in the front, her head tucked under her wings, muttering,

"Yikes. Yikes. Yikes."

Percy gunned the engine. They shot out of the garage before it was fully open, leaving a Cadillac-shaped hole of splintered wood.

The ogres ran to intercept, but Percy shouted at the top of his lungs, and the irrigation system exploded. A hundred geysers shot into the air along with clods of dirt, pieces of pipe, and very heavy sprinkler heads.

The Cadillac was going about forty when they hit the first ogre, who disintegrated on impact. By the time the other monsters overcame their confusion, the Cadillac was half a mile down the road. Flaming cannonballs burst behind them.

Frank glanced back and saw his family mansion on fire, the walls collapsing inward and smoke billowing into the sky. He saw a large black speck—maybe a buzzard—circling up from the fire. It might've been Frank's imagination, but he thought it had flown out of the second-story window.

"Grandmother?" he murmured.

It seemed impossible, but she had promised she would die in her own way, not at the hands of the ogres. Frank hoped she had been right.

They drove through the woods and headed north.

"About three miles!" Frank said. "You can't miss it!"

Behind them, more explosions ripped through the forest. Smoke boiled into the sky.

"How fast can Laistrygonians run?" Hazel asked.

"Let's not find out," Percy said.

The gates of the airfield appeared before them—only a few hundred yards away. A private jet idled on the runway. Its stairs were down.

The Cadillac hit a pothole and went airborne. Frank's head slammed into the ceiling. When the wheels touched the ground, Percy floored the brakes, and they swerved to a stop just inside the gates.

Frank climbed out and drew his bow. "Get to the plane! They're coming!"

The Laistrygonians were closing in with alarming speed. The first line of ogres burst out of the woods and barreled toward the airfield—five hundred yards away, four hundred yards...

Percy and Hazel managed to get Ella out of the Cadillac, but as soon as the harpy saw the airplane, she began to shriek.

"N-n-no!" she yelped. "Fly with wings! N-n-no airplanes."

"It's okay," Hazel promised. "We'll protect you!"

Ella made a horrible, painful wail like she was being burned.

Percy held up his hands in exasperation. “What do we do? We can’t force her.”

“No,” Frank agreed. The ogres were three hundred yards out.

“She’s too valuable to leave behind,” Hazel said. Then she winced at her own words. “Gods, I’m sorry, Ella. I sound as bad as Phineas. You’re a living thing, not a treasure.” “No planes. N-n-no planes.” Ella was hyperventilating.

The ogres were almost in throwing distance.

Percy’s eyes lit up. “I’ve got an idea. Ella, can you hide in the woods? Will you be safe from the ogres?”

“Hide,” she agreed. “Safe. Hiding is good for harpies. Ellais quick. And small. And fast.”

“Okay,” Percy said. “Just stay around this area. I can send a friend to meet you and take you to Camp Jupiter.”

Frank unslung his bow and nocked an arrow. “A friend?”

Percy waved his hand in a *tell you later* gesture. “Ella, would you like that? Would you like my friend to take you to Camp Jupiter and show you our home?”

“Camp,” Ella muttered. Then in Latin: “*‘Wisdom’s daughter walks alone, the Mark of Athena burns through Rome.’*”

“Uh, right,” Percy said. “That sounds important, but we can talk about that later. You’ll be safe at camp. All the books and food you want.”

“No planes,” she insisted.

“No planes,” Percy agreed.

“Ella will hide now.” Just like that, she was gone—a red streak disappearing into the woods.

“I’ll miss her,” Hazel said sadly.

“We’ll see her again,” Percy promised, but he frowned uneasily, as if he were really troubled by that last bit of prophecy—the thing about Athena.

An explosion sent the airfield’s gate spinning into the air.

Frank tossed his grandmother’s letter to Percy. “Show that to the pilot! Show him your letter from Reyna too! We’ve got to take off *now*.”

Percy nodded. He and Hazel ran for the plane.

Frank took cover behind the Cadillac and started firing at the ogres. He targeted the largest clump of enemies and shot a tulip-shaped arrow. Just as he’d hoped, it was a hydra.

Ropes lashed out like squid tentacles, and the entire front row of ogres plowed face first into the dirt.

Frank heard the plane's engines rev.

He shot three more arrows as fast as he could, blasting enormous craters in the ogres' ranks. The survivors were only a hundred yards away, and some of the brighter ones stumbled to a stop, realizing that they were now within hurling range.

"Frank!" Hazel shrieked. "Come on!"

A fiery cannonball hurtled toward him in a slow arc. Frank knew instantly it was going to hit the plane. He nocked an arrow. *I can do this*, he thought. He let the arrow fly. It intercepted the cannonball midair, detonating a massive fireball. Another two cannonballs sailed toward him. Frank ran.

Behind him, metal groaned as the Cadillac exploded. He dove into the plane just as the stairs started to rise.

The pilot must've understood the situation just fine. There was no safety announcement, no pre-flight drink, and no waiting for clearance. He pushed the throttle, and the plane shot down the runway. Another blast ripped through the runway behind them, but then they were in the air.

Frank looked down and saw the airstrip riddled with craters like a piece of burning Swiss cheese. Swaths of Lynn Canyon Park were on fire. A few miles to the south, a swirling pyre of flames and black smoke was all that remained of the Zhang family mansion.

So much for Frank being impressive. He'd failed to save his grandmother. He'd failed to use his powers. He hadn't even saved their harpy friend. When Vancouver disappeared in the clouds below, Frank buried his head in his hands and started to cry.

The plane banked to the left.

Over the intercom, the pilot's voice said, "*Senatus Populusque Romanus*, my friends. Welcome aboard. Next stop: Anchorage, Alaska."

PERCY

AIRPLANES OR CANNIBALS? NO CONTEST.

Percy would've preferred driving Grandma Zhang's

Cadillac all the way to Alaska with fireball-throwing ogres on his tail rather than sitting in a luxury Gulf stream.

He'd flown before. The details were hazy, but he remembered a pegasus named Blackjack. He'd even been in a plane once or twice. But a son of Neptune (Poseidon, whatever) didn't belong in the air. Every time the plane hit a spot of turbulence, Percy's heart raced, and he was sure Jupiter was slapping them around.

He tried to focus as Frank and Hazel talked. Hazel was reassuring Frank that he'd done everything he could for his grandmother. Frank had saved them from the Laistrygonians and gotten them out of Vancouver. He'd been incredibly brave.

Frank kept his head down like he was ashamed to have been crying, but Percy didn't blame him. The poor guy had just lost his grandmother and seen his house go up in flames. As far as Percy was concerned, shedding a few tears about something like that didn't make you any less of a man, especially when you had just fended off an army of ogres that wanted to eat you for breakfast.

Percy still couldn't get over the fact that Frank was a distant relative. Frank would be his...what? Great-times-a-thousand nephew? Too weird for words.

Frank refused to explain exactly what his "family gift" was, but as they flew north, Frank *did* tell them about his conversation with Mars the night before. He explained the prophecy Juno had issued when he was a baby—about his life being tied to a piece of firewood, and how he had asked Hazel to keep it for him.

Some of that, Percy had already figured out. Hazel and Frank had obviously shared some crazy experiences when they had blacked out together, and they'd

made some sort of deal. It also explained why even now, out of habit, Frank kept checking his coat pocket, and why he was so nervous around fire. Still, Percy couldn't imagine what kind of courage it had taken for Frank to embark on a quest, knowing that one small flame could snuff out his life.

"Frank," he said, "I'm proud to be related to you."

Frank's ears turned red. With his head lowered, his military haircut made a sharp black arrow pointing down. "Juno has some sort of plan for us, about the Prophecy of Seven."

"Yeah," Percy grumbled. "I didn't like her as Hera. I don't like her any better as Juno." Hazel tucked her feet underneath her. She studied Percy with her luminescent golden eyes, and he wondered how she could be so calm. She was the youngest one on the quest, but she was always holding them together and comforting them. Now they were flying to Alaska, where she had died once before. They would try to free Thanatos, who might take her back to the Underworld. Yet she didn't show any fear. It made

Percy feel silly for being scared of airplane turbulence.

"You're a son of Poseidon, aren't you?" she asked. "You *are* a Greek demigod."

Percy gripped his leather necklace. "I started to remember in Portland, after the gorgon's blood. It's been coming back to me slowly since then. There's another camp—Camp Half-Blood."

Just saying the name made Percy feel warm inside. Good memories washed over him: the smell of strawberry fields in the warm summer sun, fireworks lighting up the beach on the Fourth of July, satyrs playing panpipes at the nightly campfire, and a kiss at the bottom of the canoe lake.

Hazel and Frank stared at him as though he'd slipped into another language.

"Another camp," Hazel repeated. "A *Greek* camp? Gods, if Octavian found out—"

"He'd declare war," Frank said. "He's always been sure the Greeks were out there, plotting against us. He thought Percy was a spy."

"That's why Juno sent me," Percy said. "Uh, I mean, not to spy. I think it was some kind of exchange. Your friend

Jason—I think he was sent to *my* camp. In my dreams, I saw a demigod that might have been him. He was working with some other demigods on this flying warship. I think they're coming to Camp Jupiter to help."

Frank tapped nervously on the back of his seat. “Mars said Juno wants to unite the Greeks and Romans to fight Gaea. But, jeez—Greeks and Romans have a long history of bad blood.”

Hazel took a deep breath. “That’s probably why the gods have kept us apart this long. If a Greek warship appeared in the sky above Camp Jupiter, and Reyna didn’t know it was friendly—”

“Yeah,” Percy agreed. “We’ve got to be careful how we explain this when we get back.”

“*If* we get back,” Frank said.

Percy nodded reluctantly. “I mean, I trust you guys. I hope you trust me. I feel...well, I feel as close to you two as to any of my old friends at Camp Half-Blood. But with the other demigods, at both camps—there’s going to be a lot of suspicion.”

Hazel did something he wasn’t expecting. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. It was totally a sisterly kiss. But she smiled with such affection, it warmed Percy right down to his feet.

“Of course we trust you,” she said. “We’re a family now. Aren’t we, Frank?”

“Sure,” he said. “Do I get a kiss?”

Hazel laughed, but there was nervous tension in it. “Anyway, what do we do now?”

Percy took a deep breath. Time was slipping away.

They were almost halfway through June twenty-third, and tomorrow was the Feast of Fortuna. “I’ve got to contact a friend—to keep my promise to Ella.”

“How?” Frank said. “One of those Iris-messages?”

“Still not working,” Percy said sadly. “I tried it last night at your grandmother’s house. No luck. Maybe it’s because my memories are still jumbled. Or the gods aren’t allowing a connection. I’m hoping I can contact my friend in my dreams.”

Another bump of turbulence made him grab his seat. Below them, snowcapped mountains broke through a blanket of clouds.

“I’m not sure I can sleep,” Percy said. “But I need to try. We can’t leave Ella by herself with those ogres around.”

“Yeah,” Frank said. “We’ve still got hours to fly. Take the couch, man.”

Percy nodded. He felt lucky to have Hazel and Frank watching out for him. What he’d said to them was true—he trusted them. In the weird, terrifying,

horrible experience of losing his memory and getting ripped out of his old life—Hazel and Frank were the bright spots.

He stretched out, closed his eyes, and dreamed he was falling from a mountain of ice toward a cold sea.

The dream shifted. He was back in Vancouver, standing in front of the ruins of the Zhang mansion. The Laistrygonians were gone. The mansion was reduced to a burned-out shell. A crew of firefighters was packing up their equipment, getting ready to move out. The lawn looked like a war zone, with smoking craters and trenches from the blown-out irrigation pipes.

At the edge of the forest, a giant shaggy black dog was bounding around, sniffing the trees. The firefighters completely ignored him.

Beside one of the craters knelt a Cyclops in oversized jeans, boots, and a massive flannel shirt. His messy brown hair was spattered with rain and mud. When he raised his head, his big brown eye was red from crying.

“Close!” he moaned. “So close, but gone!”

It broke Percy’s heart to hear the pain and worry in the big guy’s voice, but he knew they only had a few seconds to talk. The edges of the vision were already dissolving. If Alaska was the land beyond the gods, Percy figured the farther north he went, the harder it would be to communicate with his friends, even in his dreams.

“Tyson!” he called.

The Cyclops looked around frantically. “Percy? Brother?”

“Tyson, I’m okay. I’m here—well, not really.”

Tyson grabbed the air like he was trying to catch butterflies. “Can’t see you! Where is my brother?”

“Tyson, I’m flying to Alaska. I’m okay. I’ll be back. Just find Ella. She’s a harpy with red feathers. She’s hiding in the woods around the house.”

“Find a harpy? A red harpy?”

“Yes! Protect her, okay? She’s my friend. Get her back to California. There’s a demigod camp in the Oakland Hills—Camp Jupiter. Meet me above the Caldecott Tunnel.”

“Oakland Hills ... California ... Caldecott Tunnel.” He shouted to the dog: “Mrs. O’Leary! We must find a harpy!”

“WOOF!” said the dog.

Tyson's face started to dissolve. "My brother is okay? My brother is coming back? I miss you!"

"I miss you, too." Percy tried to keep his voice from cracking. "I'll see you soon. Just be careful! There's a giant's army marching south. Tell Annabeth—"

The dream shifted.

Percy found himself standing in the hills north of Camp Jupiter, looking down at the Field of Mars and New Rome. At the legion's fort, horns were blowing. Campers scrambled to muster.

The giant's army was arrayed to Percy's left and right—centaurs with bull's horns, the six-armed Earthborn, and evil Cyclopes in scrap-metal armor. The Cyclopes' siege tower cast a shadow across the feet of the giant Polybotes, who grinned down at the Roman camp. He paced eagerly across the hill, snakes dropping from his green dreadlocks, his dragon legs stomping down small trees. On his green-blue armor, the decorative faces of hungry monsters seemed to blink in the shadows.

"Yes," he chuckled, planting his trident in the ground. "Blow your little horns, Romans. I've come to destroy you! Stheno!"

The gorgon scrambled out of the bushes. Her lime green viper hair and Bargain Mart vest clashed horribly with the giant's color scheme.

"Yes, master!" she said. "Would you like a Puppy-in-a-Blanket?"

She held up a tray of free samples.

"Hmm," Polybotes said. "What sort of puppy?"

"Ah, they're not actually puppies. They're tiny hot dogs in crescent rolls, but they're on sale this week—"

"Bah! Never mind, then! Are our forces ready to attack?"

"Oh—" Stheno stepped back quickly to avoid getting flattened by the giant's foot. "Almost, great one. Ma Gasket and half her Cyclopes stopped in Napa. Something about a winery tour? They promised to be here by tomorrow evening."

"What?" The giant looked around, as if just noticing that a big portion of his army was missing. "Gah! That Cyclops woman will give me an ulcer. *Winery tour?*"

"I think there was cheese and crackers, too," Stheno said helpfully. "Though Bargain Mart has a much better deal."

Polybotes ripped an oak tree out of the ground and threw it into the valley. “Cyclopes! I tell you, Stheno, when I destroy Neptune and take over the oceans, we will renegotiate the Cyclopes’ labor contract. Ma Gasket will learn her place! Now, what news from the north?”

“The demigods have left for Alaska,” Stheno said. “They fly straight to their death. Ah, small ‘d’ *death*, I mean. Not our prisoner Death. Although, I suppose they’re flying to him too.”

Polybotes growled. “Alcyoneus had better spare the son of Neptune as he promised. I want that one chained at my feet, so I can kill him when the time is ripe. His blood shall water the stones of Mount Olympus and wake the Earth Mother! What word from the Amazons?”

“Only silence,” Stheno said. “We do not yet know the winner of last night’s duel, but it is only a matter of time before Otrera prevails and comes to our aid.”

“Hmm.” Polybotes absently scratched some vipers out of his hair. “Perhaps it’s just as well we wait, then. Tomorrow at sundown is Fortuna’s Feast. By then, we must invade—Amazons or no. In the meantime, dig in! We set up camp here, on high ground.”

“Yes, great one!” Stheno announced to the troops: “Puppies-in-Blankets for everyone!”

The monsters cheered.

Polybotes spread his hands in front of him, taking in the valley like a panoramic picture. “Yes, blow your little horns, demigods. Soon, the legacy of Rome will be destroyed for the last time!”

The dream faded.

Percy woke with a jolt as the plane started its descent.

Hazel laid her hand on his shoulder. “Sleep okay?”

Percy sat up groggily. “How long was I out?”

Frank stood in the aisle, wrapping his spear and new bow in his ski bag. “A few hours,” he said. “We’re almost there.”

Percy looked out the window. A glittering inlet of the sea snaked between snowy mountains. In the distance, a city was carved out of the wilderness, surrounded by lush green forest on one side and icy black beaches on the other.

“Welcome to Alaska,” Hazel said. “We’re beyond the help of the gods.”

PERCY

THE PILOT SAID THE PLANE COULDN'T WAIT for them, but that was okay with Percy. If they survived till the next day, he hoped they could find a different way back—*anything* but a plane.

He should've been depressed. He was stuck in Alaska, the giant's home territory, out of contact with his old friends just as his memories were coming back. He had seen an image of Polybotes's army about to invade Camp Jupiter. He'd learned that the giants planned to use him as some kind of blood sacrifice to awaken Gaea. Plus, tomorrow evening was the Feast of Fortuna. He, Frank, and Hazel had an impossible task to complete before then. At best, they would unleash Death, who might take Percy's two friends to the Underworld. Not much to look forward to.

Still, Percy felt strangely invigorated. His dream of Tyson had lifted his spirits. He *remembered* Tyson, his brother. They'd fought together, celebrated victories, shared good times at

Camp Half-Blood. He remembered his home, and that gave him a new determination to succeed. He was fighting for two camps now—two families.

Juno had stolen his memory and sent him to Camp Jupiter for a reason. He understood that now. He still wanted to punch her in her godly face, but at least he got her reasoning. If the two camps could work together, they stood a chance of stopping their mutual enemies. Separately, both camps were doomed.

There were other reasons Percy wanted to save Camp Jupiter. Reasons he didn't dare put into words—not yet, anyway. Suddenly he saw a future for himself and for Annabeth that he'd never imagined before.

As they took a taxi into downtown Anchorage, Percy told Frank and Hazel about his dreams. They looked anxious but not surprised when he told them about the giant's army closing in on camp.

Frank choked when he heard about Tyson. “You have a half-brother who’s a Cyclops?”

“Sure,” Percy said. “Which makes him your great-great-great—”

“Please.” Frank covered his ears. “Enough.”

“As long as he can get Ella to camp,” Hazel said. “I’m worried about her.”

Percy nodded. He was still thinking about the lines of prophecy the harpy had recited—about the son of Neptune drowning, and the mark of Athena burning through Rome.

He wasn’t sure what the first part meant, but he was starting to have an idea about the second. He tried to set the question aside. He had to survive *this* quest first.

The taxi turned on Highway One, which looked more like a small street to Percy, and took them north toward downtown. It was late afternoon, but the sun was still high in the sky.

“I can’t believe how much this place has grown,” Hazel muttered.

The taxi driver grinned in the rearview mirror. “Been a long time since you visited, miss?”

“About seventy years,” Hazel said.

The driver slid the glass partition closed and drove on in silence.

According to Hazel, almost none of the buildings were the same, but she pointed out features of the landscape: the vast forests ringing the city, the cold, gray waters of Cook Inlet tracing the north edge of town, and the Chugach Mountains rising grayish-blue in the distance, capped with snow even in June. Percy had never smelled air this clean before. The town itself had a weather-beaten look to it, with closed stores, rusted-out cars, and worn apartment complexes lining the road, but it was still beautiful. Lakes and huge stretches of woods cut through the middle. The arctic sky was an amazing combination of turquoise and gold.

Then there were the giants. Dozens of bright-blue men, each thirty feet tall with gray frosty hair, were wading through the forests, fishing in the bay, and striding across the mountains. The mortals didn’t seem to notice them. The taxi passed within a few yards of one who was sitting at the edge of a lake washing his feet, but the driver didn’t panic.

“Um...” Frank pointed at the blue guy.

“Hyperboreans,” Percy said. He was amazed he remembered that name.

“Northern giants. I fought some when Kronos invaded Manhattan.”

“Wait,” Frank said. “When *who* did *what*?”

“Long story. But these guys look...I don’t know, *peaceful*.”

“They usually are,” Hazel agreed. “I remember them. They’re everywhere in Alaska, like bears.”

“Bears?” Frank said nervously.

“The giants are invisible to mortals,” Hazel said. “They never bothered me, though one almost stepped on me by accident once.”

That sounded fairly bothersome to Percy, but the taxi kept driving. None of the giants paid them any attention. One stood right at the intersection of Northern Lights Road, straddling the highway, and they drove between his legs. The Hyperborean was cradling a Native American totem pole wrapped in furs, humming to it like a baby. If the guy hadn’t been the size of a building, he would’ve been almost cute.

The taxi drove through downtown, past a bunch of tourists’ shops advertising furs, Native American art, and gold. Percy hoped Hazel wouldn’t get agitated and make the jewelry shops explode.

As the driver turned and headed toward the seashore, Hazel knocked on the glass partition. “Here is good. Can you let us out?”

They paid the driver and stepped onto Fourth Street. Compared to Vancouver, downtown Anchorage was tiny—more like a college campus than a city, but Hazel looked amazed.

“It’s *huge*,” she said. “That—that’s where the Gitchell Hotel used to be. My mom and I stayed there our first week in Alaska. And they’ve moved City Hall. It used to be there.”

She led them in a daze for a few blocks. They didn’t really have a plan beyond finding the fastest way to the Hubbard Glacier, but Percy smelled something cooking nearby—sausage, maybe? He realized he hadn’t eaten since that morning at Grandma Zhang’s.

“Food,” he said. “Come on.”

They found a café right by the beach. It was bustling with people, but they scored a table at the window and perused the menus.

Frank whooped with delight. “Twenty-four-hour breakfast!”

“It’s, like, dinnertime,” Percy said, though he couldn’t tell from looking outside. The sun was so high, it could’ve been noon.

“I love breakfast,” Frank said. “I’d eat breakfast, breakfast, and breakfast if I could. Though, um, I’m sure the food here isn’t as good as Hazel’s.”

Hazel elbowed him, but her smile was playful.

Seeing them like that made Percy happy. Those two definitely needed to get together. But it also made him sad. He thought about Annabeth, and wondered if he’d live long enough to see her again.

Think positive, he told himself.

“You know,” he said, “breakfast sounds great.”

They all ordered massive plates of eggs, pancakes, and reindeer sausage, though Frank looked a little worried about the reindeer. “You think it’s okay that we’re eating Rudolph?”

“Dude,” Percy said, “I could eat Prancer and Blitzen, too. I’m *hungry*.”

The food was excellent. Percy had never seen anyone eat as fast as Frank. The red-nosed reindeer did not stand a chance.

Between bites of blueberry pancake, Hazel drew a squiggly curve and an X on her napkin. “So this is what I’m thinking. We’re here.” She tapped X. “Anchorage.”

“It looks like a seagull’s face,” Percy said. “And we’re the eye.”

Hazel glared at him. “It’s a *map*, Percy. Anchorage is at the top of this sliver of ocean, Cook Inlet. There’s a big peninsula of land below us, and my old home town, Seward, is at the bottom of the peninsula, *here*.” She drew another X at the base of the seagull’s throat. “That’s the closest town to the Hubbard Glacier. We could go around by sea, I guess, but it would take forever. We don’t have that kind of time.”

Frank polished off the last of his Rudolph. “But land is dangerous,” he said. “Land means *Gaea*.”

Hazel nodded. “I don’t see that we’ve got much choice, though. We could have asked our pilot to fly us down, but I don’t know...his plane might be too big for the little Seward airport. And if we chartered another plane—”

“No more planes,” Percy said. “Please.”

Hazel held up her hand in a placating gesture. “It’s okay. There’s a train that goes from here to Seward. We might be able to catch one tonight. It only takes a couple of hours.”

She drew a dotted line between the two X’s.

“You just cut off the seagull’s head,” Percy noted.

Hazel sighed. “It’s the train line. Look, from Seward, the Hubbard Glacier is down here somewhere.” She tapped the lower right corner of her napkin. “That’s where Alcyoneus is.”

“But you’re not sure how far?” Frank asked.

Hazel frowned and shook her head. “I’m pretty sure it’s only accessible by boat or plane.”

“Boat,” Percy said immediately.

“Fine,” Hazel said. “It shouldn’t be too far from Seward. *If* we can get to Seward safely.”

Percy gazed out the window. So much to do, and only twenty-four hours left. This time tomorrow, the Feast of Fortuna would be starting. Unless they unleashed Death and made it back to camp, the giant’s army would flood into the valley. The Romans would be the main course at a monster dinner.

Across the street, a frosty black sand beach led down to the sea, which was as smooth as steel. The ocean here felt different—still powerful, but freezing, slow, and primal. No gods controlled that water, at least no gods Percy knew. Neptune wouldn’t be able to protect him. Percy wondered if he could even manipulate water here, or breathe underwater.

A Hyperborean giant lumbered across the street. Nobody in the café noticed. The giant stepped into the bay, cracking the ice under his sandals, and thrust his hands in the water. He brought out a killer whale in one fist. Apparently that wasn’t what he wanted, because he threw the whale back and kept wading.

“Good breakfast,” Frank said. “Who’s ready for a train ride?”

The station wasn’t far. They were just in time to buy tickets for the last train south. As his friends climbed on board, Percy said, “Be with you in a sec,” and ran back into the station.

He got change from the gift shop and stood in front of the pay phone.

He’d never used a pay phone before. They were strange antiques to him, like his mom’s turntable or his teacher Chiron’s Frank Sinatra cassette tapes. He wasn’t sure how many coins it would take, or if he could even make the call go through, assuming he remembered the number correctly.

Sally Jackson, he thought.

That was his mom’s name. And he had a stepdad...Paul.

What did they think had happened to Percy? Maybe they had already held a

memorial service. As near as he could figure, he'd lost *seven months* of his life. Sure, most of that had been during the school year, but still...*not* cool.

He picked up the receiver and punched in a New York number—his mom's apartment. Voice mail. Percy should have figured. It would be like, midnight in New York. They wouldn't recognize this number.

Hearing Paul's voice on the recording hit Percy in the gut so hard, he could barely speak at the tone.

"Mom," he said. "Hey, I'm alive. Her a put me to sleep for a while, and then she took my memory, and..." His voice faltered. How he could possibly explain all this? "Anyway, I'm okay. I'm sorry. I'm on a quest—" He winced. He shouldn't have said that. His mom knew all about quests, and now she'd be worried. "I'll make it home. I promise. Love you."

He put down the receiver. He stared at the phone, hoping it would ring back. The train whistle sounded. The conductor shouted, "All aboard."

Percy ran. He made it just as they were pulling up the steps, then climbed to the top of the double-decker car and slid into his seat.

Hazel frowned. "You okay?"

"Yeah," he croaked. "Just...made a call."

She and Frank seemed to get that. They didn't ask for details.

Soon they were heading south along the coast, watching the landscape go by. Percy tried to think about the quest, but for an ADHD kid like him, the train wasn't the easiest place to concentrate.

Cool things kept happening outside. Bald eagles soared overhead. The train raced over bridges and along cliffs where glacial waterfalls tumbled thousands of feet down the rocks. They passed forests buried in snowdrifts, big artillery guns (to set off small avalanches and prevent uncontrolled ones, Hazel explained), and lakes so clear, they reflected the mountains like mirrors, so the world looked upside down.

Brown bears lumbered through the meadows. Hyperborean giants kept appearing in the strangest places. One was lounging in a lake like it was a hot tub. Another was using a pine tree as a toothpick. A third sat in a snowdrift, playing with two live moose like they were action figures. The train was full of tourists ohhing and ahhing and snapping pictures, but Percy felt sorry they couldn't see the Hyperboreans. They were missing the really good shots.

Meanwhile, Frank studied a map of Alaska that he'd found in the seat

pocket. He located Hubbard Glacier, which looked discouragingly far away from Seward. He kept running his finger along the coastline, frowning with concentration.

“What are you thinking?” Percy asked.

“Just...possibilities,” Frank said.

Percy didn’t know what that meant, but he let it go.

After about an hour, Percy started to relax. They bought hot chocolate from the dining car. The seats were warm and comfortable, and he thought about taking a nap.

Then a shadow passed overhead. Tourists murmured in excitement and started taking pictures.

“Eagle!” one yelled.

“Eagle?” said another.

“Huge eagle!” said a third.

“That’s no eagle,” Frank said.

Percy looked up just in time to see the creature make a second pass. It was definitely larger than an eagle, with a sleek black body the size of a Labrador retriever. Its wingspan was at least ten feet across.

“There’s another one!” Frank pointed. “Strike that. Three, four. Okay, we’re in trouble.”

The creatures circled the train like vultures, delighting the tourists. Percy wasn’t delighted. The monsters had glowing red eyes, sharp beaks, and vicious talons.

Percy felt for his pen in his pocket. “Those things look familiar....”

“Seattle,” Hazel said. “The Amazons had one in a cage. They’re—”

Then several things happened at once. The emergency brake screeched, pitching them forward. Tourists screamed and tumbled through the aisles. The monsters swooped down, shattering the glass roof of the car, and the entire train toppled off the rails.

PERCY

PERCY WENT WEIGHTLESS.

His vision blurred. Claws grabbed his arms and lifted him into the air. Below, train wheels squealed and metal crashed. Glass shattered. Passengers screamed.

When his eyesight cleared, he saw the beast that was carrying him aloft. It had the body of a panther—sleek, black, and feline—with the wings and head of an eagle. Its eyes glowed blood-red.

Percy squirmed. The monster's front talons were wrapped around his arms like steel bands. He couldn't free himself or reach his sword. He rose higher and higher in the cold wind. Percy had no idea where the monster was taking him, but he was pretty sure he wouldn't like it when he got there.

He yelled—mostly out of frustration. Then something whistled by his ear. An arrow sprouted from the monster's neck. The creature shrieked and let go.

Percy fell, crashing through tree branches until he slammed into a snowbank. He groaned, looking up at a massive pine tree he'd just shredded.

He managed to stand. Nothing seemed broken. Frank stood to his left, shooting down the creatures as fast as he could. Hazel was at his back, swinging her sword at any monster that came close, but there were too many swarming around them—at least a dozen.

Percy drew Riptide. He sliced the wing off one monster and sent it spiraling into a tree, then sliced through another that burst into dust. But the defeated ones began to re-form immediately.

“What are these things?” he yelled.

“Gryphons!” Hazel said. “We have to get them away from the train!”

Percy saw what she meant. The train cars had fallen over, and their roofs had shattered. Tourists were stumbling around in shock. Percy didn't see anybody

seriously injured, but the gryphons were swooping toward anything that moved. The only thing keeping them away from the mortals was a glowing gray warrior in camouflage—Frank’s pet *spartus*.

Percy glanced over and noticed Frank’s spear was gone. “Used your last charge?”

“Yeah.” Frank shot another gryphon out of the sky. “I had to help the mortals. The spear just dissolved.”

Percy nodded. Part of him was relieved. He didn’t like the skeleton warrior. Part of him was disappointed, because that was one less weapon they had at their disposal. But he didn’t fault Frank. Frank had done the right thing.

“Let’s move the fight!” Percy said. “Away from the tracks!” They stumbled through the snow, smacking and slicing gryphons that re-formed from dust every time they were killed.

Percy had had no experience with gryphons. He’d always imagined them as huge noble animals, like lions with wings, but these things reminded him more of vicious pack hunters—flying hyenas.

About fifty yards from the tracks, the trees gave way to an open marsh. The ground was so spongy and icy, Percy felt like he was racing across Bubble Wrap. Frank was running out of arrows. Hazel was breathing hard. Percy’s own sword swings were getting slower. He realized they were alive only because the gryphons weren’t *trying* to kill them. The gryphons wanted to pick them up and carry them off somewhere.

Maybe to their nests, Percy thought.

Then he tripped over something in the tall grass—a circle of scrap metal about the size of a tractor tire. It was a massive bird’s nest—a *gryphon’s* nest—the bottom littered with old pieces of jewelry, an Imperial gold dagger, a dented centurion’s badge, and two pumpkin-sized eggs that looked like real gold.

Percy jumped into the nest. He pressed his sword tip against one of the eggs. “Back off, or I break it!”

The gryphons squawked angrily. They buzzed around the nest and snapped their beaks, but they didn’t attack. Hazel and Frank stood back to back with Percy, their weapons ready.

“Gryphons collect gold,” Hazel said. “They’re crazy for it. Look—more nests over there.”

Frank nocked his last arrow. “So if these are their nests, where were they

trying to take Percy? That thing was flying away with him.”

Percy’s arms still throbbed where the gryphon had grabbed him. “Alcyoneus,” he guessed. “Maybe they’re working for him. Are these things smart enough to take orders?”

“I don’t know,” Hazel said. “I never fought them when I lived here. I just read about them at camp.”

“Weaknesses?” Frank asked. “Please tell me they have weaknesses.”

Hazel scowled. “Horses. They hate horses—natural enemies, or something. I wish Arion was here!”

The gryphons shrieked. They swirled around the nest with their red eyes glowing.

“Guys,” Frank said nervously, “I see legion relics in this nest.”

“I know,” Percy said.

“That means other demigods died here, or—”

“Frank, it’ll be okay,” Percy promised.

One of the gryphons dived in. Percy raised his sword, ready to stab the egg. The monster veered off, but the other gryphons were losing their patience. Percy couldn’t keep this standoff going much longer.

He glanced around the fields, desperately trying to formulate a plan. About a quarter mile away, a Hyperborean giant was sitting in the bog, peacefully picking mud from between his toes with a broken tree trunk.

“I’ve got an idea,” Percy said. “Hazel—all the gold in these nests. Do you think you can use it to cause a distraction?”

“I—I guess.”

“Just give us enough time for a head start. When I say *go*, run for that giant.”

Frank gaped at him. “You want us to run *toward* a giant?”

“Trust me,” Percy said. “Ready? Go!”

Hazel thrust her hand upward. From a dozen nests across the marsh, golden objects shot into the air—jewelry, weapons, coins, gold nuggets, and most importantly, gryphon eggs. The monsters shrieked and flew after their eggs, frantic to save them.

Percy and his friends ran. Their feet splashed and crunched through the frozen marsh. Percy poured on speed, but he could hear the gryphons closing behind them, and now the monsters were *really* angry.

The giant hadn't noticed the commotion yet. He was inspecting his toes for mud, his face sleepy and peaceful, his white whiskers glistening with ice crystals. Around his neck was a necklace of found objects—garbage cans, car doors, moose antlers, camping equipment, even a toilet. Apparently he'd been cleaning up the wilderness.

Percy hated to disturb him, especially since it meant taking shelter under the giant's thighs, but they didn't have much choice.

"Under!" he told his friends. "Crawl under!"

They scrambled between the massive blue legs and flattened themselves in the mud, crawling as close as they could to his loincloth. Percy tried to breathe through his mouth, but it wasn't the most pleasant hiding spot.

"What's the plan?" Frank hissed. "Get flattened by a blue rump?"

"Lay low," Percy said. "Only move if you have to."

The gryphons arrived in a wave of angry beaks, talons, and wings, swarming around the giant, trying to get under his legs.

The giant rumbled in surprise. He shifted. Percy had to roll to avoid getting crushed by his large hairy rear. The Hyperborean grunted, a little more irritated. He swatted at the gryphons, but they squawked in outrage and began pecking at his legs and hands.

"Ruh?" the giant bellowed. "Ruh!"

He took a deep breath and blew out a wave of cold air. Even under the protection of the giant's legs, Percy could feel the temperature drop. The gryphons' shrieking stopped abruptly, replaced by the *thunk, thunk, thunk* of heavy objects hitting the mud.

"Come on," Percy told his friends. "Carefully."

They squirmed out from under the giant. All around the marsh, trees were glazed with frost. A huge swath of the bog was covered in fresh snow. Frozen gryphons stuck out of the ground like feathery Popsicle sticks, their wings still spread, beaks open, eyes wide with surprise.

Percy and his friends scrambled away, trying to keep out of the giant's vision, but the big guy was too busy to notice them. He was trying to figure out how to string a frozen gryphon onto his necklace.

"Percy..." Hazel wiped the ice and mud from her face. "How did you know the giant could do that?"

"I almost got hit by Hyperborean breath once," he said. "We'd better move."

The gryphons won't stay frozen forever.”

PERCY

THEY WALKED OVERLAND FOR ABOUT an hour, keeping the train tracks in sight but staying in the cover of the trees as much as possible. Once they heard a helicopter flying in the direction of the train wreck. Twice they heard the screech of gryphons, but they sounded a long way off.

As near as Percy could figure, it was about midnight when the sun finally set. It got cold in the woods. The stars were so thick, Percy was tempted to stop and gawk at them. Then the northern lights cranked up. They reminded Percy of his mom's gas stovetop back home, when she had the flame on low—waves of ghostly blue flames rippling back and forth.

"That's amazing," Frank said.

"Bears," Hazel pointed. Sure enough, a couple of brown bears were lumbering in the meadow a few hundred feet away, their coats gleaming in the starlight. "They won't bother us," Hazel promised. "Just give them a wide berth."

Percy and Frank didn't argue.

As they trudged on, Percy thought about all the crazy places he'd seen. None of them had left him speechless like Alaska. He could see why it was a land beyond the gods. Everything here was rough and untamed. There were no rules, no prophecies, no destinies—just the harsh wilderness and a bunch of animals and monsters. Mortals and demigods came here at their own risk.

Percy wondered if this was what Gaea wanted—for the whole world to be like this. He wondered if that would be such a bad thing.

Then he put the thought aside. Gaea wasn't a gentle goddess. Percy had heard what she planned to do. She wasn't like the Mother Earth you might read about in a children's fairy tale. She was vengeful and violent. If she ever woke up fully, she'd destroy human civilization.

After another couple of hours, they stumbled across a tiny village between the railroad tracks and a two-lane road. The city limit sign said: MOOSE PASS. Standing next to the sign was an actual moose. For a second, Percy thought it might be some sort of statue for advertising. Then the animal bounded into the woods.

They passed a couple of houses, a post office, and some trailers. Everything was dark and closed up. On the other end of town was a store with a picnic table and an old rusted petrol pump in front.

The store had a hand-painted sign that read: MOOSE PASS GAS.

“That’s just wrong,” Frank said.

By silent agreement they collapsed around the picnic table.

Percy’s feet felt like blocks of ice—very *sore* blocks of ice. Hazel put her head in her hands and passed out, snoring. Frank took out his last sodas and some granola bars from the train ride and shared them with Percy.

They ate in silence, watching the stars, until Frank said, “Did you mean what you said earlier?”

Percy looked across the table. “About what?”

In the starlight, Frank’s face might have been alabaster, like an old Roman statue. “About...being proud that we’re related.”

Percy tapped his granola bar on the table. “Well, let’s see. You single-handedly took out three basilisks while I was sipping green tea and wheat germ. You held off an army of Laistrygonians so that our plane could take off in Vancouver. You saved my life by shooting down that gryphon. And you gave up the last charge on your magic spear to help some defenseless mortals. You are, hands down, the nicest child of the war god I’ve ever met...maybe the *only* nice one. So what do you think?”

Frank stared up at the northern lights, still cooking across the stars on low heat. “It’s just...I was supposed to be in charge of this quest, the centurion, and all. I feel like you guys have had to carry me.”

“Not true,” Percy said.

“I’m supposed to have these powers I haven’t figured out how to use,” Frank said bitterly. “Now I don’t have a spear, and I’m almost out of arrows. And... I’m scared.”

“I’d be worried if you weren’t scared,” Percy said. “We’re all scared.”

“But the Feast of Fortuna is...” Frank thought about it.

“It’s after midnight, isn’t it? That means it’s June twenty-fourth now. The feast starts tonight at sundown. We have to find our way to Hubbard Glacier, defeat a giant who is undefeatable in his home territory, and get back to Camp Jupiter before they’re overrun—all in less than eighteen hours.”

“And when we free Thanatos,” Percy said, “he might claim your life. And Hazel’s. Believe me, I’ve been thinking about it.”

Frank gazed at Hazel, still snoring lightly. Her face was buried under a mass of curly brown hair.

“She’s my best friend,” Frank said. “I lost my mom, my grandmother...I can’t lose her, too.”

Percy thought about his old life—his mom in New York, Camp Half-Blood, Annabeth. He’d lost all of that for eight months. Even now, with the memories coming back...he’d never been this far away from home before. He’d been to the Underworld and back. He’d faced death dozens of times. But sitting at this picnic table, thousands of miles away, beyond the power of Olympus, he’d never been so alone—except for Hazel and Frank.

“I’m not going to lose either of you,” he promised. “I’m not going to let that happen. And, Frank, you *are* a leader. Hazel would say the same thing. We need you.”

Frank lowered his head. He seemed lost in thought. Finally he leaned forward until his head bumped the picnic table. He started to snore in harmony with Hazel.

Percy sighed. “Another inspiring speech from Jackson,” he said to himself. “Rest up, Frank. Big day ahead.”

* * *

At dawn, the store opened up. The owner was a little surprised to find three teenagers crashed out on his picnic table, but when Percy explained that they had stumbled away from last night’s train wreck, the guy felt sorry for them and treated them to breakfast. He called a friend of his, an Inuit native who had a cabin close to Seward. Soon they were rumbling along the road in a beat-up Ford pickup that had been new about the time Hazel was born.

Hazel and Frank sat in back. Percy rode up front with the leathery old man, who smelled like smoked salmon. He told Percy stories about Bear and Raven, the Inuit gods, and all Percy could think was that he hoped he didn’t meet them.

He had enough enemies already.

The truck broke down a few miles outside Seward. The driver didn't seem surprised, as though this happened to him several times a day. He said they could wait for him to fix the engine, but since Seward was only a few miles away, they decided to walk it.

By midmorning, they climbed over a rise in the road and saw a small bay ringed with mountains. The town was a thin crescent on the right-hand shore, with wharves extending into the water and a cruise ship in the harbor.

Percy shuddered. He'd had bad experiences with cruise ships.

"Seward," Hazel said. She didn't sound happy to see her old home.

They'd already lost a lot of time, and Percy didn't like how fast the sun was rising. The road curved around the hillside, but it looked like they could get to town faster going straight across the meadows.

Percy stepped off the road. "Come on."

The ground was squishy, but he didn't think much about it until Hazel shouted, "Percy, no!"

His next step went straight through the ground. He sank like a stone until the earth closed over his head—and the earth swallowed him.

HAZEL

“YOUR BOW!” HAZEL SHOUTED.

Frank didn’t ask questions. He dropped his pack and slipped the bow off his shoulder.

Hazel’s heart raced. She hadn’t thought about this boggy soil—muskeg—since before she had died. Now, too late, she remembered the dire warnings the locals had given her. Marshy silt and decomposed plants made a surface that looked completely solid, but it was even worse than quicksand. It could be twenty feet deep or more, and impossible to escape.

She tried not to think what would happen if it were deeper than the length of the bow.

“Hold one end,” she told Frank. “Don’t let go.”

She grabbed the other end, took a deep breath, and jumped into the bog. The earth closed over her head.

Instantly, she was frozen in a memory.

Not now! she wanted to scream. *Ella said I was done with blackouts!*

Oh, but my dear, said the voice of Gaea, *this is not one of your blackouts. This is a gift from me.*

Hazel was back in New Orleans. She and her mother sat in the park near their apartment, having a picnic breakfast. She remembered this day. She was seven years old. Her mother had just sold Hazel’s first precious stone: a small diamond. Neither of them had yet realized Hazel’s curse.

Queen Marie was in an excellent mood. She had bought orange juice for Hazel and champagne for herself, and beignets sprinkled with chocolate and powdered sugar. She’d even bought Hazel a new box of crayons and a pad of paper. They sat together, Queen Marie humming cheerfully while Hazel drew pictures.

The French Quarter woke up around them, ready for Mardi Gras. Jazz bands practiced. Floats were being decorated with fresh-cut flowers. Children laughed and chased each other, decked in so many colored necklaces they could barely walk. The sunrise turned the sky to red gold, and the warm steamy air smelled of magnolias and roses.

It had been the happiest morning of Hazel's life.

"You could stay here." Her mother smiled, but her eyes were blank white. The voice was Gaea's.

"This is fake," Hazel said.

She tried to get up, but the soft bed of grass made her lazy and sleepy. The smell of baked bread and melting chocolate was intoxicating. It was the morning of Mardi Gras, and the world seemed full of possibilities. Hazel could almost believe she had a bright future.

"What is real?" asked Gaea, speaking through her mother's face. "Is your second life *real*, Hazel? You're supposed to be dead. Is it *real* that you're sinking into a bog, suffocating?"

"Let me help my friend!" Hazel tried to force herself back to reality. She could imagine her hand clenched on the end of the bow, but even that was starting to feel fuzzy. Her grip was loosening. The smell of magnolias and roses was overpowering.

Her mother offered her a beignet.

No, Hazel thought. This isn't my mother. This is Gaea tricking me.

"You want your old life back," Gaea said. "I can give you that. This moment can last for years. You can grow up in New Orleans, and your mother will adore you. You'll never have to deal with the burden of your curse. You can be with Sammy—"

"It's an illusion!" Hazel said, choking on the sweet scent of flowers.

"*You* are an illusion, Hazel Levesque. You were only brought back to life because the gods have a task for you. I may have used you, but Nico used you *and* lied about it. You should be glad I captured him."

"Captured?" A feeling of panic rose in Hazel's chest. "What do you mean?"

Gaea smiled, sipping her champagne. "The boy should have known better than to search for the Doors. But no matter—it's not really your concern. Once you release Thanatos, you'll be thrown back into the Underworld to rot forever. Frank and Percy won't stop that from happening. Would *real* friends ask you to

give up your life? Tell me who is lying, and who tells you the truth.”

Hazel started to cry. Bitterness welled up inside her. She’d lost her life once. She didn’t want to die again.

“That’s right,” Gaea purred. “You were destined to marry Sammy. Do you know what happened to him after you died in Alaska? He grew up and moved to Texas. He married and had a family. But he never forgot you. He always wondered why you disappeared. He’s dead now—a heart attack in the nineteen-sixties. The life you could’ve had together always haunted him.”

“Stop it!” Hazel screamed. “*You* took that from me!”

“And you can have it again,” Gaea said. “I have you in my embrace, Hazel. You’ll die anyway. If you give up, at least I can make it pleasant for you. Forget saving Percy Jackson. He belongs to me. I’ll keep him safe in the earth until I’m ready to use him. You can have an entire life in your final moments—you can grow up, marry Sammy. All you have to do is let go.”

Hazel tightened her grip on the bow. Below her, something grabbed her ankles, but she didn’t panic. She *knew* it was Percy, suffocating, desperately grasping for a chance at life.

Hazel glared at the goddess. “I’ll never cooperate with you! LET—US—GO!”

Her mother’s face dissolved. The New Orleans morning melted into darkness. Hazel was drowning in mud, one hand on the bow, Percy’s hands around her ankles, deep in the darkness. Hazel wiggled the end of the bow frantically. Frank pulled her up with such force it nearly popped her arm out of the socket.

When she opened her eyes, she was lying in the grass, covered in muck. Percy sprawled at her feet, coughing and spitting mud.

Frank hovered over them, yelling, “Oh, gods! Oh, gods! Oh, gods!”

He yanked some extra clothes from his bag and started toweling off Hazel’s face, but it didn’t do much good. He dragged Percy farther from the muskeg.

“You were down there so long!” Frank cried. “I didn’t think—oh, gods, don’t *ever* do something like that again!”

He wrapped Hazel in a bear hug.

“Can’t—breathe,” she choked out.

“Sorry!” Frank went back to toweling and fussing over them. Finally he got them to the side of the road, where they sat and shivered and spit up mud clods.

Hazel couldn't feel her hands. She wasn't sure if she was cold or in shock, but she managed to explain about the muskeg, and the vision she'd seen while she was under. Not the part about Sammy—that was still too painful to say out loud—but she told them about Gaea's offer of a fake life, and the goddess' claim that she'd captured her brother Nico. Hazel didn't want to keep that to herself. She was afraid the despair would overwhelm her.

Percy rubbed his shoulders. His lips were blue. "You—you saved me, Hazel. We'll figure out what happened to Nico, I promise."

Hazel squinted at the sun, which was now high in the sky.

The warmth felt good, but it didn't stop her trembling. "Does it seem like Gaea let us go too easily?"

Percy plucked a mud clod from his hair. "Maybe she still wants us as pawns. Maybe she was just saying things to mess with your mind."

"She knew what to say," Hazel agreed. "She knew how to get to me."

Frank put his jacket around her shoulders. "This is a real life. You know that, right? We're not going to let you die again."

He sounded so determined. Hazel didn't want to argue, but she didn't see how Frank could stop Death. She pressed her coat pocket, where Frank's half-burned firewood was still securely wrapped. She wondered what would've happened to him if she'd sunk in the mud forever. Maybe that would have saved him. Fire couldn't have gotten to the wood down there.

She would have made any sacrifice to keep Frank safe. Perhaps she hadn't always felt that strongly, but Frank had trusted her with his life. He believed in her. She couldn't bear the thought of any harm coming to him.

She glanced at the rising sun....Time was running out. She thought about Hylla, the Amazon Queen back in Seattle. Hylla would have dueled Otrera two nights in a row by now, assuming she had survived. She was counting on Hazel to release Death.

She managed to stand. The wind coming off Resurrection Bay was just as cold as she remembered. "We should get going. We're losing time."

Percy gazed down the road. His lips were returning to their normal color. "Any hotels or something where we could clean off? I mean...hotels that accept mud people?"

"I'm not sure," Hazel admitted.

She looked at the town below and couldn't believe how much it had grown

since 1942. The main harbor had moved east as the town had expanded. Most of the buildings were new to her, but the grid of downtown streets seemed familiar. She thought she recognized some warehouses along the shore. “I might know a place we can freshen up.”

HAZEL

WHEN THEY GOT INTO TOWN, Hazel followed the same route she'd used seventy years ago—the last night of her life, when she'd come home from the hills and found her mother missing.

She led her friends along Third Avenue. The railroad station was still there. The big white two-story Seward Hotel was still in business, though it had expanded to twice its old size. They thought about stopping there, but Hazel didn't think it would be a good idea to traipse into the lobby covered in mud, nor was she sure the hotel would give a room to three minors.

Instead, they turned toward the shoreline. Hazel couldn't believe it, but her old home was still there, leaning over the water on barnacle-encrusted piers. The roof sagged. The walls were perforated with holes like buckshot. The door was boarded-up, and a hand-painted sign read: ~~ROOMS—STORAGE—AVAILABLE~~.

"Come on," she said.

"Uh, you sure it's safe?" Frank asked.

Hazel found an open window and climbed inside. Her friends followed. The room hadn't been used in a long time. Their feet kicked up dust that swirled in the buckshot beams of sunlight. Mouldering cardboard boxes were stacked along the walls. Their faded labels read: *Greeting Cards, Assorted Seasonal*. Why several hundred boxes of season's greetings had wound up crumbling to dust in a warehouse in Alaska, Hazel had no idea, but it felt like a cruel joke: as if the cards were for all the holidays she'd never gotten to celebrate—decades of Christmases, Easters, birthdays, Valentine's Days.

"It's warmer in here, at least," Frank said. "Guess no running water? Maybe I can go shopping. I'm not as muddy as you guys. I could find us some clothes."

Hazel only half heard him.

She climbed over a stack of boxes in the corner that used to be her sleeping

area. An old sign was propped against the wall: GOLD PROSPECTING SUPPLIES. She thought she'd find a bare wall behind it, but when she moved the sign, most of her photos and drawings were still pinned there. The sign must have protected them from sunlight and the elements. They seemed not to have aged. Her crayon drawings of New Orleans looked so childish. Had she really made them? Her mother stared out at her from one photograph, smiling in front of her business sign: QUEEN MARIE'S GRIS-GRIS—CHARMS SOLD, FORTUNES TOLD.

Next to that was a photo of Sammy at the carnival. He was frozen in time with his crazy grin, his curly black hair, and those beautiful eyes. If Gaea was telling the truth, Sammy had been dead for over forty years. Had he really remembered Hazel all that time? Or had he forgotten the peculiar girl he used to go riding with—the girl who shared one kiss and a birthday cupcake with him before disappearing forever?

Frank's fingers hovered over the photo. "Who...?" He saw that she was crying and clamped back his question. "Sorry, Hazel. This must be really hard. Do you want some time—"

"No," she croaked. "No, it's fine."

"Is that your mother?" Percy pointed to the photo of Queen Marie. "She looks like you. She's beautiful."

Then Percy studied the picture of Sammy. "Who is that?"

Hazel didn't understand why he looked so spooked. "That's...that's Sammy. He was my—uh—friend from New Orleans." She forced herself not to look at Frank.

"I've seen him before," Percy said.

"You couldn't have," Hazel said. "That was in 1941. He's...he's probably dead now."

Percy frowned. "I guess. Still..." He shook his head, like the thought was too uncomfortable.

Frank cleared his throat. "Look, we passed a store on the last block. We've got a little money left. Maybe I should go get you guys some food and clothes and—I don't know—a hundred boxes of wet wipes or something?"

Hazel put the gold prospecting sign back over her mementos. She felt guilty even looking at that old picture of Sammy, with Frank trying to be so sweet and supportive. It didn't do her any good to think about her old life.

"That would be great," she said. "You're the best, Frank."

The floorboards creaked under his feet. “Well...I’m the only one not completely covered in mud, anyway. Be back soon.”

Once he was gone, Percy and Hazel made temporary camp. They took off their jackets and tried to scrape off the mud. They found some old blankets in a crate and used them to clean up. They discovered that boxes of greeting cards made pretty good places to rest if you arranged them like mattresses.

Percy set his sword on the floor where it glowed with a faint bronze light. Then he stretched out on a bed of *Merry Christmas 1982*.

“Thank you for saving me,” he said. “I should’ve told you that earlier.”

Hazel shrugged. “You would have done the same for me.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “But when I was down in the mud, I remembered that line from Ella’s prophecy—about the son of Neptune drowning. I thought. ‘This is what it means. I’m drowning in the earth.’ I was sure I was dead.”

His voice quavered like it had his first day at Camp Jupiter, when Hazel had shown him the shrine of Neptune. Back then she had wondered if Percy was the answer to her problems—the descendant of Neptune that Pluto had promised would take away her curse someday. Percy had seemed so intimidating and powerful, like a real hero.

Only now, she knew that Frank was a descendant of

Neptune, too. Frank wasn’t the most impressive-looking hero in the world, but he’d trusted her with his life. He tried so hard to protect her. Even his clumsiness was endearing.

She’d never felt more confused—and since she had spent her whole life confused, that was saying a lot.

“Percy,” she said, “that prophecy might not have been complete. Frank thought Ella was remembering a burned page. Maybe you’ll drown someone else.”

He looked at her cautiously. “You think so?”

Hazel felt strange reassuring him. He was so much older, and more in command. But she nodded confidently. “You’re going to make it back home. You’re going to see your girlfriend Annabeth.”

“You’ll make it back, too, Hazel,” he insisted. “We’re not going to let anything happen to you. You’re too valuable to me, to the camp, and especially to Frank.”

Hazel picked up an old valentine. The lacy white paper fell apart in her

hands. “I don’t belong in this century. Nico only brought me back so I could correct my mistakes, maybe get into Elysium.”

“There’s more to your destiny than that,” he said. “We’re supposed to fight Gaea together. I’m going to need you at my side way longer than just today. And Frank—you can see the guy is crazy about you. This life is worth fighting for, Hazel.”

She closed her eyes. “Please, don’t get my hopes up. I can’t—”

The window creaked open. Frank climbed in, triumphantly holding some shopping bags. “Success!”

He showed off his prizes. From a hunting store, he’d gotten a new quiver of arrows for himself, some rations, and a coil of rope.

“For the next time we run across muskeg,” he said.

From a local tourist shop, he had bought three sets of fresh clothes, some towels, some soap, some bottled water, and, yes, a huge box of wet wipes. It wasn’t exactly a hot shower, but Hazel ducked behind a wall of greeting card boxes to clean up and change. Soon she was feeling much better.

This is your last day, she reminded herself. Don’t get too comfortable.

The Feast of Fortuna—all the luck that happened today, good or bad, was supposed to be an omen of the entire year to come. One way or another, their quest would end this evening.

She slipped the piece of driftwood into her new coatpocket. Somehow, she’d have to make sure it stayed safe, no matter what happened to her. She could bear her own death as long as her friends survived.

“So,” she said. “Now we find a boat to Hubbard Glacier.”

She tried to sound confident, but it wasn’t easy. She wished Arion were still with her. She’d much rather ride into battle on that beautiful horse. Ever since they’d left Vancouver, she’d been calling to him in her thoughts, hoping he would hear her and come find her, but that was just wishful thinking.

Frank patted his stomach. “If we’re going to battle to the death, I want lunch first. I found the perfect place.”

Frank led them to a shopping plaza near the wharf, where an old railway car had been converted to a diner. Hazel had no memory of the place from the 1940s, but the food smelled amazing. While Frank and Percy ordered, Hazel wandered down to the docks and asked some questions. When she came back, she needed

cheering up. Even the cheeseburger and fries didn't do the trick.

"We're in trouble," she said. "I tried to get a boat. But...I miscalculated."

"No boats?" Frank asked.

"Oh, I can get a boat," Hazel said. "But the glacier is farther than I thought. Even at top speed, we couldn't get there until tomorrow morning."

Percy turned pale. "Maybe I could make the boat go faster?"

"Even if you could," Hazel said, "from what the captains tell me, it's treacherous—icebergs, mazes of channels to navigate. You'd have to know where you were going."

"A plane?" Frank asked.

Hazel shook her head. "I asked the boat captains about that. They said we could try, but it's a tiny airfield. You have to charter a plane two, three weeks in advance."

They ate in silence after that. Hazel's cheeseburger was excellent, but she couldn't concentrate on it. She'd eaten about three bites when a raven settled on the telephone pole above and began to croak at them.

Hazel shivered. She was afraid it would speak to her like the other raven, so many years ago: *The last night. Tonight.* She wondered if ravens always appeared to children of Pluto when they were about to die. She hoped Nico was still alive, and Gaea had just been lying to make her unsettled. Hazel had a bad feeling that the goddess was telling the truth.

Nico had told her that he'd search for the Doors of Death from the other side. If he'd been captured by Gaea's forces,

Hazel might've lost the only family she had.

She stared at her cheeseburger.

Suddenly, the raven's cawing changed to a strangled yelp.

Frank got up so fast that he almost toppled the picnic table. Percy drew his sword.

Hazel followed their eyes. Perched on top of the pole where the raven had been, a fat ugly gryphon glared down at them. It burped, and raven feathers fluttered from its beak.

Hazel stood and unsheathed her *spatha*.

Frank nocked an arrow. He took aim, but the gryphon shrieked so loudly the sound echoed off the mountains. Frank flinched, and his shot went wide.

“I think that’s a call for help,” Percy warned. “We have to get out of here.”

With no clear plan, they ran for the docks. The gryphon dove after them. Percy slashed at it with his sword, but the gryphon veered out of reach.

They took the steps to the nearest pier and raced to the end. The gryphon swooped after them, its front claws extended for the kill. Hazel raised her sword, but an icy wall of water slammed sideways into the gryphon and washed it into the bay. The gryphon squawked and flapped its wings. It managed to scramble onto the pier, where it shook its black fur like a wet dog.

Frank grunted. “Nice one, Percy.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Didn’t know if I could still do that in Alaska. But bad news—look over there.” About a mile away, over the mountains, a black cloud was swirling—a whole flock of gryphons, dozens at least. There was no way they could fight that many, and no boat could take them away fast enough.

Frank nocked another arrow. “Not going down without a fight.”

Percy raised Riptide. “I’m with you.”

Then Hazel heard a sound in the distance—like the whinnying of a horse. She must’ve been imagining it, but she cried out desperately, “Arion! Over here!”

A tan blur came ripping down the street and onto the pier. The stallion materialized right behind the gryphon, brought down his front hooves, and smashed the monster to dust.

Hazel had never been so happy in her life. “Good horse! *Really* good horse!”

Frank backed up and almost fell off the pier. “How—?”

“He followed me!” Hazel beamed. “Because he’s the best—horse—EVER! Now, get on!”

“All three of us?” Percy said. “Can he handle it?”

Arion whinnied indignantly.

“All right, no need to be rude,” Percy said. “Let’s go.”

They climbed on, Hazel in front, Frank and Percy balancing precariously behind her. Frank wrapped his arms around her waist, and Hazel thought that if this was going to be her last day on earth—it wasn’t a bad way to go out.

“Run, Arion!” she cried. “To Hubbard Glacier!”

The horse shot across the water, his hooves turning the top of the sea to steam.

HAZEL

RIDING ARION, HAZEL FELT POWERFUL, unstoppable, absolutely in control—a perfect combination of horse and human. She wondered if this was what it was like to be a centaur.

The boat captains in Seward had warned her it was three hundred nautical miles to the Hubbard Glacier, a hard, dangerous journey, but Arion had no trouble. He raced over the water at the speed of sound, heating the air around them so that Hazel didn't even feel the cold. On foot, she never would have felt so brave. On horseback, she couldn't wait to charge into battle.

Frank and Percy didn't look so happy. When Hazel glanced back, their teeth were clenched and their eyeballs were bouncing around in their heads. Frank's cheeks jiggled from the g-force. Percy sat in back, hanging on tight, desperately trying not to slip off the horse's rear. Hazel hoped that didn't happen. The way Arion was moving, she might not notice he was gone for fifty or sixty miles.

They raced through icy straits, past blue fjords and cliffs with waterfalls spilling into the sea. Arion jumped over a breaching humpback whale and kept galloping, startling a pack of seals off an iceberg.

It seemed like only minutes before they zipped into a narrow bay. The water turned the consistency of shaved ice in blue sticky syrup. Arion came to a halt on a frozen turquoise slab.

A half a mile away stood Hubbard Glacier. Even Hazel, who'd seen glaciers before, couldn't quite process what she was looking at. Purple snowcapped mountains marched off in either direction, with clouds floating around their middles like fluffy belts. In a massive valley between two of the largest peaks, a ragged wall of ice rose out of the sea, filling the entire gorge. The glacier was blue and white with streaks of black, so that it looked like a hedge of dirty snow left behind on a sidewalk after a snowplow had gone by, only four million times

as large.

As soon as Arion stopped, Hazel felt the temperature drop. All that ice was sending off waves of cold, turning the bay into the world's largest refrigerator. The eeriest thing was a sound like thunder that rolled across the water.

"What is that?" Frank gazed at the clouds above the glacier. "A storm?"

"No," Hazel said. "Ice cracking and shifting. Millions of tons of ice."

"You mean that thing is breaking up?" Frank asked.

As if on cue, a sheet of ice silently calved off the side of the glacier and crashed into the sea, spraying water and frozen shrapnel several stories high. A millisecond later the sound hit them—a *BOOM* almost as jarring as Arion hitting the sound barrier.

"We can't get close to that thing!" Frank said.

"We have to," Percy said. "The giant is at the top."

Arion nickered.

"Jeez, Hazel," Percy said, "tell your horse to watch his language."

Hazel tried not to laugh. "What did he say?"

"With the cussing removed? He said he can get us to the top."

Frank looked incredulous. "I thought the horse couldn't fly!"

This time Arion whinnied so angrily, even Hazel could guess he was cursing.

"Dude," Percy told the horse, "I've gotten suspended for saying less than that. Hazel, he promises you'll see what he can do as soon as you give the word."

"Um, hold on, then, you guys," Hazel said nervously. "Arion, giddyup!"

Arion shot toward the glacier like a runaway rocket, barreling straight across the slush like he wanted to play chicken with the mountain of ice.

The air grew colder. The crackling of the ice grew louder. As Arion closed the distance, the glacier loomed so large, Hazel got vertigo just trying to take it all in. The side was riddled with crevices and caves, spiked with jagged ridges like ax blades. Pieces were constantly crumbling off—some no larger than snowballs, some the size of houses.

When they were about fifty yards from the base, a thunderclap rattled Hazel's bones, and a curtain of ice that would have covered Camp Jupiter calved away and fell toward them.

"Look out!" Frank shouted, which seemed a little unnecessary to Hazel.

Arion was way ahead of him. In a burst of speed, he zigzagged through the debris, leaping over chunks of ice and clambering up the face of the glacier.

Percy and Frank both cursed like horses and held on desperately while Hazel wrapped her arms around Arion's neck. Somehow, they managed not to fall off as Arion scaled the cliffs, jumping from foothold to foothold with impossible speed and agility. It was like falling down a mountain in reverse.

Then it was over. Arion stood proudly at the top of a ridge of ice that loomed over the void. The sea was now three hundred feet below them.

Arion whinnied a challenge that echoed off the mountains. Percy didn't translate, but Hazel was pretty sure Arion was calling out to any other horses that might be in the bay: *Beat that, ya punks!*

Then he turned and ran inland across the top of the glacier, leaping a chasm fifty feet across.

"There!" Percy pointed.

The horse stopped. Ahead of them stood a frozen Roman camp like a giant-sized ghastly replica of Camp Jupiter. The trenches bristled with ice spikes. The snow-brick ramparts glared blinding white. Hanging from the guard towers, banners of frozen blue cloth shimmered in the arctic sun.

There was no sign of life. The gates stood wide open. No sentries walked the walls. Still, Hazel had an uneasy feeling in her gut. She remembered the cave in Resurrection Bay where she'd worked to raise Alcyoneus—the oppressive sense of malice and the constant *boom, boom, boom*, like Gaea's heartbeat. This place felt similar, as if the earth were trying to wake up and consume everything—as if the mountains on either side wanted to crush them and the entire glacier to pieces.

Arion trotted skittishly.

"Frank," Percy said, "how about we go on foot from here?"

Frank sighed with relief. "Thought you'd never ask."

They dismounted and took some tentative steps. The ice seemed stable, covered with a fine carpet of snow so that it wasn't too slippery.

Hazel urged Arion forward. Percy and Frank walked on either side, sword and bow ready. They approached the gates without being challenged. Hazel was trained to spot pits, snares, trip lines, and all sorts of other traps Roman legions had faced for eons in enemy territory, but she saw nothing—just the yawning icy gates and the frozen banners crackling in the wind.

She could see straight down the Via Praetoria. At the crossroads, in front of the snow-brick *principia*, a tall, dark-robed figure stood, bound in icy chains.

“Thanatos,” Hazel murmured.

She felt as if her soul were being pulled forward, drawn toward Death like dust toward a vacuum. Her vision went dark. She almost fell off Arion, but Frank caught her and propped her up.

“We’ve got you,” he promised. “Nobody’s taking you away.”

Hazel gripped his hand. She didn’t want to let go. He was so *solid*, so reassuring, but Frank couldn’t protect her from Death. His own life was as fragile as a half-burned piece of wood.

“I’m all right,” she lied.

Percy looked around uneasily. “No defenders? No giant? This has to be a trap.”

“Obviously,” Frank said. “But I don’t think we have a choice.”

Before Hazel could change her mind, she urged Arion through the gates. The layout was so familiar—cohort barracks, baths, armory. It was an exact replica of Camp Jupiter, except three times as big. Even on horseback, Hazel felt tiny and insignificant, as if they were moving through a model city constructed by the gods.

They stopped ten feet from the robed figure.

Now that she was here, Hazel felt a reckless urge to finish the quest. She knew she was in more danger than when she’d been fighting the Amazons, or fending off the gryphons, or climbing the glacier on Arion’s back. Instinctively she knew that Thanatos could simply touch her, and she would die.

But she also had a feeling that if she *didn’t* see the quest through, if she didn’t face her fate bravely, she would still die—in cowardice and failure. The judges of the dead wouldn’t be lenient to her a second time.

Arion cantered back and forth, sensing her disquiet.

“Hello?” Hazel forced out the word. “Mr. Death?”

The hooded figure raised his head.

Instantly, the whole camp stirred to life. Figures in Roman armor emerged from the barracks, the *principia*, the armory, and the canteen, but they weren’t human. They were shades—the chattering ghosts Hazel had lived with for decades in the Fields of Asphodel. Their bodies weren’t much more than wisps of black vapor, but they managed to hold together sets of scale armor, greaves,

and helmets. Frost-covered swords were strapped to their waists. *Pila* and dented shields floated in their smoky hands. The plumes on the centurions' helmets were frozen and ragged. Most of the shades were on foot, but two soldiers burst out of the stables in a golden chariot pulled by ghostly black steeds.

When Arion saw the horses, he stamped the ground in outrage.

Frank gripped his bow. "Yep, *here's* the trap."

HAZEL

THE GHOSTS FORMED RANKS AND ENCIRCLED the crossroads. There were about a hundred in all—not an entire legion, but more than a cohort. Some carried the tattered lightning bolt banners of the Twelfth Legion, Fifth Cohort—Michael

Varus’s doomed expedition from the 1980s. Others carried standards and insignia Hazel didn’t recognize, as if they’d died at different times, on different quests—maybe not even from Camp Jupiter.

Most were armed with Imperial gold weapons—more Imperial gold than the entire Twelfth Legion possessed. Hazel could feel the combined power of all that gold humming around her, even scarier than the crackling of the glacier. She wondered if she could use her power to control the weapons, maybe disarm the ghosts, but she was afraid to try. Imperial gold wasn’t just a precious metal. It was deadly to demigods and monsters. Trying to control that much at once would be like trying to control plutonium in a reactor. If she failed, she might wipe Hubbard Glacier off the map and kill her friends.

“Thanatos!” Hazel turned to the robed figure. “We’re here to rescue you. If you control these shades, tell them—”

Her voice faltered. The god’s hood fell away and his robes dropped off as he spread his wings, leaving him in only a sleeveless black tunic belted at the waist. He was the most beautiful man Hazel had ever seen.

His skin was the color of teakwood, dark and glistening like Queen Marie’s old séance table. His eyes were as honey gold as Hazel’s. He was lean and muscular, with a regal face and black hair flowing down his shoulders. His wings glimmered in shades of blue, black, and purple.

Hazel reminded herself to breathe.

Beautiful was the right word for Thanatos—not handsome, or hot, or anything like that. He was beautiful the way an angel is beautiful—timeless,

perfect, remote.

“Oh,” she said in a small voice.

The god’s wrists were shackled in icy manacles, with chains that ran straight into the glacier floor. His feet were bare, shackled around the ankles and also chained.

“It’s Cupid,” Frank said.

“A really buff Cupid,” Percy agreed.

“You compliment me,” Thanatos said. His voice was as gorgeous as he was—deep and melodious. “I am frequently mistaken for the god of love. Death has more in common with Love than you might imagine. But I am Death. I assure you.”

Hazel didn’t doubt it. She felt as if she were made of ashes. Any second, she might crumble and be sucked into the vacuum. She doubted Thanatos even needed to touch her to kill her. He could simply tell her to die. She would keel over on the spot, her soul obeying that beautiful voice and those kind eyes.

“We’re—we’re here to save you,” she managed. “Where’s Alcyoneus?”

“Save me...?” Thanatos narrowed his eyes. “Do you understand what you are saying, Hazel Levesque? Do you understand what that will mean?”

Percy stepped forward. “We’re wasting time.”

He swung his sword at the god’s chains. Celestial bronze rang against the ice, but Riptide stuck to the chain like glue. Frost began creeping up the blade. Percy pulled frantically. Frank ran to help. Together, they just managed to yank Riptide free before the frost reached their hands.

“That won’t work,” Thanatos said simply. “As for the giant, he is close. These shades are not mine. They are his.”

Thanatos’s eyes scanned the ghost soldiers. They shifted uncomfortably, as if an arctic wind were rattling through their ranks.

“So how do we get you out?” Hazel demanded.

Thanatos turned his attention back to her. “Daughter of Pluto, child of my master, you of all people should not wish me released.”

“Don’t you think I *know* that?” Hazel’s eyes stung, but she was done being afraid. She’d been a scared little girl seventy years ago. She’d lost her mother because she acted too late. Now she was a soldier of Rome. She wasn’t going to fail again. She wasn’t going to let down her friends.

“Listen, Death.” She drew her cavalry sword, and Arion reared in defiance.

“I didn’t come back from the Underworld and travel thousands of miles to be told that I’m stupid for setting you free. If I die, I die. I’ll fight this whole army if I have to. Just tell us how to break your chains.”

Thanatos studied her for a heartbeat. “Interesting. You do understand that these shades were once demigods like you. They fought for Rome. They died without completing their heroic quests. Like you, they were sent to Asphodel. Now Gaea has promised them a second life if they fight for her today. Of course, if you release me and defeat them, they will have to return to the Underworld where they belong. For treason against the gods, they will face eternal punishment. They are not so different from you, Hazel Levesque. Are you sure you want to release me and damn these souls forever?”

Frank clenched his fists. “That’s not fair! Do you want to be freed or not?”

“Fair...” Death mused. “You’d be amazed how often I hear that word, Frank Zhang, and how meaningless it is. Is it fair that your life will burn so short and bright? Was it fair when I guided your mother to the Underworld?”

Frank staggered like he’d been punched.

“No,” Death said sadly. “Not fair. And yet it was her time. There is no fairness in Death. If you free me, I will do my duty. But of course these shades will try to stop you.”

“So if we let you go,” Percy summed up, “we get mobbed by a bunch of black vapor dudes with gold swords. Fine. How do we break those chains?”

Thanatos smiled. “Only the fire of life can melt the chains of death.”

“Without the riddles, please?” Percy asked.

Frank drew a shaky breath. “It isn’t a riddle.”

“Frank, no,” Hazel said weakly. “There’s got to be another way.”

Laughter boomed across the glacier. A rumbling voice said: “My friends. I’ve waited so long!”

Standing at the gates of the camp was Alcyoneus. He was even larger than the giant Polybotes they’d seen in California. He had metallic golden skin, armor made from platinum links, and an iron staff the size of a totem pole. His rust-red dragon legs pounded against the ice as he entered the camp. Precious stones glinted in his red braided hair.

Hazel had never seen him fully formed, but she knew him better than she knew her own parents. She had *made* him. For months, she had raised gold and gems from the earth to create this monster. She knew the diamonds he used for a

heart. She knew the oil that ran in his veins instead of blood. More than anything, she wanted to destroy him.

The giant approached, grinning at her with his solid silver teeth.

“Ah, Hazel Levesque,” he said, “you cost me dearly! If not for you, I would have risen decades ago, and this world would already be Gaea’s. But no matter!”

He spread his hands, showing off the ranks of ghostly soldiers. “Welcome, Percy Jackson! Welcome, Frank Zhang! I am Alcyoneus, the bane of Pluto, the *new* master of Death. And this is your new legion.”

FRANK

NO FAIRNESS IN DEATH. Those words kept ringing in Frank's head.

The golden giant didn't scare him. The army of shades didn't scare him. But the thought of freeing Thanatos made Frank want to curl into the fetal position. This god had taken his mother.

Frank understood what he had to do to break those chains. Mars had warned him. He'd explained why he loved Emily Zhang so much: *She always put her duty first, ahead of everything. Even her life.*

Now it was Frank's turn.

His mother's sacrifice medal felt warm in his pocket. He finally understood his mother's choice, saving her comrades at the cost of her own life. He got what Mars had been trying to tell him—*Duty. Sacrifice. They mean something.*

In Frank's chest, a hard knot of anger and resentment—a lump of grief he'd been carrying since the funeral—finally began to dissolve. He understood why his mother never came home. Some things *were* worth dying for.

"Hazel." He tried to keep his voice steady. "That package you're keeping for me? I need it."

Hazel glanced at him in dismay. Sitting on Arion, she looked like a queen, powerful and beautiful, her brown hair swept over her shoulders and a wreath of icy mist around her head. "Frank, no. There has to be another way."

"Please. I—I know what I'm doing."

Thanatos smiled and lifted his manacled wrists. "You're right, Frank Zhang. Sacrifices must be made."

Great. If Death approved of his plan, Frank was pretty sure he wasn't going to like the results.

The giant Alcyoneus stepped forward, his reptilian feet shaking the ground. "What package do you speak of, Frank Zhang? Have you brought me a present?"

“Nothing for you, Golden Boy,” Frank said. “Except a whole lot of pain.”

The giant roared with laughter. “Spoken like a child of Mars! Too bad I have to kill you. And *this* one...my, my, I’ve been waiting to meet the famous Percy Jackson.”

The giant grinned. His silver teeth made his mouth look like a car grille.

“I’ve followed your progress, son of Neptune,” said Alcyoneus. “Your fight with Kronos? Well done. Gaea hates you above all others...except perhaps for that upstart Jason Grace. I’m sorry I can’t kill you right away, but my brother Polybotes wishes to keep you as a pet. He thinks it will be amusing when he destroys Neptune to have the god’s favorite son on a leash. After that, of course, Gaea has plans for you.”

“Yeah, flattering.” Percy raised Riptide. “But actually I’m the son of Poseidon. I’m from Camp Half-Blood.”

The ghosts stirred. Some drew swords and lifted shields. Alcyoneus raised his hand, gesturing for them to wait.

“Greek, Roman, it doesn’t matter,” the giant said easily. “We will crush both camps underfoot. You see, the Titans didn’t think *big* enough. They planned to destroy the gods in their new home of America. We giants know better! To kill a weed, you must pull up its roots. Even now, while my forces destroy your little Roman camp, my brother Porphyronis preparing for the real battle in the ancient lands! We will destroy the gods at their source.”

The ghosts pounded their swords against their shields. The sound echoed across the mountains.

“The source?” Frank asked. “You mean Greece?”

Alcyoneus chuckled. “No need to worry about that, son of Mars. You won’t live long enough to see our ultimate victory.

I will replace Pluto as lord of the Underworld. I already have Death in my custody. With Hazel Levesque in my service, I will have all the riches under the earth as well!”

Hazel gripped her *spatha*. “I don’t do *service*.”

“Oh, but you gave me life!” Alcyoneus said. “True, we hoped to awaken Gaea during World War II. That would’ve been glorious. But really, the world is in almost as bad a shape now. Soon, your civilization will be wiped out. The Doors of Death will stand open. Those who serve us will never perish. Alive or dead, you three *will* join my army.”

Percy shook his head. “Fat chance, Golden Boy. You’re going down.”

“Wait.” Hazel spurred her horse toward the giant. “I raised this monster from the earth. I’m the daughter of Pluto. It’s my place to kill him.”

“Ah, little Hazel.” Alcyoneus planted his staff on the ice. His hair glittered with millions of dollars’ worth of gems. “Are you sure you will not join us of your own free will? You could be quite ... *precious* to us. Why die again?” Hazel’s eyes flashed with anger. She looked down at Frank and pulled the wrapped-up piece of firewood from her coat.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” he said.

She pursed her lips. “You’re my best friend, too, Frank. I should have told you that.” She tossed him the stick. “Do what you have to. And Percy...can you protect him?”

Percy gazed at the ranks of ghostly Romans. “Against a small army? Sure, no problem.”

“Then I’ve got Golden Boy,” Hazel said.

She charged the giant.

FRANK

FRANK UNWRAPPED THE FIREWOOD and knelt at the feet of Thanatos.

He was aware of Percy standing over him, swinging his sword and yelling in defiance as the ghosts closed in. He heard the giant bellow and Arion whinny angrily, but he didn't dare look.

His hands trembling, he held his piece of tinder next to the chains on Death's right leg. He thought about flames, and instantly the wood blazed.

Horrible warmth spread through Frank's body. The icy metal began to melt, the flame so bright it was more blinding than the ice.

"Good," Thanatos said. "Very good, Frank Zhang."

Frank had heard about people's lives flashing before their eyes, but now he experienced it literally. He saw his mother the day she left for Afghanistan. She smiled and hugged him. He tried to breathe in her jasmine scent so he'd never forget it.

*I will always be proud of you, Frank, she said. Someday, you'll travel even farther than I. You'll bring our family full circle. Years from now, our descendants will be telling stories about the hero Frank Zhang, their great-, great-, great—*She poked him in the belly for old times' sake. It would be the last time Frank smiled for months.

He saw himself at the picnic bench in Moose Pass, watching the stars and the northern lights as Hazel snored softly beside him, Percy saying, *Frank, you are a leader. We need you.*

He saw Percy disappearing into the muskeg, then Hazel diving after him. Frank remembered how alone he had felt holding on to the bow, how utterly powerless. He had pleaded with the Olympian gods—even Mars—to help his friends, but he knew they were beyond the gods' reach.

With a clank, the first chain broke. Quickly, Frank stabbed the firewood at

the chain on Death's other leg.

He risked a glance over his shoulder.

Percy was fighting like a whirlwind. In fact...he *was* a whirlwind. A miniature hurricane of water and ice vapor churned around him as he waded through the enemy, knocking Roman ghosts away, deflecting arrows and spears. Since when did he have *that* power?

He moved through the enemy lines, and even though he seemed to be leaving Frank undefended, the enemy was completely focused on Percy. Frank wasn't sure why—then he saw Percy's goal. One of the black vapory ghosts was wearing the lion's-skin cape of a standard bearer and holding a pole with a golden eagle, icicles frozen to its wings. The legion's standard.

Frank watched as Percy plowed through a line of legionnaires, scattering their shields with his personal cyclone. He knocked down the standard bearer and grabbed the eagle.

"You want it back?" he shouted at the ghosts. "Come and get it!"

He drew them away, and Frank couldn't help being awed by his bold strategy. As much as those shades wanted to keep Thanatos chained, they were *Roman* spirits. Their minds were fuzzy at best, like the ghosts Frank had seen in Asphodel, but they remembered one thing clearly: they were supposed to protect their eagle.

Still, Percy couldn't fight off that many enemies forever. Maintaining a storm like that had to be difficult. Despite the cold, his face was already beaded with sweat.

Frank looked for Hazel. He couldn't see her or the giant.

"Watch your fire, boy," Death warned. "You don't have any to waste."

Frank cursed. He'd gotten so distracted, he hadn't noticed the second chain had melted.

He moved his fire to the shackles on the god's right hand. The piece of tinder was almost half gone now. Frank started to shiver. More images flashed through his mind. He saw Mars sitting at his grandmother's bedside, looking at Frank with those nuclear explosion eyes: *You're Juno's secret weapon. Have you figured out your gift yet?*

He heard his mother say: *You can be anything.*

Then he saw Grandmother's stern face, her skin as thin as rice paper, her white hair spread across her pillow. Yes, Fai Zhang. Your mother was not

simply boosting your self-esteem. She was telling you the *literal* truth.

He thought of the grizzly bear his mother had intercepted at the edge of the woods. He thought of the large black bird circling over the flames of their family mansion.

The third chain snapped. Frank thrust the tinder at the last shackle. His body was racked with pain. Yellow splotches danced in his eyes.

He saw Percy at the end of the Via Principalis, holding off the army of ghosts. He'd overturned the chariot and destroyed several buildings, but every time he threw off a wave of attackers in his hurricane, the ghosts simply got up and charged again. Every time Percy slashed one of them down with his sword, the ghost re-formed immediately. Percy had backed up almost as far as he could go. Behind him was the side gate of the camp, and about twenty feet beyond that, the edge of the glacier.

As for Hazel, she and Alcyoneus had managed to destroy most of the barracks in their battle. Now they were fighting in the wreckage at the main gate. Arion was playing a dangerous game of tag, charging around the giant while Alcyoneus swiped at them with his staff, knocking over walls and cleaving massive chasms in the ice. Only Arion's speed kept them alive.

Finally, Death's last chain snapped. With a desperate yelp, Frank jabbed his firewood into a pile of snow and extinguished the flame. His pain faded. He was still alive. But when he took out the piece of tinder, it was no more than a stub, smaller than a candy bar.

Thanatos raised his arms.

"Free," he said with satisfaction.

"Great." Frank blinked the spots from his eyes. "Then do something!"

Thanatos gave him a calm smile. "Do something? Of course. I will watch. Those who die in this battle will stay dead."

"Thanks," Frank muttered, slipping his firewood into his coat. "Very helpful."

"You're most welcome," Thanatos said agreeably.

"Percy!" Frank yelled. "They can die now!"

Percy nodded understanding, but he looked worn out. His hurricane was slowing down. His strikes were getting slower. The entire ghostly army had him surrounded, gradually forcing him toward the edge of the glacier.

Frank drew his bow to help. Then he dropped it. Normal arrows from a

hunting store in Seward wouldn't do any good. Frank would have to use his gift.

He thought he understood his powers at last. Something about watching the firewood burn, smelling the acrid smoke of his own life, had made him feel strangely confident.

Is it fair your life burns so short and bright? Death had asked.

"No such thing as fair," Frank told himself. "If I'm going to burn, it might as well be bright."

He took one step toward Percy. Then, from across the camp, Hazel yelled in pain. Arion screamed as the giant got a lucky shot. His staff sent horse and rider tumbling over the ice, crashing into the ramparts.

"Hazel!" Frank glanced back at Percy, wishing he had his spear. If he could just summon Gray...but he couldn't be in two places at once.

"Go help her!" Percy yelled, holding the golden eagle aloft. "I've got these guys!"

Percy *didn't* have them. Frank knew that. The son of Poseidon was about to be overwhelmed, but Frank ran to Hazel's aid.

She was half-buried in a collapsed pile of snow-bricks. Arion stood over her, trying to protect her, rearing and swatting at the giant with his front hooves.

The giant laughed. "Hello, little pony. You want to play?"

Alcyoneus raised his icy staff.

Frank was too far away to help...but he imagined himself rushing forward, his feet leaving the ground.

Be anything.

He remembered the bald eagles they'd seen on the train ride. His body became smaller and lighter. His arms stretched into wings, and his sight became a thousand times sharper. He soared upward, then dove at the giant with his talons extended, his razor-sharp claws raking across the giant's eyes.

Alcyoneus bellowed in pain. He staggered backward as Frank landed in front of Hazel and returned to his normal form.

"Frank..." She stared at him in amazement, a cap of snow dripping off her head. "What just...how did—?"

"Fool!" Alcyoneus shouted. His face was slashed, black oil dripping into his eyes instead of blood, but the wounds were already closing. "I am immortal in my homeland, Frank Zhang! And thanks to your friend Hazel, my new homeland is Alaska. You *cannot* kill me here!"

“We’ll see,” Frank said. Power coursed through his arms and legs. “Hazel, get back on your horse.”

The giant charged, and Frank charged to meet him. He remembered the bear he’d met face to face when he was a child. As he ran, his body became heavier, thicker, rippling with muscles. He crashed into the giant as a full-grown grizzly, a thousand pounds of pure force. He was still small compared to Alcyoneus, but he slammed into the giant with such momentum, Alcyoneus toppled into an icy watchtower that collapsed on top of him.

Frank sprang at the giant’s head. A swipe of his claw was like a heavyweight fighter swinging a chain saw. Frank bashed the giant’s face back and forth until his metallic features began to dent.

“Urgg,” the giant mumbled in a stupor.

Frank changed to his regular form. His backpack was still with him. He grabbed the rope he’d bought in Seward, quickly made a noose, and fastened it around the giant’s scaly dragon foot.

“Hazel, here!” He tossed her the other end of the rope. “I’ve got an idea, but we’ll have to—”

“Kill—uh—you—uh...” Alcyoneus muttered.

Frank ran to the giant’s head, picked up the nearest heavy object he could find—a legion shield—and slammed it into the giant’s nose.

The giant said, “Urgg.”

Frank looked back at Hazel. “How far can Arion pull this guy?”

Hazel just stared at him. “You—you were a bird. Then a bear. And—”

“I’ll explain later,” Frank said. “We need to drag this guy inland, as fast and far as we can.”

“But Percy!” Hazel said.

Frank cursed. How could he have forgotten?

Through the ruins of the camp, he saw Percy with his back to the edge of the cliff. His hurricane was gone. He held Riptide in one hand and the legion’s golden eagle in the other. The entire army of shades edged forward, their weapons bristling.

“Percy!” Frank yelled.

Percy glanced over. He saw the fallen giant and seemed to understand what was happening. He yelled something that was lost in the wind, probably: *Go!*

Then he slammed Riptide into the ice at his feet. The entire glacier shuddered. Ghosts fell to their knees. Behind Percy, a wave surged up from the bay—a wall of gray water even taller than the glacier. Water shot from the chasms and crevices in the ice. As the wave hit, the back half of the camp crumbled. The entire edge of the glacier peeled away, cascading into the void—carrying buildings, ghosts, and Percy Jackson over the edge.

FRANK

FRANK WAS SO STUNNED THAT Hazel had to yell his name a dozen times before he realized Alcyoneus was getting up again.

He slammed his shield into the giant's nose until Alcyoneus began to snore. Meanwhile the glacier kept crumbling, the edge getting closer and closer.

Thanatos glided toward them on his black wings, his expression serene.

"Ah, yes," he said with satisfaction. "There go some souls. Drowning, drowning. You'd best hurry, my friends, or you'll drown, too."

"But Percy..." Frank could barely speak his friend's name. "Is he—?"

"Too soon to tell. As for *this* one..." Thanatos looked down at Alcyoneus with distaste. "You'll never kill him here. You know what to do?"

Frank nodded numbly. "I think so."

"Then our business is complete."

Frank and Hazel exchanged nervous looks.

"Um..." Hazel faltered. "You mean you won't...you're not going to —" "Claim your life?" Thanatos asked. "Well, let's see..."

He pulled a pure-black iPad from thin air. Death tapped the screen a few times, and all Frank could think was: Please don't let there be an app for reaping souls.

"I don't see you on the list," Thanatos said. "Pluto gives me specific orders for escaped souls, you see. For some reason, he has not issued a warrant for yours. Perhaps he feels your life is not finished, or it could be an oversight. If you'd like me to call and ask—"

"No!" Hazel yelped. "That's okay."

"Are you sure?" Death asked helpfully. "I have video conferencing enabled. I have his Skype address here somewhere..."

“Really, no.” Hazel looked as if several thousand pounds of worry had just been lifted from her shoulders. “Thank you.”

“Urgg,” Alcyoneus mumbled.

Frank hit him over the head again.

Death looked up from his iPad. “As for you, Frank Zhang, it isn’t your time, either. You’ve got a little fuel left to burn. But don’t think I’m doing either of you a favor. We will meet again under less pleasant circumstances.”

The cliff was still crumbling, the edge only twenty feet away now. Arion whinnied impatiently. Frank knew they had to leave, but there was one more question he had to ask.

“What about the Doors of Death?” he said. “Where are they? How do we close them?”

“Ah, yes.” A look of irritation flickered across Thanatos’s face. “The Doors of Me. Closing them would be good, but I fear it is beyond my power. How *you* would do it, I haven’t the faintest idea. I can’t tell you exactly where they are. The location isn’t...well, it’s not entirely a *physical* place. They must be located through questing. I can tell you to start your search in Rome. The *original* Rome. You will need a special guide. Only one sort of demigod can read the signs that will ultimately lead you to the Doors of Me.”

Cracks appeared in the ice under their feet. Hazel patted Arion’s neck to keep him from bolting.

“What about my brother?” she asked. “Is Nico alive?”

Thanatos gave her a strange look—possibly pity, though that didn’t seem like an emotion Death would understand. “You will find the answer in Rome. And now I must fly south to your Camp Jupiter. I have a feeling there will be many souls to reap, very soon. Farewell, demigods, until we meet again.”

Thanatos dissipated into black smoke.

The cracks widened in the ice under Frank’s feet.

“Hurry!” he told Hazel. “We’ve got to take Alcyoneus about ten miles due north!”

He climbed onto the giant’s chest and Arion took off, racing across the ice, dragging Alcyoneus like the world’s ugliest sled.

It was a short trip.

Arion rode the glacier like a highway, zipping across the ice, leaping

crevices, and skidding down slopes that would've made a snowboarder's eyes light up.

Frank didn't have to knock out Alcyoneus too many times, because the giant's head kept bouncing and hitting the ice. As they raced along, the half-conscious Golden Boy mumbled a tune that sounded like "Jingle Bells."

Frank felt pretty stunned himself. He'd just turned into an eagle and a bear. He could still feel fluid energy rippling through his body, like he was halfway between a solid and liquid state.

Not only that: Hazel and he had released Death, and both of them had survived. And Percy... Frank swallowed down his fear. Percy had gone over the side of the glacier to save them.

The son of Neptune shall drown.

No. Frank refused to believe Percy was dead. They hadn't come all this way just to lose their friend. Frank would find him—but first they had to deal with Alcyoneus.

He visualized the map he had been studying on the train from Anchorage. He knew roughly where they were going, but there were no signs or markers on top of the glacier. He'd just have to take his best guess.

Finally Arion zoomed between two mountains into a valley of ice and rocks, like a massive bowl of frozen milk with bits of Cocoa Puffs. The giant's golden skin paled as if it were turning to brass. Frank felt a subtle vibration in his own body, like a tuning fork pressed against his sternum. He knew he'd crossed into friendly territory—*home* territory.

"Here!" Frank shouted.

Arion veered to one side. Hazel cut the rope, and Alcyoneus went skidding past. Frank leaped off just before the giant slammed into a boulder.

Immediately Alcyoneus jumped to his feet. "What? Where? Who?"

His nose was bent in an odd direction. His wounds had healed, though his golden skin had lost some of its luster. He looked around for his iron staff, which was still back at Hubbard Glacier. Then he gave up and pounded the nearest boulder to pieces with his fist.

"You *dare* take me for a sleigh ride?" He tensed and sniffed the air. "That smell...like snuffed-out souls. Thanatos is free, eh? Bah! It doesn't matter. Gaea still controls the Doors of Death. Now, why have you brought me here, son of Mars?"

“To kill you,” Frank said. “Next question?”

The giant’s eyes narrowed. “I’ve never known a child of Mars who can change his form, but that doesn’t mean you can defeat me. Do you think your stupid soldier of a father gave you the strength to face me in one-on-one combat?”

Hazel drew her sword. “How about two on one?”

The giant growled and charged at Hazel, but Arion nimbly darted out of the way. Hazel slashed her sword across the back of the giant’s calf. Black oil spouted from the wound.

Alcyoneus stumbled. “You can’t kill me, Thanatos or no!”

Hazel made a grabbing gesture with her free hand. An invisible force yanked the giant’s jewel-encrusted hair back ward. Hazel rushed in, slashed his other leg, and raced away before he could regain his balance.

“Stop that!” Alcyoneus shouted. “This is Alaska. I am immortal in my homeland!”

“Actually,” Frank said, “I have some bad news about that. See, I got more from my dad than strength.”

The giant snarled. “What are you talking about, war brat?”

“Tactics,” Frank said. “That’s my gift from Mars. A battle can be won before it’s ever fought by choosing the right ground.” He pointed over his shoulder. “We crossed the border a few hundred yards back. You’re not in Alaska anymore. Can’t you feel it, Al? You want to get to Alaska, you have to go through me.”

Slowly, understanding dawned in the giant’s eyes. He looked down incredulously at his wounded legs. Oil still poured from his calves, turning the ice black.

“Impossible!” the giant bellowed. “I’ll—I’ll—Gah!”

He charged at Frank, determined to reach the international boundary. For a split second, Frank doubted his plan. If he couldn’t use his gift again, if he froze, he was dead. Then he remembered his grandmother’s instructions:

It helps if you know the creature well. Check.

It also helps if you are in a life-and-death situation, such as combat. Double check.

The giant kept coming. Twenty yards. Ten yards.

“Frank?” Hazel called nervously.

Frank stood his ground. “I got this.”

Just before Alcyoneus smashed into him, Frank changed. He’d always felt too big and clumsy. Now he used that feeling. His body swelled to massive size. His skin thickened. His arms changed to stout front legs. His mouth grew tusks and his nose elongated. He became the animal he knew best—the one he’d cared for, fed, bathed, and even given indigestion to at Camp Jupiter.

Alcyoneus slammed into a full-grown ten-ton elephant.

The giant staggered sideways. He screamed in frustration and slammed into Frank again, but Alcyoneus was completely out of his weight division. Frank head-butted him so hard Alcyoneus flew backward and landed spread-eagled on the ice.

“You—can’t—kill me,” Alcyoneus growled. “You can’t—”

Frank turned back to his normal form. He walked up to the giant, whose oily wounds were steaming. The gems fell out of his hair and sizzled in the snow. His golden skin began to corrode, breaking into chunks.

Hazel dismounted and stood next to Frank, her sword ready. “May I?”

Frank nodded. He looked into the giant’s seething eyes. “Here’s a tip, Alcyoneus. Next time you choose the biggest state for your home, don’t set up base in the part that’s only ten miles wide. Welcome to Canada, idiot.”

Hazel’s sword came down on the giant’s neck. Alcyoneus dissolved into a pile of very expensive rocks.

For a while Hazel and Frank stood together, watching the remains of the giant melt into the ice. Frank picked up his rope.

“An elephant?” Hazel asked.

Frank scratched his neck. “Yeah. It seemed like a good idea.”

He couldn’t read her expression. He was afraid he’d finally done something so weird that she’d never want to be around him again. Frank Zhang: lumbering klutz, child of Mars, part-time pachyderm.

Then she kissed him—a real kiss on the lips, much better than the kind of kiss she’d given Percy on the airplane.

“You are amazing,” she said. “And you make a very handsome elephant.”

Frank felt so flustered that he thought his boots might melt through the ice. Before he could say anything, a voice echoed across the valley:

You haven’t won.

Frank looked up. Shadows were shifting across the nearest mountain, forming the face of a sleeping woman.

You will never reach home in time, taunted the voice of Gaea. Even now, Thanatos is attending the death of Camp Jupiter, the final destruction of your Roman friends.

The mountain rumbled as if the whole earth were laughing. The shadows disappeared.

Hazel and Frank looked at each other. Neither said a word. They climbed onto Arion and sped back toward Glacier Bay.

FRANK

PERCY WAS WAITING FOR THEM. He looked mad.

He stood at the edge of the glacier, leaning on the staff with the golden eagle, gazing down at the wreckage he'd caused: several hundred acres of newly open water dotted with icebergs and flotsam from the ruined camp.

The only remains on the glacier were the main gates, which listed sideways, and a tattered blue banner lying over a pile of snow-bricks.

When they ran up to him, Percy said, "Hey," like they were just meeting for lunch or something.

"You're alive!" Frank marveled.

Percy frowned. "The fall? That was nothing. I fell twice that far from the St. Louis Arch."

"You did *what*?" Hazel asked.

"Never mind. The important thing was I didn't drown."

"So the prophecy *was* incomplete!" Hazel grinned. "It probably said something like: *The son of Neptune will drown a whole bunch of ghosts.*"

Percy shrugged. He was still looking at Frank like he was miffed. "I got a bone to pick with you, Zhang. You can turn into an eagle? And a bear?"

"And an elephant," Hazel said proudly.

"An elephant." Percy shook his head in disbelief. "That's your family gift? You can change shape?"

Frank shuffled his feet. "Um...yeah. Periclymenus, my ancestor, the Argonaut—he could do that. He passed down the ability."

"And he got that gift from Poseidon," Percy said. "That's completely unfair. I can't turn into animals."

Frank stared at him. "Unfair? You can breathe underwater and blow up

glaciers and summon freaking hurricanes—and it's unfair that I can be an elephant?"

Percy considered. "Okay. I guess you got a point. But next time I say you're totally *beast*—"

"Just shut up," Frank said. "Please."

Percy cracked a smile.

"If you guys are done," Hazel said, "we need to go. Camp Jupiter is under attack. They could use that gold eagle."

Percy nodded. "One thing first, though. Hazel, there's about a ton of Imperial gold weapons and armor at the bottom of the bay now, plus a really nice chariot. I'm betting that stuff could come in handy...."

It took them a long time—too long—but they all knew those weapons could make the difference between victory and defeat if they got them back to camp in time.

Hazel used her abilities to levitate some items from the bottom of the sea. Percy swam down and brought up more. Even Frank helped by turning into a seal, which was kind of cool, though Percy claimed his breath smelled like fish.

It took all three of them to raise the chariot, but finally they'd managed to haul everything ashore to a black sand beach near the base of the glacier. They couldn't fit everything in the chariot, but they used Frank's rope to strap down most of the gold weapons and the best pieces of armor.

"It looks like Santa's sleigh," Frank said. "Can Arion even pull that much?"

Arion huffed.

"Hazel," Percy said, "I am seriously going to wash your horse's mouth with soap. He says, yes, he can pull it, but he needs food."

Hazel picked up an old Roman dagger, a *pugio*. It was bent and dull, so it wouldn't be much good in a fight, but it looked like solid Imperial gold.

"Here you go, Arion," she said. "High-performance fuel."

The horse took the dagger in his teeth and chewed it like an apple. Frank made a silent oath never to put his hand near that horse's mouth.

"I'm not doubting Arion's strength," he said carefully, "but will the chariot hold up? The last one—"

"This one has Imperial gold wheels and axle," Percy said. "It should hold."

"If not," Hazel said, "this is going to be a short trip. But we're out of time."

Come on!”

Frank and Percy climbed into the chariot. Hazel swung up onto Arion’s back.

“Giddyup!” she yelled.

The horse’s sonic boom echoed across the bay. They sped south, avalanches tumbling down the mountains as they passed.

PERCY

FOUR HOURS.

That's how long it took the fastest horse on the planet to get from Alaska to San Francisco Bay, heading straight over the water down the Northwest Coast.

That's also how long it took for Percy's memory to return completely. The process had started in Portland when he had drunk the gorgon's blood, but his past life had still been maddeningly fuzzy. Now, as they headed back into the Olympian gods' territory, Percy remembered everything: the war with Kronos, his sixteenth birthday at Camp Half-Blood, his trainer Chiron the centaur, his best friend Grover, his brother Tyson, and most of all Annabeth—two great months of dating, and then *BOOM*. He'd been abducted by the alien known as Hera. Or Juno...whatever.

Eight months of his life stolen. Next time Percy saw the Queen of Olympus, he was definitely going to give her a goddess-sized slap upside the head.

His friends and family must be going out of their minds. If Camp Jupiter was in such bad trouble, he could only guess what Camp Half-Blood must be facing without him.

Even worse: Saving both camps would be only the beginning. According to Alcyoneus, the *real* war would happen far away, in the homeland of the gods. The giants intended to attack the *original* Mount Olympus and destroy the gods forever.

Percy knew that giants couldn't die unless demigods and gods fought them together. Nico had told him that. Annabeth had mentioned it too, back in August, when she'd speculated that the giants might be part of the new Great Prophecy—what the Romans called the Prophecy of Seven. (That was the downside of dating the smartest girl at camp: You learn stuff.)

He understood Juno's plan: Unite the Roman and Greek demigods to create

an elite team of heroes, then somehow convince the gods to fight alongside them. But first, they had to save Camp Jupiter.

The coastline began to look familiar. They raced past the Mendocino lighthouse. Shortly afterward, Mount Tam and the Marin headlands loomed out of the fog. Arion shot straight under the Golden Gate Bridge into San Francisco Bay.

They tore through Berkeley and into the Oakland Hills. When they reached the hilltop above the Caldecott Tunnel, Arion shuddered like a broken car and came to a stop, his chest heaving.

Hazel patted his sides lovingly. “You did great, Arion.”

The horse was too tired even to cuss: *Of course I did great. What did you expect?*

Percy and Frank jumped off the chariot. Percy wished there’d been comfortable seats or an in-flight meal. His legs were wobbly. His joints were so stiff, he could barely walk. If he went into battle like this, the enemy would call him Old Man Jackson.

Frank didn’t look much better. He hobbled to the top of the hill and peered down at the camp. “Guys...you need to see this.”

When Percy and Hazel joined him, Percy’s heart sank. The battle had begun, and it wasn’t going well. The Twelfth Legion was arrayed on the Field of Mars, trying to protect the city. Scorpions fired into the ranks of the Earthborn. Hannibal the elephant plowed down monsters right and left, but the defenders were badly outnumbered.

On her pegasus Scipio, Reyna flew around the giant Polybotes, trying to keep him occupied. The Lares had formed shimmering purple lines against a mob of black, vaporous shades in ancient armor. Veteran demigods from the city had joined the battle, and were pushing their shield wall against an onslaught of wild centaurs. Giant eagles circled the battlefield, doing aerial combat with two snake-haired ladies in green Bargain Mart vests—Stheno and Euryale.

The legion itself was taking the brunt of the attack, but their formation was breaking. Each cohort was an island in a sea of enemies. The Cyclopes’ siege tower shot glowing green cannonballs into the city, blasting craters in the forum, reducing houses to ruins. As Percy watched, a cannonball hit the Senate House and the dome partially collapsed.

“We’re too late,” Hazel said.

“No,” Percy said. “They’re still fighting. We can do this.”

“Where’s Lupa?” Frank asked, desperation creeping into his voice. “She and the wolves...they should be here.”

Percy thought about his time with the wolf goddess. He’d come to respect her teachings, but he’d also learned that wolves had limits. They weren’t front-line fighters. They only attacked when they had vastly superior numbers, and usually under the cover of darkness. Besides, Lupa’s first rule was self-sufficiency. She would help her children as much as she could, train them to fight—but in the end, they were either predator or prey. Romans had to fight for themselves. They had to prove their worth or die. That was Lupa’s way.

“She did what she could,” Percy said. “She slowed down the army on its way south. Now it’s up to us. We’ve got to get the gold eagle and these weapons to the legion.”

“But Arion is out of steam!” Hazel said. “We can’t haul this stuff ourselves.”

“Maybe we don’t have to.” Percy scanned the hilltops. If Tyson had gotten his dream message in Vancouver, help might be close.

He whistled as loud as he could—a good New York cab whistle that would’ve been heard all the way from Times Square to Central Park.

Shadows rippled in the trees. A huge black shape bounded out of nowhere—a mastiff the size of an SUV, with a Cyclops and a harpy on her back.

“Hellhound!” Frank scrambled backward.

“It’s okay!” Percy grinned. “These are friends.”

“Brother!” Tyson climbed off and ran toward Percy. Percy tried to brace himself, but it was no good. Tyson slammed into him and smothered him in a hug. For a few seconds, Percy could only see black spots and lots of flannel. Then Tyson let go and laughed with delight, looking Percy over with that massive baby brown eye.

“You are not dead!” he said. “I like it when you are not dead!”

Ella fluttered to the ground and began preening her feathers. “Ella found a dog,” she announced. “A large dog. And a Cyclops.”

Was she blushing? Before Percy could decide, his black mastiff pounced on him, knocking Percy to the ground and barking so loudly that even Arion backed up.

“Hey, Mrs. O’Leary,” Percy said. “Yeah, I love you too, girl. Good dog.”

Hazel made a squeaking sound. “You have a hellhound named Mrs.

O’Leary?”“Long story.” Percy managed to get to his feet and wipe off the dog slobber. “You can ask your brother...”

His voice wavered when he saw Hazel’s expression. He’d almost forgotten that Nico di Angelo was missing.

Hazel had told him what Thanatos had said about searching for the Doors of Death in Rome, and Percy was anxious to find Nico for his own reasons—to wring the kid’s neck for having pretended he didn’t know Percy when he first came to camp. Still, he was Hazel’s brother, and finding him was a conversation for another time.

“Sorry,” he said. “But yeah, this is my dog, Mrs. O’Leary. Tyson—these are my friends, Frank and Hazel.”

Percy turned to Ella, who was counting all the barbs in one of her feathers.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “We were worried about you.”

“Ella is not strong,” she said. “Cyclopes are strong. Tyson found Ella. Tyson took care of Ella.”

Percy raised his eyebrows. Ella was blushing.

“Tyson,” he said, “you big charmer, you.”

Tyson turned the same color as Ella’s plumage. “Um...No.” He leaned down and whispered nervously, loud enough for all the others to hear: “She is pretty.”

Frank tapped his head like he was afraid his brain had short-circuited. “Anyway, there’s this battle happening.”

“Right,” Percy agreed. “Tyson, where’s Annabeth? Is any other help coming?”

Tyson pouted. His big brown eye got misty. “The big ship is not ready. Leo says tomorrow, maybe two days. Then they will come.”

“We don’t have two *minutes*,” Percy said. “Okay, here’s the plan.”

As quickly as possible, he pointed out which were the good guys and the bad guys on the battlefield. Tyson was alarmed to learn that bad Cyclopes and bad centaurs were in the giant’s army. “I have to hit pony-men?”

“Just scare them away,” Percy promised.

“Um, Percy?” Frank looked at Tyson with trepidation. “I just...don’t want our friend here getting hurt. Is Tyson a fighter?”

Percy smiled. “Is he a fighter? Frank, you’re looking at General Tyson of the Cyclopes army. And by the way, Tyson, Frank is a descendant of Poseidon.”

“Brother!” Tyson crushed Frank in a hug.

Percy stifled a laugh. “Actually he’s more like a great-great-...Oh, never mind. Yeah, he’s your brother.”

“Thanks,” Frank mumbled through a mouthful of flannel. “But if the legion mistakes Tyson for an enemy—”

” I’ve got it!” Hazel ran to the chariot and dug out the biggest Roman helmet she could find, plus an old Roman banner embroidered with SPQR.

She handed them to Tyson. “Put those on, big guy. Then our friends will know you’re on our team.”

“Yay!” Tyson said. “I’m on your team!”

The helmet was ridiculously small, and he put the cape on backward, like a SPQR baby bib.

“It’ll do,” Percy said. “Ella, just stay here. Stay safe.”

“Safe,” Ella repeated. “Ella likes being safe. Safety in numbers. Safety deposit boxes. Ella will go with Tyson.”

“What?” Percy said. “Oh...fine. Whatever. Just don’t get hurt. And Mrs. O’Leary—”

“ROOOOF!”

“How do you feel about pulling a chariot?”

PERCY

THEY WERE, WITHOUT A DOUBT, the strangest reinforcements in Roman military history. Hazel rode Arion, who had recovered enough to carry one person at normal horse speed, though he cursed about his aching hooves all the way downhill.

Frank transformed into a bald eagle—which Percy still found totally unfair—and soared above them. Tyson ran down the hill, waving his club and yelling, “Bad pony-men! BOO!” while Ella fluttered around him, reciting facts from the *Old Farmer’s Almanac*.

As for Percy, he rode Mrs. O’Leary into battle with a chariot full of Imperial gold equipment clanking and clink ing behind, the golden eagle standard of the Twelfth Legion raised high above him.

They skirted the perimeter of the camp and took the northernmost bridge over the Little Tiber, charging onto the Field of Mars at the western edge of the battle. A horde of Cyclopes was hammering away at the campers of the Fifth Cohort, who were trying to keep their shields locked just to stay alive.

Seeing them in trouble, Percy felt a surge of protective rage. These were the kids who’d taken him in. This was *his* family.

He shouted, “Fifth Cohort!” and slammed into the nearest Cyclops. The last things the poor monster saw were Mrs. O’Leary’s teeth.

After the Cyclops disintegrated—and *stayed* disintegrated, thanks to Death—Percy leaped off his hellhound and slashed wildly through the other monsters.

Tyson charged at the Cyclops leader, Ma Gasket, her chain-mail dress spattered with mud and decorated with broken spears.

She gawked at Tyson and started to say, “Who—?”

Tyson hit her in the head so hard, she spun in a circle and landed on her rump.

“Bad Cyclops Lady!” he bellowed. “General Tyson says GO AWAY!”

He hit her again, and Ma Gasket broke into dust.

Meanwhile Hazel charged around on Arion, slicing her *spatha* through one Cyclops after another, while Frank blinded the enemies with his talons.

Once every Cyclops within fifty yards had been reduced to ashes, Frank landed in front of his troops and transformed into a human. His centurion’s badge and Mural Crown gleamed on his winter jacket.

“Fifth Cohort!” he bellowed. “Get your Imperial gold weapons right here!”

The campers recovered from their shock and mobbed the chariot. Percy did his best to hand out equipment quickly.

“Let’s go, let’s go!” Dakota urged, grinning like a madman as he swigged red Kool-Aid from his flask. “Our comrades need help!”

Soon the Fifth Cohort was equipped with new weapons and shields and helmets. They weren’t exactly consistent. In fact they looked like they’d been shopping at a King Midas clearance sale. But they were suddenly the most powerful cohort in the legion.

“Follow the eagle!” Frank ordered. “To battle!”

The campers cheered. As Percy and Mrs. O’Leary charged onward, the entire cohort followed—forty extremely shiny gold-plated warriors screaming for blood.

They slammed into a herd of wild centaurs that were attacking the Third Cohort. When the campers of the Third saw the eagle standard, they shouted insanely and fought with renewed effort.

The centaurs didn’t stand a chance. The two cohorts crushed them like a vise. Soon there was nothing left but piles of dust and assorted hooves and horns. Percy hoped Chiron would forgive him, but these centaurs weren’t like the Party Ponies he’d met before. They were some other breed. They had to be defeated.

“Form ranks!” the centurions shouted. The two cohorts came together, their military training kicking in. Shields locked, they marched into battle against the Earthborn.

Frank shouted, “*Pila!*”

A hundred spears bristled. When Frank yelled, “Fire!” they sailed through the air—a wave of death cutting through the six-armed monsters. The campers drew swords and advanced toward the center of the battle.

At the base of the aqueduct, the First and Second Cohorts were trying to

encircle Polybotes, but they were taking a pounding. The remaining Earthborn threw barrage after barrage of stone and mud. *Karpoi* grain spirits—those horrible little piranha Cupids—were rushing through the tall grass abducting campers at random, pulling them away from the line. The giant himself kept shaking basilisks out of his hair. Every time one landed, the Romans panicked and ran. Judging from their corroded shields and the smoking plumes on their helmets, they'd already learned about the basilisks' poison and fire.

Reyna soared above the giant, diving in with her javelin whenever he turned his attention to the ground troops. Her purple cloak snapped in the wind. Her golden armor gleamed. Polybotes jabbed his trident and swung his weighted net, but Scipio was almost as nimble as Arion.

Then Reyna noticed the Fifth Cohort marching to their aid with the eagle. She was so stunned, the giant almost swatted her out of the air, but Scipio dodged. Reyna locked eyes with Percy and gave him a huge smile.

“Romans!” Her voice boomed across the fields. “Rally to the eagle!”

Demigods and monsters alike turned and gawked as Percy bounded forward on his hellhound.

“What is this?” Polybotes demanded. “*What is this?*”

Percy felt a rush of power coursing through the standard's staff. He raised the eagle and shouted, “Twelfth Legion Fulminata!”

Thunder shook the valley. The eagle let loose a blinding flash, and a thousand tendrils of lightning exploded from its golden wings—arcing in front of Percy like the branches of an enormous deadly tree, connecting with the nearest monsters, leaping from one to another, completely ignoring the Roman forces.

When the lightning stopped, the First and Second

Cohorts were facing one surprised-looking giant and several hundred smoking piles of ash. The enemy's center line had been charred to oblivion.

The look on Octavian's face was priceless. The centurion stared at Percy with shock, then outrage. Then, when his own troops started to cheer, he had no choice except to join the shouting: “Rome! Rome!”

The giant Polybotes backed up uncertainly, but Percy knew the battle wasn't over.

The Fourth Cohort was still surrounded by Cyclopes. Even Hannibal the elephant was having a hard time wading through so many monsters. His black

Kevlar armor was ripped so that his label just said ant.

The veterans and Lares on the eastern flank were being pushed toward the city. The monsters' siege tower was still hurling explosive green fireballs into the streets. The gorgons had disabled the giant eagles and now flew unchallenged over the giant's remaining centaurs and the Earthborn, trying to rally them.

"Stand your ground!" Stheno yelled. "I've got free samples!"

Polybotes bellowed. A dozen fresh basilisks fell out of his hair, turning the grass to poison yellow. "You think this changes anything, Percy Jackson? I cannot be destroyed! Come forward, son of Neptune. I will break you!"

Percy dismounted. He handed Dakota the standard. "You are the cohort's senior centurion. Take care of this." Dakota blinked, then he straightened with pride. He dropped his Kool-Aid flask and took the eagle. "I will carry it with honor."

"Frank, Hazel, Tyson," Percy said, "help the Fourth Cohort. I've got a giant to kill."

He raised Riptide, but before he could advance, horns blew in the northern hills. Another army appeared on the ridge—hundreds of warriors in black-and-gray camouflage, armed with spears and shields. Interspersed among their ranks were a dozen battle forklifts, their sharpened tines gleaming in the sunset and flaming bolts nocked in their crossbows.

"Amazons," Frank said. "Great."

Polybotes laughed. "You, see? Our reinforcements have arrived! Rome will fall today!"

The Amazons lowered their spears and charged down the hill. Their forklifts barreled into battle. The giant's army cheered—until the Amazons changed course and headed straight for the monsters' intact eastern flank.

"Amazons, forward!" On the largest forklift stood a girl who looked like an older version of Reyna, in black combat armor with a glittering gold belt around her waist.

"Queen Hylla!" said Hazel. "She survived!"

The Amazon queen shouted: "To my sister's aid! Destroy the monsters!"

"Destroy!" Her troops' cry echoed through the valley.

Reyna wheeled her pegasus toward Percy. Her eyes gleamed. Her expression said: *I could hug you right now*. She shouted, "Romans! Advance!"

The battlefield descended into absolute chaos. Amazon and Roman lines swung toward the enemy like the Doors of Death themselves.

But Percy had only one goal. He pointed at the giant.

“You. Me. To the finish.”

They met by the aqueduct, which had somehow survived the battle so far. Polybotes fixed that. He swiped his trident and smashed the nearest brick arch, unleashing a waterfall.

“Go on, then, son of Neptune!” Polybotes taunted. “Let me see your power! Does water do your bidding? Does it heal you? But I am born to oppose Neptune.”

The giant thrust his hand under the water. As the torrent passed through his fingers it turned dark green. He flung some at Percy, who instinctively deflected it with his will. The liquid splattered the ground in front of him. With a nasty hiss, the grass withered and smoked.

“My touch turns water to poison,” Polybotes said. “Let’s see what it does to your blood!”

He threw his net at Percy, but Percy rolled out of the way. He diverted the waterfall straight into the giant’s face. While Polybotes was blinded, Percy charged. He plunged Riptide into the giant’s belly then withdrew it and vaulted away, leaving the giant roaring in pain.

The strike would have dissolved any lesser monster, but Polybotes just staggered and looked down at the golden *ichor* —the blood of immortals— spilling from his wound. The cut was already closing.

“Good try, demigod,” he snarled. “But I will break you still.”

“Gotta catch me first,” Percy said.

He turned and bolted toward the city.

“What?” the giant yelled incredulously. “You run, coward? Stand still and die!”

Percy had no intention of doing that. He knew he couldn’t kill Polybotes alone. But he did have a plan.

He passed Mrs. O’Leary, who looked up curiously with a gorgon wriggling in her mouth.

“I’m fine!” Percy yelled as he ran by, followed by a giant screaming bloody murder.

He jumped over a burning scorpion and ducked as Hannibal threw a Cyclops across his path. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tyson pounding the Earthborn into the ground like a game of whack-a-mole. Ella was fluttering above him, dodging missiles and calling out advice: “The groin. The Earthborn’s groin is sensitive.”

SMASH!

“Good. Yes. Tyson found its groin.”

“Percy needs help?” Tyson called.

“I’m good!”

“Die!” Polybotes yelled, closing fast. Percy kept running.

In the distance, he saw Hazel and Arion galloping across the battlefield, cutting down centaurs and *karpoi*. One grain spirit yelled, “Wheat! I’ll give you wheat!” but Arion stomped him into a pile of breakfast cereal. Queen Hylla and Reyna joined forces, forklift and pegasus riding together, scattering the dark shades of fallen warriors. Frank turned himself into an elephant and stomped through some Cyclopes, and Dakota held the golden eagle high, blasting lightning at any monsters that dared to challenge the Fifth Cohort.

All that was great, but Percy needed a different kind of help. He needed a god.

He glanced back and saw the giant almost within arm’s reach. To buy some time, Percy ducked behind one of the aqueduct’s columns. The giant swung his trident. When the column crumbled, Percy used the unleashed water to guide the collapse—bringing down several tons of bricks on the giant’s head.

Percy bolted for the city limits.

“Terminus!” he yelled.

The nearest statue of the god was about sixty feet ahead. His stone eyes snapped open as Percy ran toward him.

“Completely unacceptable!” he complained. “Buildings on fire! Invaders! Get them out of here, Percy Jackson!”

“I’m trying,” he said. “But there’s this giant, Polybotes.”

“Yes, I know! Wait—Excuse me a moment.” Terminus closed his eyes in concentration. A flaming green cannonball sailed overhead and suddenly vaporized. “I can’t stop *all* the missiles,” Terminus complained. “Why can’t they be civilized and attack more slowly? I’m only one god.”

“Help me kill the giant,” Percy said, “and this will all be over. A god and

demigod working together—that’s the only way to kill him.”

Terminus sniffed. “I guard borders. I don’t kill giants. It’s not in my job description.”

“Terminus, come on!” Percy took another step forward, and the god shrieked indignantly.

“Stop right there, young man! No weapons inside the Pomerian Line!”

“But we’re under attack.”

“I don’t care! Rules are rules. When people don’t follow the rules, I get very, very angry.”

Percy smiled. “Hold that thought.”

He sprinted back toward the giant. “Hey, ugly!”

“Rarr!” Polybotes burst from the ruins of the aqueduct. The water was still pouring over him, turning to poison and creating a steaming marsh around his feet.

“You...you will die slowly,” the giant promised. He picked up his trident, now dripping with green venom.

All around them, the battle was winding down. As the last monsters were mopped up, Percy’s friends started gathering, forming a ring around the giant.

“I will take you prisoner, Percy Jackson,” Polybotes snarled. “I will torture you under the sea. Every day the water will heal you, and every day I will bring you closer to death.”

“Great offer,” Percy said. “But I think I’ll just kill you instead.”

Polybotes bellowed in rage. He shook his head, and more basilisks flew from his hair.

“Get back!” Frank warned.

Fresh chaos spread through the ranks. Hazel spurred Arion and put herself between the basilisks and the campers. Frank changed form—shrinking into something lean and furry...a weasel? Percy thought Frank had lost his mind, but when Frank charged the basilisks, they absolutely freaked out. They slithered away with Frank chasing after them in hot weasely pursuit.

Polybotes pointed his trident and ran toward Percy. As the giant reached the Pomerian Line, Percy jumped aside like a bullfighter. Polybotes barreled across the city limits.

“THAT’S IT!” Terminus cried. “That’s AGAINST THE RULES!”

Polybotes frowned, obviously confused that he was being told off by a statue. “What are you?” he growled. “Shut up!”

He pushed the statue over and turned back to Percy.

“Now I’m MAD!” Terminus shrieked. “I’m strangling you. Feel that? Those are my hands around your neck, you big bully. Get over here! I’m going to head-butt you so hard—”

“Enough!” The giant stepped on the statue and broke Terminus in three pieces—pedestal, body, and head.

“You DIDN’T!” shouted Terminus. “Percy Jackson, you’ve got yourself a deal! Let’s kill this upstart.”

The giant laughed so hard that he didn’t realize Percy was charging until it was too late. Percy jumped up, vaulting off the giant’s knee, and drove Riptide straight through one of the metal mouths on Polybotes’s breastplate, sinking the Celestial bronze hilt-deep in his chest. The giant stumbled backward, tripping over Terminus’s pedestal and crashing to the ground.

While he was trying to get up, clawing at the sword in his chest, Percy hefted the head of the statue.

“You’ll never win!” the giant groaned. “You cannot defeat me alone.”

“I’m not alone.” Percy raised the stone head above the giant’s face. “I’d like you to meet my friend Terminus. He’s a god!”

Too late, awareness and fear dawned in the giant’s face. Percy smashed the god’s head as hard as he could into the Polybotes’s nose, and the giant dissolved, crumbling into a steaming heap of seaweed, reptile skin, and poisonous muck.

Percy staggered away, completely exhausted.

“Ha!” said the head of Terminus. “That will teach *him* to obey the rules of Rome.”

For a moment, the battlefield was silent except for a few fires burning, and a few retreating monsters screaming in panic.

A ragged circle of Romans and Amazons stood around Percy. Tyson, Ella, and Mrs. O’Leary were there. Frank and Hazel were grinning at him with pride. Arion was nibbling contentedly on a golden shield.

The Romans began to chant, “Percy! Percy!”

They mobbed him. Before he knew it, they were raising him on a shield. The cry changed to, “Praetor! Praetor!”

Among the chanters was Reyna herself, who held up her hand and grasped

Percy's in congratulation. Then the mob of cheering Romans carried him around the Pomerian Line, carefully avoiding Terminus's borders, and escorted him back home to Camp Jupiter.

PERCY

THE FEAST OF FORTUNA HAD NOTHING to do with tuna, which was fine with Percy.

Campers, Amazons and Lares crowded the mess hall for a lavish dinner. Even the fauns were invited, since they'd helped out by bandaging the wounded after the battle. Wind nymphs zipped around the room, delivering orders of pizza, burgers, steaks, salads, Chinese food, and burritos, all flying at terminal velocity.

Despite the exhausting battle, everyone was in good spirits. Casualties had been light, and the few campers who'd previously died and come back to life, like Gwen, hadn't been taken to the Underworld. Maybe Thanatos had turned a blind eye. Or maybe Pluto had given those folks a pass, like he had for Hazel. Whatever the case, nobody complained.

Colorful Amazon and Roman banners hung side-by-side from the rafters. The restored golden eagle stood proudly behind the praetor's table, and the walls were decorated with cornucopias—magical horns of plenty that spilled out recycling waterfalls of fruit, chocolate, and fresh-baked cookies.

The cohorts mingled freely with the Amazons, jumping from couch to couch as they pleased, and for once the soldiers of the Fifth were welcome everywhere. Percy changed seats so many times, he lost track of his dinner.

There was a lot of flirting and arm-wrestling—which seemed to be the same thing for the Amazons. At one point Percy was cornered by Kinzie, the Amazon who'd disarmed him in Seattle. He had to explain that he already had a girlfriend. Fortunately Kinzie took it well. She told him what had happened after they'd left Seattle—how Hylla had defeated her challenger Otrera in two consecutive duels to the death, so that the Amazons were now calling their queen Hylla Twice-Kill.

“Otrera stayed dead the second time,” Kinzie said, batting her eyes. “We

have you to thank for that. If you ever need a new girlfriend...well, I think you'd look great in an iron collar and an orange jumpsuit."

Percy couldn't tell if she was kidding or not. He politely thanked her and changed seats.

Once everyone had eaten and the plates stopped flying, Reyna made a short speech. She formally welcomed the Amazons, thanking them for their help. Then she hugged her sister and everybody applauded.

Reyna raised her hands for quiet. "My sister and I haven't always seen eye to eye—"

Hylla laughed. "That's an understatement."

"She joined the Amazons," Reyna continued. "I joined Camp Jupiter. But looking around this room, I think we both made good choices. Strangely, our destinies were made possible by the hero you all just raised to praetor on the battlefield—Percy Jackson."

More cheering. The sisters raised their glasses to Percy and beckoned him forward.

Everybody asked for a speech, but Percy didn't know what to say. He protested that he really wasn't the best person for praetor, but the campers drowned him out with applause. Reyna took away his *probatio* neck plate. Octavian shot him a dirty look, then turned to the crowd and smiled like this was all his idea. He ripped open a teddy bear and pronounced good omens for the coming year—Fortuna would bless them! He passed his hand over Percy's arm and shouted: "Percy Jackson, son of Neptune, first year of service!"

The Roman symbols burned onto Percy's arm: a trident, SPQR, and a single stripe. It felt like someone was pressing a hot iron into his skin, but Percy managed not to scream.

Octavian embraced him and whispered, "I hope it hurt."

Then Reyna gave him an eagle medal and purple cloak, symbols of the praetor. "You earned these, Percy."

Queen Hylla pounded him on the back. "And I've decided not to kill you."

"Um, thanks," Percy said.

He made his way around the mess hall one more time, because all the campers wanted him at their table. Vitellius the Lar followed, stumbling over his shimmering purple toga and readjusting his sword, telling everyone how he'd predicted Percy's rise to greatness.

“I demanded he join the Fifth Cohort!” the ghost said proudly. “Spotted his talent right away!”

Don the faun popped up in a nurse’s hat, a stack of cookies in each hand. “Man, congrats and stuff! Awesome! Hey, do you have any spare change?”

All the attention embarrassed Percy, but he was happy to see how well Hazel and Frank were being treated. Everyone called them the saviors of Rome, and they deserved it. There was even talk about reinstating Frank’s great-grandfather, Shen Lun, to the legion’s roll of honor. Apparently he hadn’t caused the 1906 earthquake after all.

Percy sat for a while with Tyson and Ella, who were honored guests at Dakota’s table. Tyson kept calling for peanut-butter sandwiches, eating them as fast as the nymphs could deliver. Ella perched at his shoulder on top of the couch and nibbled furiously on cinnamon rolls.

“Cinnamon rolls are good for harpies,” she said. “June twenty-fourth is a good day. Roy Disney’s birthday, and Fortuna’s Feast, and Independence Day for Zanzibar. And Tyson.”

She glanced at Tyson, then blushed and looked away.

After dinner, the entire legion got the night off. Percy and his friends drifted down to the city, which wasn’t quite recovered from the battle, but the fires were out, most of the debris had been swept up, and the citizens were determined to celebrate.

At the Pomerian Line, the statue of Terminus wore a paper party hat.

“Welcome, praetor!” he said. “You need any giants’ faces smashed while you’re in town, just let me know.” “Thanks, Terminus,” Percy said. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Yes, good. Your praetor’s cape is an inch too low on the left. There—that’s better. Where is my assistant? Julia!”

The little girl ran out from behind the pedestal. She was wearing a green dress tonight, and her hair was still in pigtails. When she smiled, Percy saw that her front teeth were starting to come in. She held up a box full of party hats.

Percy tried to decline, but Julia gave him the big adoring eyes.

“Ah, sure,” he said. “I’ll take the blue crown.”

She offered Hazel a gold pirate hat. “I’m gonna be Percy Jackson when I grow up,” she told Hazel solemnly.

Hazel smiled and ruffled her hair. “That’s a good thing to be, Julia.”

“Although,” Frank said, picking out a hat shaped like a polar bear’s head, “Frank Zhang would be good too.”

“Frank!” Hazel said.

They put on their hats and continued to the forum, which was lit up with multicolored lanterns. The fountains glowed purple. The coffee shops were doing a brisk business, and street musicians filled the air with the sounds of guitar, lyre, panpipes, and armpit noises. (Percy didn’t get that last one. Maybe it was an old Roman musical tradition.)

The goddess Iris must’ve been in a party mood too. As Percy and his friends strolled past the damaged Senate House, a dazzling rainbow appeared in the night sky. Unfortunately the goddess sent another blessing, too—a gentle rain of gluten-free R.O.F.L. cupcake simulations, which Percy figured would either make cleaning up harder, or rebuilding easier. The cupcakes would make great bricks.

For a while, Percy wandered the streets with Hazel and Frank, who kept brushing shoulders.

Finally he said, “I’m a little tired, guys. You go ahead.”

Hazel and Frank protested, but Percy could tell they wanted some time alone.

As he headed back to camp, he saw Mrs. O’Leary playing with Hannibal in the Field of Mars. Finally, she’d found a playmate she could roughhouse with. They frolicked around, slamming into each other, breaking fortifications, and generally having an excellent time.

At the fort gates, Percy stopped and gazed across the valley. It seemed like so long ago that he’d stood here with Hazel, getting his first good view of camp. Now he was more interested in watching the eastern horizon.

Tomorrow, maybe the next day, his friends from Camp

Half-Blood would arrive. As much as he cared about Camp Jupiter, he couldn’t wait to see Annabeth again. He yearned for his old life—New York and Camp Half-Blood—but something told him it might be a while before he returned home. Gaea and the giants weren’t done causing trouble—not by a long shot.

Reyna had given him the second praetor’s house on the Via Principalis, but as soon as Percy looked inside, he knew he couldn’t stay there. It was nice, but it was also full of Jason Grace’s stuff. Percy already felt uneasy taking Jason’s title

of praetor. He didn't want to take the guy's house, too. Things would be awkward enough when Jason came back—and Percy was sure that he would be on that dragon-headed warship.

Percy headed back to the Fifth Cohort barracks and climbed into his bunk. He passed out instantly.

He dreamed he was carrying Juno across the Little Tiber.

She was disguised as a crazy old bag lady, smiling and singing an Ancient Greek lullaby as her leathery hands gripped Percy's neck.

"Do you still want to slap me, dear?" she asked.

Percy stopped midstream. He let go and dumped the goddess in the river.

The moment she hit the water, she vanished and reappeared on the shore. "Oh, my," she cackled, "that wasn't very heroic, even in a dream!"

"Eight months," Percy said. "You stole eight months of my life for a quest that took a week. Why?"

Juno tutted disapprovingly. "You mortals and your short lives. Eight months is nothing, my dear. I lost eight centuries once, missed most of the Byzantine Empire."

Percy summoned the power of the river. It swirled around him, spinning into a froth of whitewater.

"Now, now," Juno said. "Don't get testy. If we are to defeat Gaea, our plans must be timed perfectly. First, I needed Jason and his friends to free me from my prison—"

"Your prison? You were in prison and they let you out?"

"Don't sound so surprised, dear! I'm a sweet old woman. At any rate, you weren't needed at Camp Jupiter until *now*, to save the Romans at their moment of greatest crisis. The eight months between...well, I do have other plans brewing, my boy. Opposing Gaea, working behind Jupiter's back, protecting your friends—it's a full-time job! If I had to guard you from Gaea's monsters and schemes as well, and keep you hidden from your friends back east all that time—no, much better you take a safe nap. You would have been a distraction—a loose cannon."

"A distraction." Percy felt the water rising with his anger, spinning faster around him. "A loose cannon."

"Exactly. I'm glad you understand."

Percy sent a wave crashing down on the old woman, but Juno simply disappeared and materialized farther down the shore.

“My,” she said, “you *are* in a bad mood. But you know I’m right. Your timing here was perfect. They trust you now. You are a hero of Rome. And while you slept, Jason Grace has learned to trust the Greeks. They’ve had time to build the *Argo II*. Together, you and Jason will unite the camps.”

“Why me?” Percy demanded. “You and I never got along. Why would you want a loose cannon on your team?”

“Because I *know* you, Percy Jackson. In many ways, you are impulsive, but when it comes to your friends, you are as constant as a compass needle. You are unswervingly loyal, and you inspire loyalty. You are the glue that will unite the seven.”

“Great,” Percy said. “I always wanted to be glue.”

Juno laced her crooked fingers. “The Heroes of Olympus must unite! After your victory over Kronos in Manhattan...well, I fear that wounded Jupiter’s self-esteem.”

“Because I was right,” Percy said. “And he was wrong.”

The old lady shrugged. “He should be used to that, after so many eons married to me, but alas! My proud and obstinate husband refuses to ask mere demigods for help again. He believes the giants can be fought without you, and Gaea can be forced back to her slumbers. I know better. But you must prove yourself. Only by sailing to the ancient lands and closing the Doors of Death will you convince Jupiter that you are worthy of fighting side-by-side with the gods. It will be the greatest quest since Aeneas sailed from Troy!”

“And if we fail?” Percy said. “If Romans and Greeks don’t get along?”

“Then Gaea has already won. I’ll tell you this, Percy Jackson. The one who will cause you the most trouble is the one closest to you—the one who hates me most.”

“Annabeth?” Percy felt his anger rising again. “You never liked her. Now you’re calling her a troublemaker? You don’t know her at all. She’s the person I *most* want watching my back.”

The goddess smiled dryly. “We will see, young hero. She has a hard task ahead of her when you arrive in Rome. Whether she is up to it...I do not know.”

Percy summoned a fist of water and smashed it down at the old lady. When the wave receded, she was gone.

The river swirled out of Percy's control. He sank into the darkness of the whirlpool.

PERCY

THE NEXT MORNING, PERCY, HAZEL, AND FRANK ate break fast early, then headed into the city before the senate was due to convene. As Percy was a praetor now, he could go pretty much wherever he wanted, whenever he wanted.

On the way, they passed the stables, where Tyson and Mrs. O’Leary were sleeping in. Tyson snored on a bed of hay next to the unicorns, a blissful look on his face like he was dreaming of ponies. Mrs. O’Leary had rolled on her back and covered her ears with her paws. On the stable roof, Ella roosted in a pile of old Roman scrolls, her head tucked under her wings.

When they got to the forum, they sat by the fountains and watched the sun come up. The citizens were already busy sweeping up cupcake simulations, confetti, and party hats from last night’s celebration. The engineer corps was working on a new arch that would commemorate the victory over Polybotes.

Hazel said she’d even heard talk of a formal *triumph* for the three of them—a parade around the city followed by a week of games and celebrations—but Percy knew they’d never get the chance. They didn’t have time.

Percy told them about his dream of Juno.

Hazel frowned. “The gods were busy last night. Show him, Frank.”

Frank reached into his coat pocket. Percy thought he might bring out his piece of firewood, but instead he produced a thin paperback book and a note on red stationery.

“These were on my pillow this morning.” He passed them to Percy. “Like the Tooth Fairy visited.”

The book was *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu. Percy had never heard of it, but he could guess who sent it. The letter read: *Good job, kid. A real man’s best weapon is his mind. This was your mom’s favorite book. Give it a read. P.S.—I hope your friend Percy has learned some respect for me.*

“Wow.” Percy handed back the book. “Maybe Mars *is* different than Ares. I don’t think Ares can read.”

Frank flipped through the pages. “There’s a lot in here about sacrifice, knowing the cost of war. Back in Vancouver, Mars told me I’d have to put my duty ahead of my life or the entire war would go sideways. I thought he meant freeing Thanatos, but now...I don’t know. I’m still alive, so maybe the worst is yet to come.”

He glanced nervously at Percy, and Percy got the feeling Frank wasn’t telling him everything. He wondered if Mars had said something about *him*, but Percy wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

Besides, Frank had already given enough. He had watched his family home burn down. He’d lost his mother and his grandmother.

“You risked your life,” Percy said. “You were willing to burn up to save the quest. Mars can’t expect more than that.”

“Maybe,” Frank said doubtfully.

Hazel squeezed Frank’s hand.

They seemed more comfortable around each other this morning, not quite as nervous and awkward. Percy wondered if they’d started dating. He hoped so, but he decided it was better not to ask.

“Hazel, how about you?” Percy asked. “Any word from Pluto?”

She looked down. Several diamonds popped out of the ground at her feet. “No,” she admitted. “In a way, I think he sent a message through Thanatos. My name wasn’t on that list of escaped souls. It should have been.”

“You think your dad is giving you a pass?” Percy asked.

Hazel shrugged. “Pluto can’t visit me or even talk to me without acknowledging I’m alive. Then he’d have to enforce the laws of death and have Thanatos bring me back to the Underworld. I think my dad is turning a blind eye. I think—I think he wants me to find Nico.”

Percy glanced at the sunrise, hoping to see a warship descending from the sky. So far, nothing.

“We’ll find your brother,” Percy promised. “As soon as the ship gets here, we’ll sail for Rome.”

Hazel and Frank exchanged uneasy looks, like they’d already talked about this.

“Percy...” Frank said. “If you want us to come along, we’re in. But are you

sure? I mean...we know you've got tons of friends at the other camp. And you could pick anyone at Camp Jupiter now. If we're not part of the seven, we'd understand—"

"Are you kidding?" Percy said. "You think I'd leave my team behind? After surviving Fleecy's wheat germ, running from cannibals, and hiding under blue giant butts in Alaska? Come on!"

The tension broke. All three of them started cracking up, maybe a little too much, but it was a relief to be alive, with the warm sun shining, and not worrying—at least for the moment—about sinister faces appearing in the shadows of the hills.

Hazel took a deep breath. "The prophecy Ella gave us—about the child of wisdom, and the mark of Athena burning through Rome...do you know what that's about?"

Percy remembered his dream. Juno had warned that Annabeth had a difficult job ahead of her, and that she'd cause trouble for the quest. He couldn't believe that, but still...it worried him.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "I think there's more to the prophecy. Maybe Ella can remember the rest of it."

Frank slipped his book into his pocket. "We need to take her with us—I mean, for her own safety. If Octavian finds out Ella has the Sibylline Books memorized..."

Percy shuddered. Octavian used prophecies to keep his power at camp. Now that Percy had taken away his chance at praetor, Octavian would be looking for other ways to exert influence. If he got hold of Ella...

"You're right," Percy said. "We've got to protect her. I just hope we can convince her—"

"Percy!" Tyson came running across the forum, Ella fluttering behind him with a scroll in her talons. When they reached the fountain, Ella dropped the scroll in Percy's lap.

"Special delivery," she said. "From an aura. A wind spirit.

Yes, Ella got a special delivery."

"Good morning, brothers!" Tyson had hay in his hair and peanut butter in his teeth. "The scroll is from Leo. He is funny and small."

The scroll looked unremarkable, but when Percy spread it across his lap, a video recording flickered on the parchment. A kid in Greek armor grinned up at

them. He had an impish face, curly black hair, and wild eyes, like he'd just had several cups of coffee. He was sitting in a dark room with timber walls like a ship's cabin. Oil lamps swung back and forth on the ceiling.

Hazel stifled a scream.

"What?" Frank asked. "What's wrong?"

Slowly, Percy realized the curly-haired kid looked familiar—and not just from his dreams. He'd seen that face in an old photo.

"Hey!" said the guy in the video. "Greetings from your friends at Camp Half-Blood, et cetera. This is Leo. I'm the..." He looked off screen and yelled: "What's my title? Am I like admiral, or captain, or—"

A girl's voice yelled back, "Repair boy."

"Very funny, Piper," Leo grumbled. He turned back to the parchment screen. "So yeah, I'm ... ah ... supreme commander of the *Argo II*. Yeah, I like that! Anyway, we're gonna be sailing toward you in about, I dunno, an hour in this big mother warship. We'd appreciate it if you'd not, like, blow us out of the sky or anything. So okay! If you could tell the Romans that. See you soon. Yours in demigodishness, and all that. Peace out."

The parchment turned blank.

"It can't be," Hazel said.

"What?" Frank asked. "You know that guy?"

Hazel looked like she'd seen a ghost. Percy understood why. He remembered the photo in Hazel's abandoned house in Seward. The kid on the warship looked exactly like Hazel's old boyfriend.

"It's Sammy Valdez," she said. "But how...how—"

"It can't be," Percy said. "That guy's name is Leo. And it's been seventy-something years. It has to be a..."

He wanted to say *a coincidence*, but he couldn't make himself believe that. Over the past few years he'd seen a lot of things: destiny, prophecy, magic, monsters, fate. But he'd never yet run across a coincidence.

They were interrupted by horns blowing in the distance. The senators came marching into the forum with Reyna at the lead.

"It's meeting time," Percy said. "Come on. We've got to warn them about the warship."

"Why should we trust these Greeks?" Octavian was saying.

He'd been pacing the senate floor for five minutes, going on and on, trying to counter what Percy had told them about Juno's plan and the Prophecy of Seven.

The senate shifted restlessly, but most of them were too afraid to interrupt Octavian while he was on a roll. Meanwhile the sun climbed in the sky, shining through the broken senate roof and giving Octavian a natural spotlight.

The Senate House was packed. Queen Hylla, Frank, and Hazel sat in the front row with the senators. Veterans and ghosts filled the back rows. Even Tyson and Ella had been allowed to sit in the back. Tyson kept waving and grinning at Percy.

Percy and Reyna occupied matching praetors' chairs on the dais, which made Percy self-conscious. It wasn't easy looking dignified wearing a bed sheet and a purple cape.

"The camp is safe," Octavian continued. "I'll be the first to congratulate our heroes for bringing back the legion's eagle and so much Imperial gold! Truly we have been blessed with good fortune. But why do more? Why tempt fate?"

"I'm glad you asked." Percy stood, taking the question as an opening.

Octavian stammered, "I wasn't—"

"—part of the quest," Percy said. "Yes, I know. And you're wise to let me explain, since I was."

Some of the senators snickered. Octavian had no choice but to sit down and try not to look embarrassed.

"Gaea is waking," Percy said. "We've defeated two of her giants, but that's only the beginning. The real war will take place in the old land of the gods. The quest will take us to Rome, and eventually to Greece."

An uneasy ripple spread through the senate.

"I know, I know," Percy said. "You've always thought of the Greeks as your enemies. And there's a good reason for that. I think the gods have kept our two camps apart because whenever we meet, we fight. But that can change. It *has* to change if we're to defeat Gaea. That's what the Prophecy of Seven means. Seven demigods, Greek and Roman, will have to close the Doors of Death together."

"Ha!" shouted a Lar from the back row. "The last time a praetor tried to interpret the Prophecy of Seven, it was Michael Varus, who lost our eagle in Alaska! Why should we believe you now?"

Octavian smiled smugly. Some of his allies in the senate began nodding and

grumbling. Even some of the veterans looked uncertain.

“I carried Juno across the Tiber,” Percy reminded them, speaking as firmly as he could. “*She* told me that the Prophecy of Seven is coming to pass. Mars also appeared to you in person. Do you think two of your most important gods would appear at camp if the situation wasn’t serious?”

“He’s right,” Gwen said from the second row. “I, for one, trust Percy’s word. Greek or not, he restored the honor of the legion. You saw him on the battlefield last night. Would anyone here say he is not a true hero of Rome?”

Nobody argued. A few nodded in agreement.

Reyna stood. Percy watched her anxiously. Her opinion could change everything—for better or worse.

“You claim this is a combined quest,” she said. “You claim Juno intends for us to work with this—this other group, Camp

Half-Blood. Yet the Greeks have been our enemies for eons.

They are known for their deceptions.”

“Maybe so,” Percy said. “But enemies can become friends. A week ago, would you have thought Romans and Amazons would be fighting side by side?”

Queen Hylla laughed. “He’s got a point.”

“The demigods of Camp Half-Blood have *already* been working with Camp Jupiter,” Percy said. “We just didn’t realize it. During the Titan War last summer, while you were attacking Mount Othrys, we were defending Mount Olympus in Manhattan. I fought Kronos myself.”

Reyna backed up, almost tripping over her toga. “You... *what?*”

“I know it’s hard to believe,” Percy said. “But I think I’ve earned your trust. I’m on your side. Hazel and Frank—I’m sure they’re meant to go with me on this quest. The other four are on their way from Camp Half-Blood right now. One of them is Jason Grace, your old praetor.”

“Oh, come on!” Octavian shouted. “He’s making things up, now.”

Reyna frowned. “It is a lot to believe. Jason is coming back with a bunch of Greek demigods? You say they’re going to appear in the sky in a heavily armed warship, but we shouldn’t be worried.”

“Yes.” Percy looked over the rows of nervous, doubtful spectators. “Just let them land. Hear them out. Jason will backup everything I’m telling you. I swear it on my life.”

“On your life?” Octavian looked meaningfully at the senate. “We will

remember that, if this turns out to be a trick.”

Right on cue, a messenger rushed into the Senate House, gasping as if he’d run all the way from camp. “Praetors! I’m sorry to interrupt, but our scouts report—”

“Ship!” Tyson said happily, pointing at the hole in the ceiling. “Yay!”

Sure enough, a Greek warship appeared out of the clouds, about a half a mile away, descending toward the Senate House. As it got closer, Percy could see bronze shields glinting along the sides, billowing sails, and a familiar-looking figurehead shaped like a metal dragon. On the tallest mast, a big white flag of truce snapped in the wind.

The *Argo II*. It was the most incredible ship he’d ever seen.

“Praetors!” the messenger cried. “What are your orders?”

Octavian shot to his feet. “You need to ask?” His face was red with rage. He was strangling his teddy bear. “The omens are *horrible!* This is a trick, a deception. Beware Greeks bearing gifts!”

He jabbed a finger at Percy. “His *friends* are attacking in a warship. He has *led* them here. We must attack!”

“No,” Percy said firmly. “You all raised me as praetor for a reason. I will fight to defend this camp with my life. But these aren’t enemies. I say we stand ready, but do *not* attack. Let them land. Let them speak. If it is a trick, then I will fight with you, as I did last night. But it is *not* a trick.”

All eyes turned toward Reyna.

She studied the approaching warship. Her expression hardened. If she vetoed Percy’s orders...well, he didn’t know what would happen. Chaos and confusion, at the very least.

Most likely, the Romans would follow her lead. She’d been their leader much longer than Percy.

“Hold your fire,” Reyna said. “But have the legion stand ready. Percy Jackson is your duly chosen praetor. We will trust this word—unless we are given clear reason not to. Senators, let us adjourn to the forum and meet our... new friends.”

The senators stampeded out of the auditorium—whether from excitement or panic, Percy wasn’t sure. Tyson ran after them, yelling, “Yay! Yay!” with Ella fluttering around his head.

Octavian gave Percy a disgusted look, then threw down his teddy bear and

followed the crowd.

Reyna stood at Percy's shoulder.

"I support you, Percy," she said. "I trust your judgment. But for all our sakes, I hope we can keep the peace between our campers and your Greek friends."

"We will," he promised. "You'll see."

She glanced up at the warship. Her expression turned a little wistful. "You say Jason is aboard...I hope that's true.

I've missed him."

She marched outside, leaving Percy alone with Hazel and Frank.

"They're coming down right in the forum," Frank said nervously. "Terminus is going to have a heart attack."

"Percy," Hazel said, "you swore on your life. Romans take that seriously. If anything goes wrong, even by accident, Octavian is going to kill you. You know that, right?"

Percy smiled. He knew the stakes were high. He knew this day could go horribly wrong. But he also knew that Annabeth was on that ship. If things went *right*, this would be the best day of his life.

He threw one arm around Hazel and one arm around Frank.

"Come on," he said. "Let me introduce you to my *other* family."

Glossary

absurdus out of place, discordant

Achilles the mightiest of the Greek demigods who fought in the Trojan War

Aesculapius the Roman god of medicine and healing

Alcyoneus the eldest of the giants born to Gaea, destined to fight Pluto

Amazons a nation of all-female warriors

Anaklusmos Riptide. The name of Percy Jackson's sword.

argentum silver

Argonauts a band of Greek heroes who accompanied Jason on his quest to find the Golden Fleece. Their name comes from their ship, the *Argo*, which was named after its builder, Argus.

augury a sign of something coming, an omen; the practice of divining the future

aurae invisible wind spirits

aurum gold

basilisk snake, literally "little crown"

Bellerophon a Greek demigod, son of Poseidon, who defeated monsters while riding on Pegasus

Bellona the Roman goddess of war

Byzantium the eastern empire that lasted another 1,000 years after Rome fell, under Greek influence

Celestial bronze a rare metal deadly to monsters

Centaur a race of creatures that is half human, half horse

centurion an officer of the Roman army

Cerberus the three-headed dog that guards the gates of the Underworld

Ceres the Roman goddess of agriculture

Charon the ferryman of Hades who carries souls of the newly deceased across the rivers Styx and Acheron, which divide the world of the living from the world of the dead

cognomen third name

cohort a Roman military unit

Cyclops a member of a primordial race of giants (**Cyclopes**, pl.), each with a single eye in the middle of his or her forehead

denarius (**denarii**, pl.) the most common coin in the Roman currency system

drachma the silver coin of ancient Greece

Elysium the final resting place of the souls of the heroic and the virtuous in the Underworld

Erebos a place of darkness between Earth and Hades

faun a Roman forest god, part goat and part man. Greek form: satyr

Fields of Asphodel the section of the Underworld where the souls of people who lived lives of equal good and evil rest

Fields of Punishment the section of the Underworld where evil souls are eternally tortured

Fortuna the Roman goddess of fortune and good luck

Fulminata armed with lightning. A Roman legion under Julius Caesar whose emblem was a lightning bolt (*fulmen*).

Gaea the earth goddess; mother of Titans, giants, Cyclopes, and other monsters. Known to the Romans as Terra

Gegenes earthborn monsters

gladius a short sword

gorgons three monstrous sisters (Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa) who have hair of living, venomous snakes; Medusa's eyes can turn the beholder to stone

graecus Greek; enemy; outsider

greaves shin armor

gris-gris a voodoo amulet that protects from evil or brings luck

harpy a winged female creature that snatches things

Hercules the Roman equivalent of Heracles; the son of Jupiter and Alcmene, who was born with great strength

Hyperboreans peaceful northern giants

ichor the golden blood of immortals

Imperial gold a rare metal deadly to monsters, consecrated at the Pantheon; its existence was a closely guarded secret of the emperors

Iris the rainbow goddess

Juno Roman goddess of women, marriage, and fertility; sister and wife of

Jupiter; mother of Mars. Greek form: Hera

Jupiter Roman king of the gods; also called Jupiter Optimus Maximus (the best and the greatest). Greek form: Zeus

karpoi grain spirits

Laistrygonians tall cannibals from the north, possibly the source of the Sasquatch legend

Lar house god, ancestral spirit (**Lares**, pl.)

legion the major unit of the Roman army, consisting of infantry and cavalry troops

legionnaire a member of a legion

Liberalia a Roman festival that celebrated a boy's rite of passage into manhood

Lupa the sacred Roman she-wolf that nursed the foundling twins Romulus and Remus

Mars the Roman god of war; also called Mars Ultor. Patron of the empire; divine father of Romulus and Remus. Greek form: Ares

Minerva Roman goddess of wisdom. Greek form: Athena

Mist magic force that disguises things from mortals

Mount Othrys the base of the Titans during the ten-year war with the Olympian gods; Saturn's headquarters

muster formal military inspection

nebulae cloud nymphs

Neptune the Roman god of the sea. Greek form: Poseidon

Otrera first Amazon queen, daughter of Ares

pallium a cloak or mantle worn by the Romans

Pantheon a temple to all the gods of Ancient Rome

Penthesilea a queen of the Amazons; daughter of Ares and Otrera, another Amazon queen

Periclymenus a Greek prince of Pylos and a son of Poseidon, who granted him the ability to shape-shift. He was renowned for his strength and participated in the voyage of the Argonauts.

Phineas a son of Poseidon, who had the gift of prophecy. When he revealed too much of the plans of the gods, Zeus punished him by blinding him.

pilum a Roman spear

Pluto the Roman god of death and riches. Greek equivalent: Hades

Polybotes the giant son of Gaea, the Earth Mother

praetor an elected Roman magistrate and commander of the army

Priam the king of Troy during the Trojan War

principia the headquarters of a Roman camp

probatio testing period for a new recruit in a legion

pugio a Roman dagger

Queen Hippolyta's belt Hippolyta wore a golden waist belt, a gift from her father, Ares, that signified her Amazonian queenship and also gave her strength.

retiarius Roman gladiator who fought with a net and trident

River Styx the river that forms the boundary between Earth and the Underworld

Romulus and Remus the twin sons of Mars and the priestess Rhea Silvia who were thrown into the River Tiber by their human father, Amulius. They were rescued and raised by a she-wolf and, upon reaching adulthood, founded Rome.

Saturn the Roman god of agriculture, the son of Uranus and Gaea and the father of Jupiter. Greek equivalent: Kronos

scorpion ballista a Roman missile siege weapon that launched a large projectile at a distant target

Senatus Populusque Romanus (SPQR) "The Senate and People of Rome"; refers to the government of the Roman Republic and is used as an official emblem of Rome

shades spirits

Sibylline Books a collection of prophecies in rhyme written in Greek. Tarquinius Superbus, a king of Rome, bought them from a prophetess named Sibyl and consulted them in times of great danger.

spartus a skeleton warrior

spatha a cavalry sword

Stygian iron like Celestial bronze and Imperial gold, a magical metal capable of killing monsters

Tartarus husband of Gaea; spirit of the abyss; father of the giants; also the lowest region of the world

Terminus the Roman god of boundaries and landmarks

Thanatos the Greek god of death. Roman equivalent: Letus

Tiber River the third-longest river in Italy. Rome was founded on its banks. In ancient Rome, executed criminals were thrown into the river.

trireme a type of warship

triumph a ceremonial procession for Roman generals and their troops in celebration of a great military victory

Trojan War the war that was waged against the city of Troy by the Greeks after Paris of Troy took Helen from her husband, Menelaus, the king of Sparta. It started with a quarrel between the goddesses Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite.

Coming Fall 2012

The Heroes of Olympus, Book Three

THE MARK OF ATHENA

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—*Publishers Weekly*

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—*Booklist*

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—*School Library Journal*

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—*Horn Book*

About the Author

Rick Riordan is the author of the *New York Times* #1 bestselling The Heroes of Olympus, Book One: *The Lost Hero*; The Heroes of Olympus, Book Two: *The Son of Neptune*; the *New York Times* #1 best-selling The Kane Chronicles, Book One: *The Red Pyramid*; The Kane Chronicles, Book Two: *The Throne of Fire*; as well as the five books in the *New York Times* #1 best-selling Percy Jackson and the Olympians series. His previous novels for adults include the hugely popular TresNavarre series, winner of the top three awards in the mystery genre. He lives in San Antonio, Texas, with his wife and two sons. To learn more about Rick, visit his Web site at www.rickriordan.com.

THE HEROES



OF OLYMPUS

THE MARK OF ATHENA



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THE HEROES



OF OLYMPUS

THE MARK OF ATHENA

RICK RIORDAN

Disney • HYPERION BOOKS
NEW YORK

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to Seán Hemingway, curator of Greek and Roman antiquities at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, for helping me follow the Mark of Athena to its source.

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ISBN 978-1-4231-5516-4

Visit www.disneyhyperionbooks.com

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To Speedy

Strays and wanderers are often sent by the gods.

THE MARK OF
ATHENA

ANNABETH

UNTIL SHE MET THE EXPLODING STATUE, Annabeth thought she was prepared for anything.

She'd paced the deck of their flying warship, the *Argo II*, checking and double-checking the ballistae to make sure they were locked down. She confirmed that the white "We come in peace" flag was flying from the mast. She reviewed the plan with the rest of the crew—and the backup plan, and the backup plan for the backup plan.

Most important, she pulled aside their war-crazed chaperone, Coach Gleeson Hedge, and encouraged him to take the morning off in his cabin and watch reruns of mixed martial arts championships. The last thing they needed as they flew a magical Greek trireme into a potentially hostile Roman camp was a middle-aged satyr in gym clothes waving a club and yelling "Die!"

Everything seemed to be in order. Even that mysterious chill she'd been feeling since the ship launched had dissipated, at least for now.

The warship descended through the clouds, but Annabeth couldn't stop second-guessing herself. What if this was a bad idea? What if the Romans panicked and attacked them on sight?

The *Argo II* definitely did not look friendly. Two hundred feet long, with a

bronze-plated hull, mounted repeating crossbows fore and aft, a flaming metal dragon for a figurehead, and two rotating ballistae amidships that could fire explosive bolts powerful enough to blast through concrete...well, it wasn't the most appropriate ride for a meet-and-greet with the neighbors.

Annabeth had tried to give the Romans a heads-up. She'd asked Leo to send one of his special inventions—a holographic scroll—to alert their friends inside the camp. Hopefully the message had gotten through. Leo had wanted to paint a giant message on the bottom of the hull—*WASSUP?* with a smiley face—but Annabeth vetoed the idea. She wasn't sure the Romans had a sense of humor.

Too late to turn back now.

The clouds broke around their hull, revealing the gold-and-green carpet of the Oakland Hills below them. Annabeth gripped one of the bronze shields that lined the starboard rail.

Her three crewmates took their places.

On the stern quarterdeck, Leo rushed around like a madman, checking his gauges and wrestling levers. Most helmsmen would've been satisfied with a pilot's wheel or a tiller. Leo had also installed a keyboard, monitor, aviation controls from a Learjet, a dubstep soundboard, and motion-control sensors from a Nintendo Wii. He could turn the ship by pulling on the throttle, fire weapons by sampling an album, or raise sails by shaking his Wii controllers really fast. Even by demigod standards, Leo was seriously ADHD.

Piper paced back and forth between the mainmast and the ballistae, practicing her lines.

“Lower your weapons,” she murmured. “We just want to talk.”

Her charmspeak was so powerful, the words flowed over Annabeth, filling her with the desire to drop her dagger and have a nice long chat.

For a child of Aphrodite, Piper tried hard to play down her beauty. Today she was dressed in tattered jeans, worn-out sneakers, and a white tank top with pink Hello Kitty designs. (Maybe as a joke, though Annabeth could never be sure with Piper.) Her choppy brown hair was braided down the right side with an eagle's feather.

Then there was Piper's boyfriend—Jason. He stood at the bow on the raised

crossbow platform, where the Romans could easily spot him. His knuckles were white on the hilt of his golden sword. Otherwise he looked calm for a guy who was making himself a target. Over his jeans and orange Camp Half-Blood T-shirt, he'd donned a toga and a purple cloak—symbols of his old rank as praetor. With his wind-ruffled blond hair and his icy blue eyes, he looked ruggedly handsome and in control—just like a son of Jupiter should. He'd grown up at Camp Jupiter, so hopefully his familiar face would make the Romans hesitant to blow the ship out of the sky.

Annabeth tried to hide it, but she still didn't completely trust the guy. He acted too perfect—always following the rules, always doing the honorable thing. He even *looked* too perfect. In the back of her mind, she had a nagging thought: What if this is a trick and he betrays us? What if we sail into Camp Jupiter, and he says, *Hey, Romans! Check out these prisoners and this cool ship I brought you!*

Annabeth doubted that would happen. Still, she couldn't look at him without getting a bitter taste in her mouth. He'd been part of Hera's forced "exchange program" to introduce the two camps. Her Most Annoying Majesty, Queen of Olympus, had convinced the other gods that their two sets of children—Roman and Greek—had to combine forces to save the world from the evil goddess Gaea, who was awakening from the earth, and her horrible children the giants.

Without warning, Hera had plucked up Percy Jackson, Annabeth's boyfriend, wiped his memory, and sent him to the Roman camp. In exchange, the Greeks had gotten Jason. None of that was Jason's fault; but every time Annabeth saw him, she remembered how much she missed Percy.

Percy...who was somewhere below them right now.

Oh, gods. Panic welled up inside her. She forced it down. She couldn't afford to get overwhelmed.

I'm a child of Athena, she told herself. *I have to stick to my plan and not get distracted.*

She felt it again—that familiar shiver, as if a psychotic snowman had crept up behind her and was breathing down her neck. She turned, but no one was there.

Must be her nerves. Even in a world of gods and monsters, Annabeth couldn't

believe a new warship would be haunted. The *Argo II* was well protected. The Celestial bronze shields along the rail were enchanted to ward off monsters, and their onboard satyr, Coach Hedge, would have sniffed out any intruders.

Annabeth wished she could pray to her mother for guidance, but that wasn't possible now. Not after last month, when she'd had that horrible encounter with her mom and gotten the worst present of her life....

The cold pressed closer. She thought she heard a faint voice in the wind, laughing. Every muscle in her body tensed. Something was about to go terribly wrong.

She almost ordered Leo to reverse course. Then, in the valley below, horns sounded. The Romans had spotted them.

Annabeth thought she knew what to expect. Jason had described Camp Jupiter to her in great detail. Still, she had trouble believing her eyes. Ringed by the Oakland Hills, the valley was at least twice the size of Camp Half-Blood. A small river snaked around one side and curled toward the center like a capital letter *G*, emptying into a sparkling blue lake.

Directly below the ship, nestled at the edge of the lake, the city of New Rome gleamed in the sunlight. She recognized landmarks Jason had told her about—the hippodrome, the coliseum, the temples and parks, the neighborhood of Seven Hills with its winding streets, colorful villas, and flowering gardens.

She saw evidence of the Romans' recent battle with an army of monsters. The dome was cracked open on a building she guessed was the Senate House. The forum's broad plaza was pitted with craters. Some fountains and statues were in ruins.

Dozens of kids in togas were streaming out of the Senate House to get a better view of the *Argo II*. More Romans emerged from the shops and cafés, gawking and pointing as the ship descended.

About half a mile to the west, where the horns were blowing, a Roman fort stood on a hill. It looked just like the illustrations Annabeth had seen in military history books—with a defensive trench lined with spikes, high walls, and watchtowers armed with scorpion ballistae. Inside, perfect rows of white barracks lined the main road—the *Via Principalis*.

A column of demigods emerged from the gates, their armor and spears glinting as they hurried toward the city. In the midst of their ranks was an actual war elephant.

Annabeth wanted to land the *Argo II* before those troops arrived, but the ground was still several hundred feet below. She scanned the crowd, hoping to catch a glimpse of Percy.

Then something behind her went *BOOM!*

The explosion almost knocked her overboard. She whirled and found herself eye to eye with an angry statue.

“Unacceptable!” he shrieked.

Apparently he had exploded into existence, right there on the deck. Sulfurous yellow smoke rolled off his shoulders. Cinders popped around his curly hair. From the waist down, he was nothing but a square marble pedestal. From the waist up, he was a muscular human figure in a carved toga.

“I will *not* have weapons inside the Pomerian Line!” he announced in a fussy teacher voice. “I *certainly* will not have Greeks!”

Jason shot Annabeth a look that said, *I’ve got this.*

“Terminus,” he said. “It’s me. Jason Grace.”

“Oh, I remember *you*, Jason!” Terminus grumbled. “I thought you had better sense than to consort with the enemies of Rome!”

“But they’re not enemies—”

“That’s right,” Piper jumped in. “We just want to talk. If we could—”

“Ha!” snapped the statue. “Don’t try that charmspeak on *me*, young lady. And put down that dagger before I slap it out of your hands!”

Piper glanced at her bronze dagger, which she’d apparently forgotten she was holding. “Um...okay. But how would you slap it? You don’t have any arms.”

“Impertinence!” There was a sharp *POP* and a flash of yellow. Piper yelped and dropped the dagger, which was now smoking and sparking.

“Lucky for you I’ve just been through a battle,” Terminus announced. “If I were at full strength, I would’ve blasted this flying monstrosity out of the sky already!”

“Hold up.” Leo stepped forward, wagging his Wii controller. “Did you just call my ship a monstrosity? I *know* you didn’t do that.”

The idea that Leo might attack the statue with his gaming device was enough to snap Annabeth out of her shock.

“Let’s all calm down.” She raised her hands to show she had no weapons. “I take it you’re Terminus, the god of boundaries. Jason told me you protect the city of New Rome, right? I’m Annabeth Chase, daughter of—”

“Oh, I know who *you* are!” The statue glared at her with its blank white eyes. “A child of *Athena*, Minerva’s Greek form. Scandalous! You Greeks have no sense of decency. We Romans know the proper place for *that* goddess.”

Annabeth clenched her jaw. This statue wasn’t making it easy to be diplomatic. “What exactly do you mean, *that* goddess? And what’s so scandalous about—”

“Right!” Jason interrupted. “Anyway, Terminus, we’re here on a mission of peace. We’d love permission to land so we can—”

“Impossible!” the god squeaked. “Lay down your weapons and surrender! Leave my city immediately!”

“Which is it?” Leo asked. “Surrender, or leave?”

“Both!” Terminus said. “Surrender, then leave. I am slapping your face for asking such a stupid question, you ridiculous boy! Do you feel that?”

“Wow.” Leo studied Terminus with professional interest. “You’re wound up pretty tight. You got any gears in there that need loosening? I could take a look.”

He exchanged the Wii controller for a screwdriver from his magic tool belt and tapped the statue’s pedestal.

“Stop that!” Terminus insisted. Another small explosion made Leo drop his screwdriver. “Weapons are *not* allowed on Roman soil inside the Pomerian Line.”

“The what?” Piper asked.

“City limits,” Jason translated.

“And this entire ship is a weapon!” Terminus said. “You *cannot* land!”

Down in the valley, the legion reinforcements were halfway to the city. The crowd in the forum was over a hundred strong now. Annabeth scanned the faces

and...oh, gods. She saw him. He was walking toward the ship with his arms around two other kids like they were best buddies—a stout boy with a black buzz cut, and a girl wearing a Roman cavalry helmet. Percy looked so at ease, so happy. He wore a purple cape just like Jason’s—the mark of a praetor.

Annabeth’s heart did a gymnastics routine.

“Leo, stop the ship,” she ordered.

“What?”

“You heard me. Keep us right where we are.”

Leo pulled out his controller and yanked it upward. All ninety oars froze in place. The ship stopped sinking.

“Terminus,” Annabeth said, “there’s no rule against hovering *over* New Rome, is there?”

The statue frowned. “Well, no...”

“We can keep the ship aloft,” Annabeth said. “We’ll use a rope ladder to reach the forum. That way, the ship won’t be on Roman soil. Not technically.”

The statue seemed to ponder this. Annabeth wondered if he was scratching his chin with imaginary hands.

“I like technicalities,” he admitted. “Still...”

“All our weapons will stay aboard the ship,” Annabeth promised. “I assume the Romans—even those reinforcements marching toward us—will also have to honor your rules inside the Pomerian Line if you tell them to?”

“Of course!” Terminus said. “Do I look like I tolerate rule breakers?”

“Uh, Annabeth...” Leo said. “You sure this is a good idea?”

She closed her fists to keep them from shaking. That cold feeling was still there. It floated just behind her, and now that Terminus was no longer shouting and causing explosions, she thought she could hear the presence laughing, as if it was delighted by the bad choices she was making.

But Percy was down there...he was so close. She *had* to reach him.

“It’ll be fine,” she said. “No one will be armed. We can talk in peace. Terminus will make sure each side obeys the rules.” She looked at the marble statue. “Do we have an agreement?”

Terminus sniffed. “I suppose. For now. You may climb down your ladder to

New Rome, daughter of Athena. *Please* try not to destroy my town.”

ANNABETH

A SEA OF HASTILY ASSEMBLED demigods parted for Annabeth as she walked through the forum. Some looked tense, some nervous. Some were bandaged from their recent battle with the giants, but no one was armed. No one attacked.

Entire families had gathered to see the newcomers. Annabeth saw couples with babies, toddlers clinging to their parents' legs, even some elderly folks in a combination of Roman robes and modern clothes. Were all of them demigods? Annabeth suspected so, though she'd never seen a place like this. At Camp Half-Blood, most demigods were teens. If they survived long enough to graduate from high school, they either stayed on as counselors or left to start lives as best they could in the mortal world. Here, it was an entire multigenerational community.

At the far end of the crowd, Annabeth spotted Tyson the Cyclops and Percy's hellhound, Mrs. O'Leary—who had been the first scouting party from Camp Half-Blood to reach Camp Jupiter. They looked to be in good spirits. Tyson waved and grinned. He was wearing an SPQR banner like a giant bib.

Some part of Annabeth's mind registered how beautiful the city was—the smells from the bakeries, the gurgling fountains, the flowers blooming in the gardens. And the architecture...gods, the architecture—gilded marble columns, dazzling mosaics, monumental arches, and terraced villas.

In front of her, the demigods made way for a girl in full Roman armor and a purple cape. Dark hair tumbled across her shoulders. Her eyes were as black as obsidian.

Reyna.

Jason had described her well. Even without that, Annabeth would have singled her out as the leader. Medals decorated her armor. She carried herself with such confidence the other demigods backed away and averted their gaze.

Annabeth recognized something else in her face, too—in the hard set of her mouth and the deliberate way she raised her chin like she was ready to accept any challenge. Reyna was forcing a look of courage, while holding back a mixture of hopefulness and worry and fear that she couldn't show in public.

Annabeth knew that expression. She saw it every time she looked in a mirror.

The two girls considered each other. Annabeth's friends fanned out on either side. The Romans murmured Jason's name, staring at him in awe.

Then someone else appeared from the crowd, and Annabeth's vision tunneled.

Percy smiled at her—that sarcastic, troublemaker smile that had annoyed her for years but eventually had become endearing. His sea-green eyes were as gorgeous as she remembered. His dark hair was swept to one side, like he'd just come from a walk on the beach. He looked even better than he had six months ago—tanner and taller, leaner and more muscular.

Annabeth was too stunned to move. She felt that if she got any closer to him, all the molecules in her body might combust. She'd secretly had a crush on him since they were twelve years old. Last summer, she'd fallen for him hard. They'd been a happy couple for four months—and then he'd disappeared.

During their separation, something had happened to Annabeth's feelings. They'd grown painfully intense—like she'd been forced to withdraw from a life-saving medication. Now she wasn't sure which was more excruciating—living with that horrible absence, or being with him again.

The praetor Reyna straightened. With apparent reluctance, she turned toward Jason.

“Jason Grace, my former colleague...” She spoke the word *colleague* like it

was a dangerous thing. “I welcome you home. And these, your friends—”

Annabeth didn’t mean to, but she surged forward. Percy rushed toward her at the same time. The crowd tensed. Some reached for swords that weren’t there.

Percy threw his arms around her. They kissed, and for a moment nothing else mattered. An asteroid could have hit the planet and wiped out all life, and Annabeth wouldn’t have cared.

Percy smelled of ocean air. His lips were salty.

Seaweed Brain, she thought giddily.

Percy pulled away and studied her face. “Gods, I never thought—”

Annabeth grabbed his wrist and flipped him over her shoulder. He slammed into the stone pavement. Romans cried out. Some surged forward, but Reyna shouted, “Hold! Stand down!”

Annabeth put her knee on Percy’s chest. She pushed her forearm against his throat. She didn’t care what the Romans thought. A white-hot lump of anger expanded in her chest—a tumor of worry and bitterness that she’d been carrying around since last autumn.

“If you *ever* leave me again,” she said, her eyes stinging, “I swear to all the gods—”

Percy had the nerve to laugh. Suddenly the lump of heated emotions melted inside Annabeth.

“Consider me warned,” Percy said. “I missed you, too.”

Annabeth rose and helped him to his feet. She wanted to kiss him again so badly, but she managed to restrain herself.

Jason cleared his throat. “So, yeah....It’s good to be back.”

He introduced Reyna to Piper, who looked a little miffed that she hadn’t gotten to say the lines she’d been practicing, then to Leo, who grinned and flashed a peace sign.

“And this is Annabeth,” Jason said. “Uh, normally she doesn’t judo-flip people.”

Reyna’s eyes sparkled. “You sure you’re not a Roman, Annabeth? Or an Amazon?”

Annabeth didn’t know if that was a compliment, but she held out her hand. “I

only attack my boyfriend like that,” she promised. “Pleased to meet you.”

Reyna clasped her hand firmly. “It seems we have a lot to discuss. Centurions!”

A few of the Roman campers hustled forward—apparently the senior officers. Two kids appeared at Percy’s side, the same ones Annabeth had seen him chumming around with earlier. The burly Asian guy with the buzz cut was about fifteen. He was cute in a sort of oversized-cuddly-panda-bear way. The girl was younger, maybe thirteen, with amber eyes and chocolate skin and long curly hair. Her cavalry helmet was tucked under her arm.

Annabeth could tell from their body language that they felt close to Percy. They stood next to him protectively, like they’d already shared many adventures. She fought down a twinge of jealousy. Was it possible Percy and this girl...no. The chemistry between the three of them wasn’t like that. Annabeth had spent her whole life learning to read people. It was a survival skill. If she had to guess, she’d say the big Asian guy was the girl’s boyfriend, though she suspected they hadn’t been together long.

There was one thing she didn’t understand: what was the girl staring at? She kept frowning in Piper and Leo’s direction, like she recognized one of them and the memory was painful.

Meanwhile, Reyna was giving orders to her officers. “...tell the legion to stand down. Dakota, alert the spirits in the kitchen. Tell them to prepare a welcome feast. And, Octavian—”

“You’re letting these intruders into the *camp*?” A tall guy with stringy blond hair elbowed his way forward. “Reyna, the security risks—”

“We’re not taking them to the camp, Octavian.” Reyna flashed him a stern look. “We’ll eat here, in the forum.”

“Oh, *much* better,” Octavian grumbled. He seemed to be the only one who didn’t defer to Reyna as his superior, despite the fact that he was scrawny and pale and for some reason had three teddy bears hanging from his belt. “You want us to relax in the shadow of their warship.”

“These are our guests.” Reyna clipped off every word. “We will welcome them, and we will talk to them. As augur, you should burn an offering to thank

the gods for bringing Jason back to us safely.”

“Good idea,” Percy put in. “Go burn your bears, Octavian.”

Reyna looked like she was trying not to smile. “You have my orders. Go.”

The officers dispersed. Octavian shot Percy a look of absolute loathing. Then he gave Annabeth a suspicious once-over and stalked away.

Percy slipped his hand into Annabeth’s. “Don’t worry about Octavian,” he said. “Most of the Romans are good people—like Frank and Hazel here, and Reyna. We’ll be fine.”

Annabeth felt as if someone had draped a cold washcloth across her neck. She heard that whispering laughter again, as if the presence had followed her from the ship.

She looked up at the *Argo II*. Its massive bronze hull glittered in the sunlight. Part of her wanted to kidnap Percy right now, climb on board, and get out of here while they still could.

She couldn’t shake the feeling that something was about to go terribly wrong. And there was no way she would ever risk losing Percy again.

“We’ll be fine,” she repeated, trying to believe it.

“Excellent,” Reyna said. She turned to Jason, and Annabeth thought there was a hungry sort of gleam in her eyes. “Let’s talk, and we can have a proper reunion.”

ANNABETH

ANNABETH WISHED SHE HAD AN APPETITE, because the Romans knew how to eat.

Sets of couches and low tables were carted into the forum until it resembled a furniture showroom. Romans lounged in groups of ten or twenty, talking and laughing while wind spirits—*aurae*—swirled overhead, bringing an endless assortment of pizzas, sandwiches, chips, cold drinks, and fresh-baked cookies. Drifting through the crowd were purple ghosts—Lares—in togas and legionnaire armor. Around the edges of the feast, satyrs (no, *fauns*, Annabeth thought) trotted from table to table, panhandling for food and spare change. In the nearby fields, the war elephant frolicked with Mrs. O’Leary, and children played tag around the statues of Terminus that lined the city limits.

The whole scene was so familiar yet so completely alien that it gave Annabeth vertigo.

All she wanted to do was be with Percy—preferably alone. She knew she would have to wait. If their quest was going to succeed, they needed these Romans, which meant getting to know them and building some goodwill.

Reyna and a few of her officers (including the blond kid Octavian, freshly back from burning a teddy bear for the gods) sat with Annabeth and her crew. Percy joined them with his two new friends, Frank and Hazel.

As a tornado of food platters settled onto the table, Percy leaned over and whispered, “I want to show you around New Rome. Just you and me. The place is incredible.”

Annabeth should’ve felt thrilled. *Just you and me* was exactly what she wanted. Instead, resentment swelled in her throat. How could Percy talk so enthusiastically about this place? What about Camp Half-Blood—*their camp, their home?*

She tried not to stare at the new marks on Percy’s forearm—an SPQR tattoo like Jason’s. At Camp Half-Blood, demigods got bead necklaces to commemorate years of training. Here, the Romans burned a tattoo into your flesh, as if to say: *You belong to us. Permanently.*

She swallowed back some biting comments. “Okay. Sure.”

“I’ve been thinking,” he said nervously. “I had this idea—”

He stopped as Reyna called a toast to friendship.

After introductions all around, the Romans and Annabeth’s crew began exchanging stories. Jason explained how he’d arrived at Camp Half-Blood without his memory, and how he’d gone on a quest with Piper and Leo to rescue the goddess Hera (or Juno, take your pick—she was equally annoying in Greek or Roman) from imprisonment at the Wolf House in northern California.

“Impossible!” Octavian broke in. “That’s our most sacred place. If the giants had imprisoned a goddess there—”

“They would’ve destroyed her,” Piper said. “And blamed it on the Greeks, and started a war between the camps. Now, be quiet and let Jason finish.”

Octavian opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Annabeth really loved Piper’s charmspeak. She noticed Reyna looking back and forth between Jason and Piper, her brow creased, as if just beginning to realize the two of them were a couple.

“So,” Jason continued, “that’s how we found out about the earth goddess Gaea. She’s still half asleep, but she’s the one freeing the monsters from Tartarus and raising the giants. Porphyron, the big leader dude we fought at the Wolf House: he said he was retreating to the ancient lands—Greece itself. He plans on awakening Gaea and destroying the gods by...what did he call it?

Pulling up their roots.”

Percy nodded thoughtfully. “Gaea’s been busy over here, too. We had our own encounter with Queen Dirt Face.”

Percy recounted his side of the story. He talked about waking up at the Wolf House with no memories except for one name—*Annabeth*.

When she heard that, Annabeth had to try hard not to cry. Percy told them how he’d traveled to Alaska with Frank and Hazel—how they’d defeated the giant Alcyoneus, freed the death god Thanatos, and returned with the lost golden eagle standard of the Roman camp to repel an attack by the giants’ army.

When Percy had finished, Jason whistled appreciatively. “No wonder they made you praetor.”

Octavian snorted. “Which means we now have *three* praetors! The rules clearly state we can only have two!”

“On the bright side,” Percy said, “both Jason *and* I outrank you, Octavian. So we can *both* tell you to shut up.”

Octavian turned as purple as a Roman T-shirt. Jason gave Percy a fist bump. Even Reyna managed a smile, though her eyes were stormy.

“We’ll have to figure out the extra praetor problem later,” she said. “Right now we have more serious issues to deal with.”

“I’ll step aside for Jason,” Percy said easily. “It’s no biggie.”

“No *biggie*?” Octavian choked. “The praetorship of Rome is *no biggie*?”

Percy ignored him and turned to Jason. “You’re Thalia Grace’s brother, huh? Wow. You guys look nothing alike.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” Jason said. “Anyway, thanks for helping my camp while I was gone. You did an awesome job.”

“Back at you,” Percy said.

Annabeth kicked his shin. She hated to interrupt a budding bromance, but Reyna was right: they had serious things to discuss. “We should talk about the Great Prophecy. It sounds like the Romans are aware of it too?”

Reyna nodded. “We call it the Prophecy of Seven. Octavian, you have it committed to memory?”

“Of course,” he said. “But, Reyna—”

“Recite it, please. In English, not Latin.”

Octavian sighed. “*Seven half-bloods shall answer the call. To storm or fire the world must fall—*”

“*An oath to keep with a final breath,*” Annabeth continued. “*And foes bear arms to the Doors of Death.*”

Everyone stared at her—except for Leo, who had constructed a pinwheel out of aluminum foil taco wrappers and was sticking it into passing wind spirits.

Annabeth wasn’t sure why she had blurted out the lines of the prophecy. She’d just felt compelled.

The big kid, Frank, sat forward, staring at her in fascination, as if she’d grown a third eye. “Is it true you’re a child of Min—I mean, Athena?”

“Yes,” she said, suddenly feeling defensive. “Why is that such a surprise?”

Octavian scoffed. “If you’re truly a child of the *wisdom* goddess—”

“Enough,” Reyna snapped. “Annabeth is what she says. She’s here in peace. Besides...” She gave Annabeth a look of grudging respect. “Percy has spoken highly of you.”

The undertones in Reyna’s voice took Annabeth a moment to decipher. Percy looked down, suddenly interested in his cheeseburger.

Annabeth’s face felt hot. Oh, gods...Reyna had tried to make a move on Percy. That explained the tinge of bitterness, maybe even envy, in her words. Percy had turned her down for Annabeth.

At that moment, Annabeth forgave her ridiculous boyfriend for everything he’d ever done wrong. She wanted to throw her arms around him, but she commanded herself to stay cool.

“Uh, thanks,” she told Reyna. “At any rate, some of the prophecy is becoming clear. Foes bearing arms to the Doors of Death...that means Romans and Greeks. We have to combine forces to find those doors.”

Hazel, the girl with the cavalry helmet and the long curly hair, picked up something next to her plate. It looked like a large ruby; but before Annabeth could be sure, Hazel slipped it into the pocket of her denim shirt.

“My brother, Nico, went looking for the doors,” she said.

“Wait,” Annabeth said. “Nico di Angelo? He’s your brother?”

Hazel nodded as if this were obvious. A dozen more questions crowded into Annabeth's head, but it was already spinning like Leo's pinwheel. She decided to let the matter go. "Okay. You were saying?"

"He disappeared." Hazel moistened her lips. "I'm afraid...I'm not sure, but I think something's happened to him."

"We'll look for him," Percy promised. "We have to find the Doors of Death anyway. Thanatos told us we'd find both answers in Rome—like, the *original* Rome. That's on the way to Greece, right?"

"Thanatos told you this?" Annabeth tried to wrap her mind around *that* idea. "The death god?"

She'd met many gods. She'd even been to the Underworld; but Percy's story about freeing the incarnation of death itself really creeped her out.

Percy took a bite of his burger. "Now that Death is free, monsters will disintegrate and return to Tartarus again like they used to. But as long as the Doors of Death are open, they'll just keep coming back."

Piper twisted the feather in her hair. "Like water leaking through a dam," she suggested.

"Yeah." Percy smiled. "We've got a dam hole."

"What?" Piper asked.

"Nothing," he said. "Inside joke. The point is we'll have to find the doors and close them before we can head to Greece. It's the only way we'll stand a chance of defeating the giants and making sure they *stay* defeated."

Reyna plucked an apple from a passing fruit tray. She turned it in her fingers, studying the dark red surface. "You propose an expedition to Greece in your warship. You do realize that the ancient lands—and the Mare Nostrum—are dangerous?"

"Mary who?" Leo asked.

"Mare Nostrum," Jason explained. "*Our Sea*. It's what the Ancient Romans called the Mediterranean."

Reyna nodded. "The territory that was once the Roman Empire is not only the birthplace of the gods. It's also the ancestral home of the monsters, Titans and giants...and worse things. As dangerous as travel is for demigods here in

America, *there* it would be ten times worse.”

“You said Alaska would be bad,” Percy reminded her. “We survived that.”

Reyna shook her head. Her fingernails cut little crescents into the apple as she turned it. “Percy, traveling in the Mediterranean is a different level of danger altogether. It’s been off limits to Roman demigods for centuries. No hero in his right mind would go there.”

“Then we’re good!” Leo grinned over the top of his pinwheel. “Because we’re all crazy, right? Besides, the *Argo II* is a top-of-the-line warship. She’ll get us through.”

“We’ll have to hurry,” Jason added. “I don’t know exactly what the giants are planning, but Gaea is growing more conscious all the time. She’s invading dreams, appearing in weird places, summoning more and more powerful monsters. We have to stop the giants before they can wake her up fully.”

Annabeth shuddered. She’d had her own share of nightmares lately.

“*Seven half-bloods must answer the call,*” she said. “It needs to be a mix from both our camps. Jason, Piper, Leo, and me. That’s four.”

“And me,” Percy said. “Along with Hazel and Frank. That’s seven.”

“What?” Octavian shot to his feet. “We’re just supposed to *accept* that? Without a vote in the senate? Without a proper debate? Without—”

“Percy!” Tyson the Cyclops bounded toward them with Mrs. O’Leary at his heels. On the hellhound’s back sat the skinniest harpy Annabeth had ever seen—a sickly-looking girl with stringy red hair, a sackcloth dress, and red-feathered wings.

Annabeth didn’t know where the harpy had come from, but her heart warmed to see Tyson in his tattered flannel and denim with the backward SPQR banner across his chest. She’d had some pretty bad experiences with Cyclopes, but Tyson was a sweetheart. He was also Percy’s half brother (long story), which made him almost like family.

Tyson stopped by their couch and wrung his meaty hands. His big brown eye was full of concern. “Ella is scared,” he said.

“N-n-no more boats,” the harpy muttered to herself, picking furiously at her feathers. “*Titanic, Lusitania, Pax...*boats are not for harpies.”

Leo squinted. He looked at Hazel, who was seated next to him. “Did that chicken girl just compare *my* ship to the *Titanic*?”

“She’s not a chicken.” Hazel averted her eyes, as if Leo made her nervous. “Ella’s a harpy. She’s just a little...high-strung.”

“Ella is pretty,” Tyson said. “And scared. We need to take her away, but she will not go on the ship.”

“No ships,” Ella repeated. She looked straight at Annabeth. “Bad luck. There she is. Wisdom’s daughter walks alone—”

“Ella!” Frank stood suddenly. “Maybe it’s not the best time—”

“*The Mark of Athena burns through Rome,*” Ella continued, cupping her hands over her ears and raising her voice. “*Twins snuff out the angel’s breath, Who holds the key to endless death. Giants’ bane stands gold and pale, Won through pain from a woven jail.*”

The effect was like someone dropping a flash grenade on the table. Everyone stared at the harpy. No one spoke. Annabeth’s heart was pounding. *The Mark of Athena*...She resisted the urge to check her pocket, but she could feel the silver coin growing warmer—the cursed gift from her mother. *Follow the Mark of Athena. Avenge me.*

Around them, the sounds of the feast continued, but muted and distant, as if their little cluster of couches had slipped into a quieter dimension.

Percy was the first to recover. He stood and took Tyson’s arm.

“I know!” he said with feigned enthusiasm. “How about you take Ella to get some fresh air? You and Mrs. O’Leary—”

“Hold on.” Octavian gripped one of his teddy bears, strangling it with shaking hands. His eyes fixed on Ella. “What was that she said? It sounded like —”

“Ella reads a lot,” Frank blurted out. “We found her at a library.”

“Yes!” Hazel said. “Probably just something she read in a book.”

“Books,” Ella muttered helpfully. “Ella likes books.”

Now that she’d said her piece, the harpy seemed more relaxed. She sat cross-legged on Mrs. O’Leary’s back, preening her wings.

Annabeth gave Percy a curious glance. Obviously, he and Frank and Hazel

were hiding something. Just as obviously, Ella had recited a prophecy—a prophecy that concerned *her*.

Percy's expression said, *Help*.

"That was a prophecy," Octavian insisted. "It sounded like a prophecy."

No one answered.

Annabeth wasn't exactly sure what was going on, but she understood that Percy was on the verge of big trouble.

She forced a laugh. "Really, Octavian? Maybe harpies are different here, on the Roman side. Ours have just enough intelligence to clean cabins and cook lunches. Do yours usually foretell the future? Do you consult them for your auguries?"

Her words had the intended effect. The Roman officers laughed nervously. Some sized up Ella, then looked at Octavian and snorted. The idea of a chicken lady issuing prophecies was apparently just as ridiculous to Romans as it was to Greeks.

"I, uh..." Octavian dropped his teddy bear. "No, but—"

"She's just spouting lines from some book," Annabeth said, "like Hazel suggested. Besides, we already have a *real* prophecy to worry about."

She turned to Tyson. "Percy's right. Why don't you take Ella and Mrs. O'Leary and shadow-travel somewhere for a while. Is Ella okay with that?"

"Large dogs are good," Ella said. "*Old Yeller*, 1957, screenplay by Fred Gipson and William Tunberg."

Annabeth wasn't sure how to take that answer, but Percy smiled like the problem was solved.

"Great!" Percy said. "We'll Iris-message you guys when we're done and catch up with you later."

The Romans looked at Reyna, waiting for her ruling. Annabeth held her breath.

Reyna had an excellent poker face. She studied Ella, but Annabeth couldn't guess what she was thinking.

"Fine," the praetor said at last. "Go."

"Yay!" Tyson went around the couches and gave everyone a big hug—even

Octavian, who didn't look happy about it. Then he climbed on Mrs. O'Leary's back with Ella, and the hellhound bounded out of the forum. They dove straight into a shadow on the Senate House wall and disappeared.

"Well." Reyna set down her uneaten apple. "Octavian is right about one thing. We must gain the senate's approval before we let any of our legionnaires go on a quest—especially one as dangerous as you're suggesting."

"This whole thing smells of treachery," Octavian grumbled. "That trireme is not a ship of peace!"

"Come aboard, man," Leo offered. "I'll give you a tour. You can steer the boat, and if you're really good I'll give you a little paper captain's hat to wear."

Octavian's nostrils flared. "How dare you—"

"It's a good idea," Reyna said. "Octavian, go with him. See the ship. We'll convene a senate meeting in one hour."

"But..." Octavian stopped. Apparently he could tell from Reyna's expression that further arguing would not be good for his health. "Fine."

Leo got up. He turned to Annabeth, and his smile changed. It happened so quickly, Annabeth thought she'd imagined it; but just for a moment someone else seemed to be standing in Leo's place, smiling coldly with a cruel light in his eyes. Then Annabeth blinked, and Leo was just regular old Leo again, with his usual impish grin.

"Back soon," he promised. "This is gonna be epic."

A horrible chill settled over her. As Leo and Octavian headed for the rope ladder, she thought about calling them back—but how could she explain that? Tell everyone she was going crazy, seeing things and feeling cold?

The wind spirits began clearing the plates.

"Uh, Reyna," Jason said, "if you don't mind, I'd like to show Piper around before the senate meeting. She's never seen New Rome."

Reyna's expression hardened.

Annabeth wondered how Jason could be so dense. Was it possible he really didn't understand how much Reyna liked him? It was obvious enough to Annabeth. Asking to show his new girlfriend around Reyna's city was rubbing salt in a wound.

“Of course,” Reyna said coldly.

Percy took Annabeth’s hand. “Yeah, me, too. I’d like to show Annabeth—”

“No,” Reyna snapped.

Percy knit his eyebrows. “Sorry?”

“I’d like a few words with Annabeth,” Reyna said. “Alone. If you don’t mind, my fellow praetor.”

Her tone made it clear she wasn’t really asking permission.

The chill spread down Annabeth’s back. She wondered what Reyna was up to. Maybe the praetor didn’t like the idea of *two* guys who had rejected her giving their girlfriends tours of her city. Or maybe there was something she wanted to say in private. Either way, Annabeth was reluctant to be alone and unarmed with the Roman leader.

“Come, daughter of Athena.” Reyna rose from her couch. “Walk with me.”

ANNABETH

ANNABETH WANTED TO HATE NEW ROME. But as an aspiring architect, she couldn't help admiring the terraced gardens, the fountains and temples, the winding cobblestone streets and gleaming white villas. After the Titan War last summer, she'd gotten her dream job of redesigning the palaces of Mount Olympus. Now, walking through this miniature city, she kept thinking, *I should have made a dome like that. I love the way those columns lead into that courtyard.* Whoever designed New Rome had clearly poured a lot of time and love into the project.

"We have the best architects and builders in the world," Reyna said, as if reading her thoughts. "Rome always did, in the ancient times. Many demigods stay on to live here after their time in the legion. They go to our university. They settle down to raise families. Percy seemed interested in this fact."

Annabeth wondered what *that* meant. She must have scowled more fiercely than she realized, because Reyna laughed.

"You're a warrior, all right," the praetor said. "You've got fire in your eyes."

"Sorry." Annabeth tried to tone down the glare.

"Don't be. I'm the daughter of Bellona."

"Roman goddess of war?"

Reyna nodded. She turned and whistled like she was hailing a cab. A moment later, two metal dogs raced toward them—automaton greyhounds, one silver and one gold. They brushed against Reyna’s legs and regarded Annabeth with glistening ruby eyes.

“My pets,” Reyna explained. “Aurum and Argentum. You don’t mind if they walk with us?”

Again, Annabeth got the feeling it wasn’t really a request. She noted that the greyhounds had teeth like steel arrowheads. Maybe weapons weren’t allowed inside the city, but Reyna’s pets could still tear her to pieces if they chose.

Reyna led her to an outdoor café, where the waiter clearly knew her. He smiled and handed her a to-go cup, then offered one to Annabeth.

“Would you like some?” Reyna asked. “They make wonderful hot chocolate. Not really a Roman drink—”

“But chocolate is universal,” Annabeth said.

“Exactly.”

It was a warm June afternoon, but Annabeth accepted the cup with thanks. The two of them walked on, Reyna’s gold and silver dogs roaming nearby.

“In our camp,” Reyna said, “Athena is Minerva. Are you familiar with how her Roman form is different?”

Annabeth hadn’t really considered it before. She remembered the way Terminus had called Athena *that* goddess, as if she were scandalous. Octavian had acted like Annabeth’s very existence was an insult.

“I take it Minerva isn’t...uh, quite as respected here?”

Reyna blew steam from her cup. “We *respect* Minerva. She’s the goddess of crafts and wisdom...but she isn’t really a goddess of war. Not for Romans. She’s also a maiden goddess, like Diana...the one you call Artemis. You won’t find any children of Minerva here. The idea that Minerva would *have* children—frankly, it’s a little shocking to us.”

“Oh.” Annabeth felt her face flush. She didn’t want to get into the details of Athena’s children—how they were born straight from the mind of the goddess, just as Athena herself had sprung from the head of Zeus. Talking about that always made Annabeth feel self-conscious, like she was some sort of freak.

People usually asked her whether or not she had a belly button, since she had been born magically. *Of course* she had a belly button. She couldn't explain how. She didn't really want to know.

"I understand that you Greeks don't see things the same way," Reyna continued. "But Romans take vows of maidenhood very seriously. The Vestal Virgins, for instance...if they broke their vows and fell in love with anyone, they would be buried alive. So the idea that a maiden goddess would have children —"

"Got it." Annabeth's hot chocolate suddenly tasted like dust. No wonder the Romans had been giving her strange looks. "I'm not supposed to exist. And even if your camp *had* children of Minerva—"

"They wouldn't be like you," Reyna said. "They might be craftsmen, artists, maybe advisers, but not warriors. Not leaders of dangerous quests."

Annabeth started to object that she wasn't the leader of the quest. Not officially. But she wondered if her friends on the *Argo II* would agree. The past few days, they had been looking to her for orders—even Jason, who could have pulled rank as the son of Jupiter, and Coach Hedge, who didn't take orders from anyone.

"There's more." Reyna snapped her fingers, and her golden dog, Aurum, trotted over. The praetor stroked his ears. "The harpy Ella...it *was* a prophecy she spoke. We both know that, don't we?"

Annabeth swallowed. Something about Aurum's ruby eyes made her uneasy. She had heard that dogs could smell fear, even detect changes in a human's breathing and heartbeat. She didn't know if that applied to magical metal dogs, but she decided it would be better to tell the truth.

"It sounded like a prophecy," she admitted. "But I've never met Ella before today, and I've never heard those lines exactly."

"I have," Reyna murmured. "At least some of them—"

A few yards away, the silver dog barked. A group of children spilled out of a nearby alleyway and gathered around Argentum, petting the dog and laughing, unfazed by its razor-sharp teeth.

"We should move on," Reyna said.

They wound their way up the hill. The greyhounds followed, leaving the children behind. Annabeth kept glancing at Reyna's face. A vague memory started tugging at her—the way Reyna brushed her hair behind her ear, the silver ring she wore with the torch and sword design.

“We've met before,” Annabeth ventured. “You were younger, I think.”

Reyna gave her a dry smile. “Very good. Percy didn't remember me. Of course you spoke mostly with my older sister Hylla, who is now queen of the Amazons. She left just this morning, before you arrived. At any rate, when we last met, I was a mere handmaiden in the house of Circe.”

“Circe...” Annabeth remembered her trip to the island of the sorceress. She'd been thirteen. Percy and she had washed ashore from the Sea of Monsters. Hylla had welcomed them. She had helped Annabeth get cleaned up and given her a beautiful new dress and a complete makeover. Then Circe had made her sales pitch: if Annabeth stayed on the island, she could have magical training and incredible power. Annabeth had been tempted, maybe just a little, until she realized the place was a trap, and Percy had been turned into a rodent. (That last part seemed funny afterward; but at the time, it had been terrifying.) As for Reyna...she'd been one of the servants who had combed Annabeth's hair.

“You...” Annabeth said in amazement. “And Hylla is queen of the Amazons? How did you two—?”

“Long story,” Reyna said. “But I remember you well. You were brave. I'd never seen anyone refuse Circe's hospitality, much less outwit her. It's no wonder Percy cares for you.”

Her voice was wistful. Annabeth thought it might be safer not to respond.

They reached the top of the hill, where a terrace overlooked the entire valley.

“This is my favorite spot,” Reyna said. “The Garden of Bacchus.”

Grapevine trellises made a canopy overhead. Bees buzzed through honeysuckle and jasmine, which filled the afternoon air with a dizzying mix of perfumes. In the middle of the terrace stood a statue of Bacchus in a sort of ballet position, wearing nothing but a loincloth, his cheeks puffed out and lips pursed, spouting water into a fountain.

Despite her worries, Annabeth almost laughed. She knew the god in his

Greek form, Dionysus—or Mr. D, as they called him back at Camp Half-Blood. Seeing their cranky old camp director immortalized in stone, wearing a diaper and spewing water from his mouth, made her feel a little better.

Reyna stopped at the edge of the terrace. The view was worth the climb. The whole city spread out below them like a 3-D mosaic. To the south, beyond the lake, a cluster of temples perched on a hill. To the north, an aqueduct marched toward the Berkeley Hills. Work crews were repairing a broken section, probably damaged in the recent battle.

“I wanted to hear it from you,” Reyna said.

Annabeth turned. “Hear *what* from me?”

“The truth,” Reyna said. “Convince me that I’m not making a mistake by trusting you. Tell me about yourself. Tell me about Camp Half-Blood. Your friend Piper has sorcery in her words. I spent enough time with Circe to know charmspeak when I hear it. I can’t trust what she says. And Jason...well, he has changed. He seems distant, no longer quite Roman.”

The hurt in her voice was as sharp as broken glass. Annabeth wondered if *she* had sounded that way, all the months she’d spent searching for Percy. At least she’d found her boyfriend. Reyna had no one. She was responsible for running an entire camp all by herself. Annabeth could sense that Reyna wanted Jason to love her. But he had disappeared, only to come back with a new girlfriend. Meanwhile, Percy had risen to praetor, but he had rebuffed Reyna too. Now Annabeth had come to take him away. Reyna would be left alone again, shouldering a job meant for two people.

When Annabeth had arrived at Camp Jupiter, she’d been prepared to negotiate with Reyna or even fight her if needed. She hadn’t been prepared to feel sorry for her.

She kept that feeling hidden. Reyna didn’t strike her as someone who would appreciate pity.

Instead, she told Reyna about her own life. She talked about her dad and stepmom and her two stepbrothers in San Francisco, and how she had felt like an outsider in her own family. She talked about how she had run away when she was only seven, finding her friends Luke and Thalia and making her way to

Camp Half-Blood on Long Island. She described the camp and her years growing up there. She talked about meeting Percy and the adventures they'd had together.

Reyna was a good listener.

Annabeth was tempted to tell her about more recent problems: her fight with her mom, the gift of the silver coin, and the nightmares she'd been having—about an old fear so paralyzing, she'd almost decided that she couldn't go on this quest. But she couldn't bring herself to open up quite that much.

When Annabeth was done talking, Reyna gazed over New Rome. Her metal greyhounds sniffed around the garden, snapping at bees in the honeysuckle. Finally Reyna pointed to the cluster of temples on the distant hill.

"The small red building," she said, "there on the northern side? That's the temple of my mother, Bellona." Reyna turned toward Annabeth. "Unlike your mother, Bellona has no Greek equivalent. She is fully, truly Roman. She's the goddess of protecting the homeland."

Annabeth said nothing. She knew very little about the Roman goddess. She wished she had studied up, but Latin never came as easily to her as Greek. Down below, the hull of the *Argo II* gleamed as it floated over the forum, like some massive bronze party balloon.

"When the Romans go to war," Reyna continued, "we first visit the Temple of Bellona. Inside is a symbolic patch of ground that represents enemy soil. We throw a spear into that ground, indicating that we are now at war. You see, Romans have always believed that offense is the best defense. In ancient times, whenever our ancestors felt threatened by their neighbors, they would invade to protect themselves."

"They conquered everyone around them," Annabeth said. "Carthage, the Gauls—"

"And the Greeks." Reyna let that comment hang. "My point, Annabeth, is that it isn't Rome's nature to cooperate with other powers. Every time Greek and Roman demigods have met, we've fought. Conflicts between our two sides have started some of the most horrible wars in human history—especially civil wars."

"It doesn't have to be that way," Annabeth said. "We've got to work together,

or Gaea will destroy us both.”

“I agree,” Reyna said. “But is cooperation possible? What if Juno’s plan is flawed? Even goddesses can make mistakes.”

Annabeth waited for Reyna to get struck by lightning or turned into a peacock. Nothing happened.

Unfortunately, Annabeth shared Reyna’s doubts. Hera *did* make mistakes. Annabeth had had nothing but trouble from that overbearing goddess, and she’d never forgive Hera for taking Percy away, even if it was for a noble cause.

“I don’t trust the goddess,” Annabeth admitted. “But I do trust my friends. This isn’t a trick, Reyna. We *can* work together.”

Reyna finished her cup of chocolate. She set the cup on the terrace railing and gazed over the valley as if imagining battle lines.

“I believe you mean it,” she said. “But if you go to the ancient lands, especially Rome itself, there is something you should know about your mother.”

Annabeth’s shoulders tensed. “My—my mother?”

“When I lived on Circe’s island,” Reyna said, “we had many visitors. Once, perhaps a year before you and Percy arrived, a young man washed ashore. He was half mad from thirst and heat. He’d been drifting at sea for days. His words didn’t make much sense, but he said he was a son of Athena.”

Reyna paused as if waiting for a reaction. Annabeth had no idea who the boy might have been. She wasn’t aware of any other Athena kids who’d gone on a quest in the Sea of Monsters, but still she felt a sense of dread. The light filtering through the grapevines made shadows writhe across the ground like a swarm of bugs.

“What happened to this demigod?” she asked.

Reyna waved her hand as if the question was trivial. “Circe turned him into a guinea pig, of course. He made quite a crazy little rodent. But *before* that, he kept raving about his failed quest. He claimed that he’d gone to Rome, following the Mark of Athena.”

Annabeth grabbed the railing to keep her balance.

“Yes,” Reyna said, seeing her discomfort. “He kept muttering about wisdom’s child, the Mark of Athena, and the giants’ bane standing pale and

gold. The same lines Ella was just reciting. But you say that you've never heard them before today?"

"Not—not the way Ella said them." Annabeth's voice was weak. She wasn't lying. She'd never heard that prophecy, but her mother had charged her with following the Mark of Athena; and as she thought about the coin in her pocket, a horrible suspicion began taking root in her mind. She remembered her mother's scathing words. She thought about the strange nightmares she'd been having lately. "Did this demigod—did he explain his quest?"

Reyna shook her head. "At the time, I had no idea what he was talking about. Much later, when I became praetor of Camp Jupiter, I began to suspect."

"Suspect...what?"

"There is an old legend that the praetors of Camp Jupiter have passed down through the centuries. If it's true, it may explain why our two groups of demigods have never been able to work together. It may be the cause of our animosity. Until this old score is finally settled, so the legend goes, Romans and Greeks will never be at peace. And the legend centers on Athena—"

A shrill sound pierced the air. Light flashed in the corner of Annabeth's eye.

She turned in time to see an explosion blast a new crater in the forum. A burning couch tumbled through the air. Demigods scattered in panic.

"Giants?" Annabeth reached for her dagger, which of course wasn't there. "I thought their army was defeated!"

"It isn't the giants." Reyna's eyes seethed with rage. "You've betrayed our trust."

"What? No!"

As soon as she said it, the *Argo II* launched a second volley. Its port ballista fired a massive spear wreathed in Greek fire, which sailed straight through the broken dome of the Senate House and exploded inside, lighting up the building like a jack-o'-lantern. If anyone had been in there...

"Gods, no." A wave of nausea almost made Annabeth's knees buckle. "Reyna, it isn't possible. We'd never do this!"

The metal dogs ran to their mistress's side. They snarled at Annabeth but paced uncertainly, as if reluctant to attack.

“You’re telling the truth,” Reyna judged. “Perhaps you were not aware of this treachery, but *someone* must pay.”

Down in the forum, chaos was spreading. Crowds were pushing and shoving. Fistfights were breaking out.

“Bloodshed,” Reyna said.

“We have to stop it!”

Annabeth had a horrible feeling this might be the last time Reyna and she ever acted in agreement, but together they ran down the hill.

If weapons had been allowed in the city, Annabeth’s friends would have already been dead. The Roman demigods in the forum had coalesced into an angry mob. Some threw plates, food, and rocks at the *Argo II*, which was pointless, as most of the stuff fell back into the crowd.

Several dozen Romans had surrounded Piper and Jason, who were trying to calm them without much luck. Piper’s charmspeak was useless against so many screaming, angry demigods. Jason’s forehead was bleeding. His purple cloak had been ripped to shreds. He kept pleading, “I’m on your side!” but his orange Camp Half-Blood T-shirt didn’t help matters—nor did the warship overhead, firing flaming spears into New Rome. One landed nearby and blasted a toga shop to rubble.

“Pluto’s pauldrons,” Reyna cursed. “Look.”

Armed legionnaires were hurrying toward the forum. Two artillery crews had set up catapults just outside the Pomerian Line and were preparing to fire at the *Argo II*.

“That’ll just make things worse,” Annabeth said.

“I hate my job,” Reyna growled. She rushed off toward the legionnaires, her dogs at her side.

Percy, Annabeth thought, scanning the forum desperately. *Where are you?*

Two Romans tried to grab her. She ducked past them, plunging into the crowd. As if the angry Romans, burning couches, and exploding buildings weren’t confusing enough, hundreds of purple ghosts drifted through the forum, passing straight through the demigods’ bodies and wailing incoherently. The

fauns had also taken advantage of the chaos. They swarmed the dining tables, grabbing food, plates, and cups. One trotted by Annabeth with his arms full of tacos and an entire pineapple between his teeth.

A statue of Terminus exploded into being, right in front of Annabeth. He yelled at her in Latin, no doubt calling her a liar and a rule breaker; but she pushed the statue over and kept running.

Finally she spotted Percy. He and his friends, Hazel and Frank, were standing in the middle of a fountain as Percy repelled the angry Romans with blasts of water. Percy's toga was in tatters, but he looked unhurt.

Annabeth called to him as another explosion rocked the forum. This time the flash of light was directly overhead. One of the Roman catapults had fired, and the *Argo II* groaned and tilted sideways, flames bubbling over its bronze-plated hull.

Annabeth noticed a figure clinging desperately to the rope ladder, trying to climb down. It was Octavian, his robes steaming and his face black with soot.

Over by the fountain, Percy blasted the Roman mob with more water. Annabeth ran toward him, ducking a Roman fist and a flying plate of sandwiches.

"Annabeth!" Percy called. "What—?"

"I don't know!" she yelled.

"I'll tell you what!" cried a voice from above. Octavian had reached the bottom of the ladder. "The Greeks have *fired* on us! Your boy Leo has trained his weapons on Rome!"

Annabeth's chest filled with liquid hydrogen. She felt like she might shatter into a million frozen pieces.

"You're lying," she said. "Leo would never—"

"I was just there!" Octavian shrieked. "I saw it with my own eyes!"

The *Argo II* returned fire. Legionnaires in the field scattered as one of their catapults was blasted to splinters.

"You see?" Octavian screamed. "Romans, kill the invaders!"

Annabeth growled in frustration. There was no time for anyone to figure out the truth. The crew from Camp Half-Blood was outnumbered a hundred to one,

and even if Octavian had managed to stage some sort of trick (which she thought likely), they'd never be able to convince the Romans before they were overrun and killed.

"We have to leave," she told Percy. "Now."

He nodded grimly. "Hazel, Frank, you've got to make a choice. Are you coming?"

Hazel looked terrified, but she donned her cavalry helmet. "Of course we are. But you'll never make it to the ship unless we buy you some time."

"How?" Annabeth asked.

Hazel whistled. Instantly a blur of beige shot across the forum. A majestic horse materialized next to the fountain. He reared, whinnying and scattering the mob. Hazel climbed on his back like she'd been born to ride. Strapped to the horse's saddle was a Roman cavalry sword.

Hazel unsheathed her golden blade. "Send me an Iris-message when you're safely away, and we'll rendezvous," she said. "Arion, ride!"

The horse zipped through the crowd with incredible speed, pushing back Romans and causing mass panic.

Annabeth felt a glimmer of hope. Maybe they could make it out of here alive. Then, from halfway across the forum, she heard Jason shouting.

"Romans!" he cried. "Please!"

He and Piper were being pelted with plates and stones. Jason tried to shield Piper, but a brick caught him above the eye. He crumpled, and the crowd surged forward.

"Get back!" Piper screamed. Her charmspeak rolled over the mob, making them hesitate, but Annabeth knew the effect wouldn't last. Percy and she couldn't possibly reach them in time to help.

"Frank," Percy said, "it's up to you. Can you help them?"

Annabeth didn't understand how Frank could do that all by himself, but he swallowed nervously.

"Oh, gods," he murmured. "Okay, sure. Just get up the ropes. Now."

Percy and Annabeth lunged for the ladder. Octavian was still clinging to the bottom, but Percy yanked him off and threw him into the mob.

They began to climb as armed legionnaires flooded into the forum. Arrows whistled past Annabeth's head. An explosion almost knocked her off the ladder. Halfway up, she heard a roar below and glanced down.

Romans screamed and scattered as a full-sized dragon charged through the forum—a beast even scarier than the bronze dragon figurehead on the *Argo II*. It had rough gray skin like a Komodo lizard's and leathery bat wings. Arrows and rocks bounced harmlessly off its hide as it lumbered toward Piper and Jason, grabbed them with its front claws, and vaulted into the air.

"Is that...?" Annabeth couldn't even put the thought into words.

"Frank," Percy confirmed, a few feet above her. "He has a few special talents."

"Understatement," Annabeth muttered. "Keep climbing!"

Without the dragon and Hazel's horse to distract the archers, they never would have made it up the ladder; but finally they climbed past a row of broken aerial oars and onto the deck. The rigging was on fire. The foresail was ripped down the middle, and the ship listed badly to starboard.

There was no sign of Coach Hedge, but Leo stood amidships, calmly reloading the ballista. Annabeth's gut twisted with horror.

"Leo!" she screamed. "What are you *doing*?"

"Destroy them..." He faced Annabeth. His eyes were glazed. His movements were like a robot's. "Destroy them all."

He turned back to the ballista, but Percy tackled him. Leo's head hit the deck hard, and his eyes rolled up so that only the whites showed.

The gray dragon soared into view. It circled the ship once and landed at the bow, depositing Jason and Piper, who both collapsed.

"Go!" Percy yelled. "Get us out of here!"

With a shock, Annabeth realized he was talking to her.

She ran for the helm. She made the mistake of glancing over the rail and saw armed legionnaires closing ranks in the forum, preparing flaming arrows. Hazel spurred Arion, and they raced out of the city with a mob chasing after them. More catapults were being wheeled into range. All along the Pomerian Line, the statues of Terminus were glowing purple, as if building up energy for some kind

of attack.

Annabeth looked over the controls. She cursed Leo for making them so complicated. No time for fancy maneuvers, but she did know one basic command: *Up*.

She grabbed the aviation throttle and yanked it straight back. The ship groaned. The bow tilted up at a horrifying angle. The mooring lines snapped, and the *Argo II* shot into the clouds.

LEO

LEO WISHED HE COULD INVENT a time machine. He'd go back two hours and undo what had happened. Either that, or he could invent a Slap-Leo-in-the-Face machine to punish himself, though he doubted it would hurt as badly as the look Annabeth was giving him.

"One more time," she said. "Exactly *what* happened?"

Leo slumped against the mast. His head still throbbed from hitting the deck. All around him, his beautiful new ship was in shambles. The aft crossbows were piles of kindling. The foresail was tattered. The satellite array that powered the onboard Internet and TV was blown to bits, which had really made Coach Hedge mad. Their bronze dragon figurehead, Festus, was coughing up smoke like he had a hairball, and Leo could tell from the groaning sounds on the port side that some of the aerial oars had been knocked out of alignment or broken off completely, which explained why the ship was listing and shuddering as it flew, the engine wheezing like an asthmatic steam train.

He choked back a sob. "I don't know. It's fuzzy."

Too many people were looking at him: Annabeth (Leo *hated* to make her angry; that girl scared him), Coach Hedge with his furry goat legs, his orange polo shirt, and his baseball bat (did he have to carry that everywhere?), and the

newcomer, Frank.

Leo wasn't sure what to make of Frank. He looked like a baby sumo wrestler, though Leo wasn't stupid enough to say that aloud. Leo's memory was hazy, but while he'd been half conscious, he was pretty sure he'd seen a dragon land on the ship—a dragon that had turned into Frank.

Annabeth crossed her arms. "You mean you don't remember?"

"I..." Leo felt like he was trying to swallow a marble. "I remember, but it's like I was watching myself do things. I couldn't control it."

Coach Hedge tapped his bat against the deck. In his gym clothes, with his cap pulled over his horns, he looked just like he used to at the Wilderness School, where he'd spent a year undercover as Jason, Piper, and Leo's P.E. teacher. The way the old satyr was glowering, Leo almost wondered if the coach was going to order him to do push-ups.

"Look, kid," Hedge said, "you blew up some stuff. You attacked some Romans. Awesome! Excellent! But did you *have* to knock out the satellite channels? I was right in the middle of watching a cage match."

"Coach," Annabeth said, "why don't you make sure all the fires are out?"

"But I already did that."

"Do it again."

The satyr trudged off, muttering under his breath. Even Hedge wasn't crazy enough to defy Annabeth.

She knelt next to Leo. Her gray eyes were as steely as ball bearings. Her blond hair fell loose around her shoulders, but Leo didn't find that attractive. He had no idea where the stereotype of dumb giggly blondes came from. Ever since he'd met Annabeth at the Grand Canyon last winter, when she'd marched toward him with that *Give me Percy Jackson or I'll kill you* expression, Leo thought of blondes as much too smart and much too dangerous.

"Leo," she said calmly, "did Octavian trick you somehow? Did he frame you, or—"

"No." Leo could have lied and blamed that stupid Roman, but he didn't want to make a bad situation worse. "The guy was a jerk, but he didn't fire on the camp. I did."

The new kid, Frank, scowled. “On purpose?”

“No!” Leo squeezed his eyes shut. “Well, yes...I mean, I didn’t want to. But at the same time, I *felt* like I wanted to. Something was making me do it. There was this cold feeling inside me—”

“A cold feeling.” Annabeth’s tone changed. She sounded almost...scared.

“Yeah,” Leo said. “Why?”

From belowdecks, Percy called up, “Annabeth, we need you.”

Oh, gods, Leo thought. Please let Jason be okay.

As soon as they’d gotten on board, Piper had taken Jason below. The cut on his head had looked pretty bad. Leo had known Jason longer than anyone at Camp Half-Blood. They were best friends. If Jason didn’t make it...

“He’ll be fine.” Annabeth’s expression softened. “Frank, I’ll be back. Just... watch Leo. Please.”

Frank nodded.

If it was possible for Leo to feel worse, he did. Annabeth now trusted a Roman demigod she’d known for like, three seconds, more than she trusted Leo.

Once she was gone, Leo and Frank stared at each other. The big dude looked pretty odd in his bedsheet toga, with his gray pullover hoodie and jeans, and a bow and quiver from the ship’s armory slung over his shoulder. Leo remembered the time he had met the Hunters of Artemis—a bunch of cute lithe girls in silvery clothes, all armed with bows. He imagined Frank frolicking along with them. The idea was so ridiculous, it almost made him feel better.

“So,” Frank said. “Your name isn’t Sammy?”

Leo scowled. “What kind of question is that?”

“Nothing,” Frank said quickly. “I just— Nothing. About the firing on the camp...Octavian could be behind it, like magically or something. He didn’t want the Romans getting along with you guys.”

Leo wanted to believe that. He was grateful to this kid for not hating him. But he knew it hadn’t been Octavian. *Leo* had walked to a ballista and started firing. Part of him had known it was wrong. He’d asked himself: *What the heck am I doing?* But he’d done it anyway.

Maybe he was going crazy. The stress of all those months working on the

Argo II might've finally made him crack.

But he couldn't think about that. He needed to do something productive. His hands needed to be busy.

"Look," he said, "I should talk to Festus and get a damage report. You mind...?"

Frank helped him up. "Who is Festus?"

"My friend," Leo said. "His name isn't Sammy either, in case you're wondering. Come on. I'll introduce you."

Fortunately the bronze dragon wasn't damaged. Well, aside from the fact that last winter he'd lost everything except his head—but Leo didn't count that.

When they reached the bow of the ship, the figurehead turned a hundred and eighty degrees to look at them. Frank yelped and backed away.

"It's alive!" he said.

Leo would have laughed if he hadn't felt so bad. "Yeah. Frank, this is Festus. He used to be a full bronze dragon, but we had an accident."

"You have a lot of accidents," Frank noted.

"Well, some of us can't turn into dragons, so we have to build our own." Leo arched his eyebrows at Frank. "Anyway, I revived him as a figurehead. He's kind of the ship's main interface now. How are things looking, Festus?"

Festus snorted smoke and made a series of squeaking, whirring sounds. Over the last few months, Leo had learned to interpret this machine language. Other demigods could understand Latin and Greek. Leo could speak Creak and Squeak.

"Ugh," Leo said. "Could be worse, but the hull is compromised in several places. The port aerial oars have to be fixed before we can go full speed again. We'll need some repair materials: Celestial bronze, tar, lime—"

"What do you need limes for?"

"Dude, *lime*. Calcium carbonate, used in cement and a bunch of other— Ah, never mind. The point is, this ship isn't going far unless we can fix it."

Festus made another click-creak noise that Leo didn't recognize. It sounded like *AY-zuhl*.

“Oh...*Hazel*,” he deciphered. “That’s the girl with the curly hair, right?”

Frank gulped. “Is she okay?”

“Yeah, she’s fine,” Leo said. “According to Festus, her horse is racing along below. She’s following us.”

“We’ve got to land, then,” Frank said.

Leo studied him. “She’s your girlfriend?”

Frank chewed his lip. “Yes.”

“You don’t sound sure.”

“Yes. Yes, definitely. I’m sure.”

Leo raised his hands. “Okay, fine. The problem is we can only manage one landing. The way the hull and the oars are, we won’t be able to lift off again until we repair, so we’ll have to make sure we land somewhere with all the right supplies.”

Frank scratched his head. “Where do you get Celestial bronze? You can’t just stock up at Home Depot.”

“Festus, do a scan.”

“He can scan for magic bronze?” Frank marveled. “Is there anything he *can’t* do?”

Leo thought: *You should’ve seen him when he had a body*. But he didn’t say that. It was too painful, remembering the way Festus used to be.

Leo peered over the ship’s bow. The Central California valley was passing below. Leo didn’t hold out much hope that they could find what they needed all in one place, but they had to try. Leo also wanted to put as much distance as possible between himself and New Rome. The *Argo II* could cover vast distances pretty quickly, thanks to its magical engine, but Leo figured the Romans had magic travel methods of their own.

Behind him, the stairs creaked. Percy and Annabeth climbed up, their faces grim.

Leo’s heart stumbled. “Is Jason—?”

“He’s resting,” Annabeth said. “Piper’s keeping an eye on him, but he should be fine.”

Percy gave him a hard look. “Annabeth says you *did* fire the ballista?”

“Man, I—I don’t understand how it happened. I’m so sorry—”

“Sorry?” Percy growled.

Annabeth put a hand on her boyfriend’s chest. “We’ll figure it out later. Right now, we have to regroup and make a plan. What’s the situation with the ship?”

Leo’s legs trembled. The way Percy had looked at him made him feel the same as when Jason summoned lightning. Leo’s skin tingled, and every instinct in his body screamed, *Duck!*

He told Annabeth about the damage and the supplies they needed. At least he felt better talking about something fixable.

He was bemoaning the shortage of Celestial bronze when Festus began to whirl and squeak.

“Perfect.” Leo sighed with relief.

“What’s perfect?” Annabeth said. “I could use some *perfect* about now.”

Leo managed a smile. “Everything we need in one place. Frank, why don’t you turn into a bird or something? Fly down and tell your girlfriend to meet us at the Great Salt Lake in Utah.”

Once they got there, it wasn’t a pretty landing. With the oars damaged and the foresail torn, Leo could barely manage a controlled descent. The others strapped themselves in below—except for Coach Hedge, who insisted on clinging to the forward rail, yelling, “YEAH! Bring it on, lake!” Leo stood astern, alone at the helm, and aimed as best he could.

Festus creaked and whirred warning signals, which were relayed through the intercom to the quarterdeck.

“I know, I know,” Leo said, gritting his teeth.

He didn’t have much time to take in the scenery. To the southeast, a city was nestled in the foothills of a mountain range, blue and purple in the afternoon shadows. A flat desert landscape spread to the south. Directly beneath them the Great Salt Lake glittered like aluminum foil, the shoreline etched with white salt marshes that reminded Leo of aerial photos of Mars.

“Hang on, Coach!” he shouted. “This is going to hurt.”

“I was *born* for hurt!”

WHOOM! A swell of salt water washed over the bow, dousing Coach Hedge. The *Argo II* listed dangerously to starboard, then righted itself and rocked on the surface of the lake. Machinery hummed as the aerial blades that were still working changed to nautical form.

Three banks of robotic oars dipped into the water and began moving them forward.

“Good job, Festus,” Leo said. “Take us toward the south shore.”

“Yeah!” Coach Hedge pumped his fists in the air. He was drenched from his horns to hooves, but grinning like a crazy goat. “Do it again!”

“Uh...maybe later,” Leo said. “Just stay above deck, okay? You can keep watch, in case—you know, the lake decides to attack us or something.”

“On it,” Hedge promised.

Leo rang the *All clear* bell and headed for the stairs. Before he got there, a loud *clump-clump-clump* shook the hull. A tan stallion appeared on deck with Hazel Levesque on his back.

“How—?” Leo’s question died in his throat. “We’re in the middle of a lake! Can that thing fly?”

The horse whinnied angrily.

“Arion can’t fly,” Hazel said. “But he can run across just about anything. Water, vertical surfaces, small mountains—none of that bothers him.”

“Oh.”

Hazel was looking at him strangely, the way she had during the feast in the forum—like she was searching for something in his face. He was tempted to ask if they had met before, but he was sure they hadn’t. He would remember a pretty girl paying such close attention to him. That didn’t happen a lot.

She’s Frank’s girlfriend, he reminded himself.

Frank was still below, but Leo almost wished the big guy would come up the stairs. The way Hazel was studying Leo made him feel uneasy and self-conscious.

Coach Hedge crept forward with his baseball bat, eyeing the magic horse suspiciously. “Valdez, does this count as an invasion?”

“No!” Leo said. “Um, Hazel, you’d better come with me. I built a stable

belowdecks, if Arion wants to—”

“He’s more of a free spirit.” Hazel slipped out of the saddle. “He’ll graze around the lake until I call him. But I want to see the ship. Lead the way.”

The *Argo II* was designed like an ancient trireme, only twice as big. The first deck had one central corridor with crew cabins on either side. On a normal trireme, most of the space would’ve been taken up with three rows of benches for a few hundred sweaty guys to do the manual labor, but Leo’s oars were automated and retractable, so they took up very little room inside the hull. The ship’s power came from the engine room on the second and lowest deck, which also housed sickbay, storage, and the stables.

Leo led the way down the hall. He’d built the ship with eight cabins—seven for the demigods of the prophecy, and a room for Coach Hedge (Seriously—Chiron considered him a responsible adult chaperone?). At the stern was a large mess hall/lounge, which was where Leo headed.

On the way, they passed Jason’s room. The door was open. Piper sat at the side of his berth, holding Jason’s hand while he snored with an ice pack on his head.

Piper glanced at Leo. She held a finger to her lips for quiet, but she didn’t look angry. That was something. Leo tried to force down his guilt, and they kept walking. When they reached the mess hall, they found the others—Percy, Annabeth, and Frank—sitting dejectedly around the dining table.

Leo had made the lounge as nice as possible, since he figured they’d be spending a lot of time there. The cupboard was lined with magic cups and plates from Camp Half-Blood, which would fill up with whatever food or drink you wanted on command. There was also a magical ice chest with canned drinks, perfect for picnics ashore. The chairs were cushy recliners with thousand-finger massage, built-in headphones, and sword and drink holders for all your demigod kicking-back needs. There were no windows, but the walls were enchanted to show real-time footage from Camp Half-Blood—the beach, the forest, the strawberry fields—although now Leo was wondering if this made people homesick rather than happy.

Percy was staring longingly at a sunset view of Half-Blood Hill, where the

Golden Fleece glittered in the branches of the tall pine tree.

“So we’ve landed,” Percy said. “What now?”

Frank plucked on his bowstring. “Figure out the prophecy? I mean...that *was* a prophecy Ella spoke, right? From the Sibylline Books?”

“The what?” Leo asked.

Frank explained how their harpy friend was freakishly good at memorizing books. At some point in the past, she’d inhaled a collection of ancient prophecies that had supposedly been destroyed around the fall of Rome.

“That’s why you didn’t tell the Romans,” Leo guessed. “You didn’t want them to get hold of her.”

Percy kept staring at the image of Half-Blood Hill. “Ella’s sensitive. She was a captive when we found her. I just didn’t want...” He made a fist. “It doesn’t matter now. I sent Tyson an Iris-message, told him to take Ella to Camp Half-Blood. They’ll be safe there.”

Leo doubted that *any* of them would be safe, now that he had stirred up a camp of angry Romans on top of the problems they already had with Gaea and the giants; but he kept quiet.

Annabeth laced her fingers. “Let me think about the prophecy—but right now we have more immediate problems. We have to get this ship fixed. Leo, what do we need?”

“The easiest thing is tar.” Leo was glad to change the subject. “We can get that in the city, at a roofing-supply store or someplace like that. Also, Celestial bronze and lime. According to Festus, we can find both of those on an island in the lake, just west of here.”

“We’ll have to hurry,” Hazel warned. “If I know Octavian, he’s searching for us with his auguries. The Romans will send a strike force after us. It’s a matter of honor.”

Leo felt everyone’s eyes on him. “Guys...I don’t know what happened. Honestly, I—”

Annabeth raised her hand. “We’ve been talking. We agree it couldn’t have been *you*, Leo. That cold feeling you mentioned...I felt it too. It must have been some sort of magic, either Octavian or Gaea or one of her minions. But until we

understand what happened—”

Frank grunted. “How can we be sure it won’t happen again?”

Leo’s fingers heated up like they were about to catch fire. One of his powers as a son of Hephaestus was that he could summon flames at will; but he had to be careful not to do so by accident, especially on a ship filled with explosives and flammable supplies.

“I’m fine now,” he insisted, though he wished he could be sure. “Maybe we should use the buddy system. Nobody goes anywhere alone. We can leave Piper and Coach Hedge on board with Jason. Send one team into town to get tar. Another team can go after the bronze and the lime.”

“Split up?” Percy said. “That sounds like a really bad idea.”

“It’ll be quicker,” Hazel put in. “Besides, there’s a reason a quest is usually limited to three demigods, right?”

Annabeth raised her eyebrows, as if reappraising Hazel’s merits. “You’re right. The same reason we needed the *Argo II*...outside camp, seven demigods in one place will attract way too much monstrous attention. The ship is designed to conceal and protect us. We should be safe enough on board; but if we go on expeditions, we shouldn’t travel in groups larger than three. No sense alerting more of Gaea’s minions than we have to.”

Percy still didn’t look happy about it, but he took Annabeth’s hand. “As long as you’re my buddy, I’m good.”

Hazel smiled. “Oh, that’s easy. Frank, you were amazing, turning into a dragon! Could you do it again to fly Annabeth and Percy into town for the tar?”

Frank opened his mouth like he wanted to protest. “I...I suppose. But what about you?”

“I’ll ride Arion with Sa—with Leo, here.” She fidgeted with her sword hilt, which made Leo uneasy. She had even more nervous energy than *he* did. “We’ll get the bronze and the lime. We can all meet back here by dark.”

Frank scowled. Obviously, he didn’t like the idea of Leo going off with Hazel. For some reason, Frank’s disapproval made Leo want to go. He *had* to prove he was trustworthy. He wasn’t going to fire any random ballistae again.

“Leo,” said Annabeth, “if we get the supplies, how long to fix the ship?”

“With luck, just a few hours.”

“Fine,” she decided. “We’ll meet you back here as soon as possible, but stay safe. We could use some good luck. That doesn’t mean we’ll get it.”

LEO

RIDING ARION WAS THE BEST THING that had happened to Leo all day—which wasn't saying much, since his day had sucked. The horse's hooves turned the surface of the lake to salty mist. Leo put his hand against the horse's side and felt the muscles working like a well-oiled machine. For the first time, he understood why car engines were measured in horsepower. Arion was a four-legged Maserati.

Ahead of them lay an island—a line of sand so white, it might have been pure table salt. Behind that rose an expanse of grassy dunes and weathered boulders.

Leo sat behind Hazel, one arm around her waist. The close contact made him a little uncomfortable, but it was the only way he could stay on board (or whatever you called it with a horse).

Before they left, Percy had pulled him aside to tell him Hazel's story. Percy made it sound like he was just doing Leo a favor, but there'd been an undertone like *If you mess with my friend, I will personally feed you to a great white shark.*

According to Percy, Hazel was a daughter of Pluto. She'd died in the 1940s and been brought back to life only a few months ago.

Leo found that hard to believe. Hazel seemed warm and very alive, not like the ghosts or the other reborn mortals Leo had tangled with.

She seemed good with people, too, unlike Leo, who was much more comfortable with machines. Living stuff, like horses and girls? He had no idea what made them work.

Hazel was also Frank's girlfriend, so Leo knew he should keep his distance. Still, her hair smelled good, and riding with her made his heart race almost against his will. It must've been the speed of the horse.

Arion thundered onto the beach. He stomped his hooves and whinnied triumphantly, like Coach Hedge yelling a battle cry.

Hazel and Leo dismounted. Arion pawed the sand.

"He needs to eat," Hazel explained. "He likes gold, but—"

"Gold?" Leo asked.

"He'll settle for grass. Go on, Arion. Thanks for the ride. I'll call you."

Just like that, the horse was gone—nothing left but a steaming trail across the lake.

"Fast horse," Leo said, "and expensive to feed."

"Not really," Hazel said. "Gold is easy for me."

Leo raised his eyebrows. "How is gold easy? Please tell me you're not related to King Midas. I don't like that guy."

Hazel pursed her lips, as if she regretted raising the subject. "Never mind."

That made Leo even more curious, but he decided it might be better not to press her. He knelt and cupped a handful of white sand. "Well...one problem solved, anyway. This is lime."

Hazel frowned. "The whole beach?"

"Yeah. See? The granules are perfectly round. It's not really sand. It's calcium carbonate." Leo pulled a Ziploc bag from his tool belt and dug his hand into the lime.

Suddenly he froze. He remembered all the times the earth goddess Gaea had appeared to him in the ground—her sleeping face made of dust or sand or dirt. She loved to taunt him. He imagined her closed eyes and her dreaming smile swirling in the white calcium.

Walk away, little hero, Gaea said. Without you, the ship cannot be fixed.

"Leo?" Hazel asked. "You okay?"

He took a shaky breath. Gaea wasn't here. He was just freaking himself out.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, fine."

He started to fill the bag.

Hazel knelt next to him and helped. "We should've brought a pail and shovels."

The idea cheered Leo up. He even smiled. "We could've made a sand castle."

"A lime castle."

Their eyes locked for a second too long.

Hazel looked away. "You are so much like—"

"Sammy?" Leo guessed.

She fell backward. "You know?"

"I have no idea who Sammy is. But Frank asked me if I was sure that wasn't my name."

"And...it isn't?"

"No! Jeez."

"You don't have a twin brother or..." Hazel stopped. "Is your family from New Orleans?"

"Nah. Houston. Why? Is Sammy a guy you used to know?"

"I...It's nothing. You just look like him."

Leo could tell she was too embarrassed to say more. But if Hazel was a kid from the past, did that mean Sammy was from the 1940s? If so, how could Frank know the guy? And why would Hazel think Leo was Sammy, all these decades later?

They finished filling the bag in silence. Leo stuffed it in his tool belt and the bag vanished—no weight, no mass, no volume—though Leo knew it would be there as soon as he reached for it. Anything that could fit into the pockets, Leo could tote around. He *loved* his tool belt. He just wished the pockets were large enough for a chain saw, or maybe a bazooka.

He stood and scanned the island—bleach-white dunes, blankets of grass, and boulders encrusted with salt like frosting. "Festus said there was Celestial bronze close by, but I'm not sure where—"

"That way." Hazel pointed up the beach. "About five hundred yards."

“How do you—?”

“Precious metals,” Hazel said. “It’s a Pluto thing.”

Leo remembered what she’d said about gold being easy. “Handy talent. Lead the way, Miss Metal Detector.”

The sun began to set. The sky turned a bizarre mix of purple and yellow. In another reality, Leo might’ve enjoyed a walk on the beach with a pretty girl, but the farther they went, the edgier he felt. Finally Hazel turned inland.

“You sure this is a good idea?” he asked.

“We’re close,” she promised. “Come on.”

Just over the dunes, they saw the woman.

She sat on a boulder in the middle of a grassy field. A black-and-chrome motorcycle was parked nearby, but each of the wheels had a big pie slice removed from the spokes and rim, so that they resembled Pac-Men. No way was the bike drivable in that condition.

The woman had curly black hair and a bony frame. She wore black leather biker’s pants, tall leather boots, and a bloodred leather jacket—sort of a *Michael Jackson joins the Hell’s Angels* look. Around her feet, the ground was littered with what looked like broken shells. She was hunched over, pulling new ones out of a sack and cracking them open. Shucking oysters? Leo wasn’t sure if there were oysters in the Great Salt Lake. He didn’t think so.

He wasn’t anxious to approach. He’d had bad experiences with strange ladies. His old babysitter, Tía Callida, had turned out to be Hera and had a nasty habit of putting him down for naps in a blazing fireplace. The earth goddess Gaea had killed his mother in a workshop fire when Leo was eight. The snow goddess Khione had tried to turn him into a frozen dairy treat in Sonoma.

But Hazel forged ahead, so he didn’t have much choice except to follow.

As they got closer, Leo noticed disturbing details. Attached to the woman’s belt was a curled whip. Her red-leather jacket had a subtle design to it—twisted branches of an apple tree populated with skeletal birds. The oysters she was shucking were actually fortune cookies.

A pile of broken cookies lay ankle-deep all around her. She kept pulling new

ones from her sack, cracking them open, and reading the fortunes. Most she tossed aside. A few made her mutter unhappily. She would swipe her finger over the slip of paper like she was smudging it, then magically reseal the cookie and toss it into a nearby basket.

“What are you doing?” Leo asked before he could stop himself.

The woman looked up. Leo’s lungs filled so fast, he thought they might burst.

“Aunt Rosa?” he asked.

It didn’t make sense, but this woman looked *exactly* like his aunt. She had the same broad nose with a mole on one side, the same sour mouth and hard eyes. But it couldn’t be Rosa. She would never wear clothes like that, and she was still down in Houston, as far as Leo knew. She wouldn’t be cracking open fortune cookies in the middle of the Great Salt Lake.

“Is that what you see?” the woman asked. “Interesting. And you, Hazel, dear?”

“How did you—?” Hazel stepped back in alarm. “You—you look like Mrs. Leer. My third grade teacher. I hated you.”

The woman cackled. “Excellent. You resented her, eh? She judged you unfairly?”

“You—she taped my hands to the desk for misbehaving,” Hazel said. “She called my mother a witch. She blamed me for everything I didn’t do and— No. She *has* to be dead. Who *are* you?”

“Oh, Leo knows,” the woman said. “How do you feel about Aunt Rosa, *mijo*?”

Mijo. That’s what Leo’s mom had always called him. After his mom died, Rosa had rejected Leo. She’d called him a devil child. She’d blamed him for the fire that had killed her sister. Rosa had turned his family against him and left him—a scrawny orphaned eight-year-old—at the mercy of social services. Leo had bounced around from foster home to foster home until he’d finally found a home at Camp Half-Blood. Leo didn’t hate many people, but after all these years, Aunt Rosa’s face made him boil with resentment.

How did he feel? He wanted to get even. He wanted revenge.

His eyes drifted to the motorcycle with the Pac-Man wheels. Where had he

seen something like that before? Cabin 16, back at Camp Half-Blood—the symbol above their door was a broken wheel.

“Nemesis,” he said. “You’re the goddess of revenge.”

“You see?” The goddess smiled at Hazel. “He recognizes me.”

Nemesis cracked another cookie and wrinkled her nose. “*You will have great fortune when you least expect it,*” she read. “That’s exactly the sort of nonsense I hate. Someone opens a cookie, and suddenly they have a prophecy that they’ll be rich! I blame that tramp Tyche. Always dispensing good luck to people who don’t deserve it!”

Leo looked at the mound of broken cookies. “Uh...you know those aren’t real prophecies, right? They’re just stuffed in the cookies at some factory—”

“Don’t try to excuse it!” Nemesis snapped. “It’s just like Tyche to get people’s hopes up. No, no. I *must* counter her.” Nemesis flicked a finger over the slip of paper, and the letters changed to red. “*You will die painfully when you most expect it.* There! Much better.”

“That’s horrible!” Hazel said. “You’d let someone read that in their fortune cookie, and it would come true?”

Nemesis sneered. It really was creepy, seeing that expression on Aunt Rosa’s face. “My dear Hazel, haven’t you ever wished horrible things on Mrs. Leer for the way she treated you?”

“That doesn’t mean I’d want them to come true!”

“Bah.” The goddess resealed the cookie and tossed it in her basket. “Tyche would be Fortuna for you, I suppose, being Roman. Like the others, she’s in a horrible way right now. Me? I’m not affected. I am called Nemesis in both Greek and Roman. I do not change, because revenge is universal.”

“What are you talking about?” Leo asked. “What are you doing here?”

Nemesis opened another cookie. “Lucky numbers. Ridiculous! That’s not even a proper fortune!” She crushed the cookie and scattered the pieces around her feet.

“To answer your question, Leo Valdez, the gods are in terrible shape. It always happens when a civil war is brewing between you Romans and Greeks. The Olympians are torn between their two natures, called on by both sides. They

become quite schizophrenic, I'm afraid. Splitting headaches. Disorientation."

"But we're not at war," Leo insisted.

"Um, Leo..." Hazel winced. "Except for the fact that you recently blew up large sections of New Rome."

Leo stared at her, wondering whose side she was on. "Not on purpose!"

"I know..." Hazel said, "but the Romans don't realize that. And they'll be pursuing us in retaliation."

Nemesis cackled. "Leo, listen to the girl. War is coming. Gaea has seen to it, with your help. And can you guess whom the gods blame for their predicament?"

Leo's mouth tasted like calcium carbonate. "Me."

The goddess snorted. "Well, don't *you* have a high opinion of yourself. You're just a pawn on the chessboard, Leo Valdez. I was referring to the player who set this ridiculous quest in motion, bringing the Greeks and Romans together. The gods blame Hera—or Juno, if you prefer! The queen of the heavens has fled Olympus to escape the wrath of her family. Don't expect any more help from your patron!"

Leo's head throbbed. He had mixed feelings about Hera. She'd meddled in his life since he was a baby, molding him to serve her purpose in this big prophecy, but at least she had been on their side, more or less. If she was out of the picture now...

"So why are you here?" he asked.

"Why, to offer *my* help!" Nemesis smiled wickedly.

Leo glanced at Hazel. She looked like she'd just been offered a free snake.

"Your help," Leo said.

"Of course!" said the goddess. "I enjoy tearing down the proud and powerful, and there are none who deserve tearing down like Gaea and her giants. Still, I must warn you that I will not suffer undeserved success. Good luck is a sham. The wheel of fortune is a Ponzi scheme. True success requires sacrifice."

"Sacrifice?" Hazel's voice was tight. "I lost my mother. I died and came back. Now my brother is missing. Isn't that enough sacrifice for you?"

Leo could totally relate. He wanted to scream that he'd lost his mom too. His

whole life had been one misery after another. He'd lost his dragon, Festus. He'd nearly killed himself trying to finish the *Argo II*. Now he'd fired on the Roman camp, most likely started a war, and maybe lost the trust of his friends.

"Right now," he said, trying to control his anger, "all I want is some Celestial bronze."

"Oh, that's easy," Nemesis said. "It's just over the rise. You'll find it with the sweethearts."

"Wait," Hazel said. "What sweethearts?"

Nemesis popped a cookie in her mouth and swallowed it, fortune and all. "You'll see. Perhaps they will teach you a lesson, Hazel Levesque. Most heroes cannot escape their nature, even when given a second chance at life." She smiled. "And speaking of your brother Nico, you don't have much time. Let's see...it's June twenty-fifth? Yes, after today, six more days. Then he dies, along with the entire city of Rome."

Hazel's eyes widened. "How...what—?"

"And as for *you*, child of fire." She turned to Leo. "Your worst hardships are yet to come. You will always be the outsider, the seventh wheel. You will not find a place among your brethren. Soon you will face a problem you cannot solve, though I could help you...for a price."

Leo smelled smoke. He realized fingers on his left hand were ablaze, and Hazel was staring at him in terror.

He shoved his hand in his pocket to extinguish the flames. "I like to solve my own problems."

"Very well." Nemesis brushed cookie dust off her jacket.

"But, um, what sort of price are we talking about?"

The goddess shrugged. "One of my children recently traded an eye for the ability to make a real difference in the world."

Leo's stomach churned. "You...want an eye?"

"In your case, perhaps another sacrifice would do. But something just as painful. Here." She handed him an unbroken fortune cookie. "If you need an answer, break this. It will solve your problem."

Leo's hand trembled as he held the fortune cookie. "What problem?"

“You’ll know when the time comes.”

“No, thanks,” Leo said firmly. But his hand, as though it had a will of its own, slipped the cookie into his tool belt.

Nemesis picked another cookie from her bag and cracked it open. “*You will have cause to reconsider your choices soon.* Oh, I like that one. No changes needed here.”

She resealed the cookie and tossed it into the basket. “Very few gods will be able to help you on the quest. Most are already incapacitated, and their confusion will only grow worse. One thing might bring unity to Olympus again—an old wrong finally avenged. Ah, that would be sweet indeed, the scales finally balanced! But it will not happen unless you accept my help.”

“I suppose you won’t tell us what you’re talking about,” Hazel muttered. “Or why my brother Nico has only six days to live. Or why Rome is going to be destroyed.”

Nemesis chuckled. She rose and slung her sack of cookies over her shoulder. “Oh, it’s all tied together, Hazel Levesque. As for my offer, Leo Valdez, give it some thought. You’re a good child. A hard worker. We could do business. But I have detained you too long. You should visit the reflecting pool before the light fades. My poor cursed boy gets quite...agitated when the darkness comes.”

Leo didn’t like the sound of that, but the goddess climbed on her motorcycle. Apparently, it *was* drivable, despite those Pac-Man-shaped wheels, because Nemesis revved her engine and disappeared in a mushroom cloud of black smoke.

Hazel bent down. All the broken cookies and fortunes had disappeared except for one crumpled slip of paper. She picked it up and read, “*You will see yourself reflected, and you will have reason to despair.*”

“Fantastic,” Leo grumbled. “Let’s go see what that means.”

V I I

LEO

“WHO IS AUNT ROSA?” HAZEL ASKED.

Leo didn't want to talk about her. Nemesis's words were still buzzing in his ears. His tool belt seemed heavier since he'd put the cookie in there—which was impossible. Its pockets could carry anything without adding extra weight. Even the most fragile things would never break. Still, Leo imagined he could feel it in there, dragging him down, waiting to be cracked open.

“Long story,” he said. “She abandoned me after my mom died, gave me to foster care.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Yeah, well...” Leo was anxious to change the subject. “What about you? What Nemesis said about your brother?”

Hazel blinked like she'd gotten salt in her eyes. “Nico...he found me in the Underworld. He brought me back to the mortal world and convinced the Romans at Camp Jupiter to accept me. I owe him for my second chance at life. If Nemesis is right, and Nico's in danger...I *have* to help him.”

“Sure,” Leo said, though the idea made him uneasy. He doubted the revenge goddess ever gave advice out of the goodness of her heart. “And what Nemesis said about your brother having six days to live, and Rome getting destroyed...”

any idea what she meant?”

“None,” Hazel admitted. “But I’m afraid…”

Whatever she was thinking, she decided not to share it. She climbed one of the largest boulders to get a better view. Leo tried to follow and lost his balance. Hazel caught his hand. She pulled him up and they found themselves atop the rock, holding hands, face-to-face.

Hazel’s eyes glittered like gold.

Gold is easy, she’d said. It didn’t seem that way to Leo—not when he looked at her. He wondered who Sammy was. Leo had a nagging suspicion that he *should* know, but he just couldn’t place the name. Whoever he was, he was lucky if Hazel cared for him.

“Um, thanks.” He let go of her hand, but they were still standing so close, he could feel the warmth of her breath. She *definitely* didn’t seem like a dead person.

“When we were talking to Nemesis,” Hazel said uneasily, “your hands… I saw flames.”

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s a Hephaestus power. Usually I can keep it under control.”

“Oh.” She put one hand protectively on her denim shirt, like she was about to say the Pledge of Allegiance. Leo got the feeling she wanted to back away from him, but the boulder was too small.

Great, he thought. Another person who thinks I’m a scary freak.

He gazed across the island. The opposite shore was only a few hundred yards away. Between here and there were dunes and clumps of boulders, but nothing that looked like a reflecting pool.

You will always be the outsider, Nemesis had told him, *the seventh wheel. You will not find a place among your brethren.*

She might as well have poured acid in his ears. Leo didn’t need anybody to tell him he was odd man out. He’d spent months alone in Bunker 9 at Camp Half-Blood, working on his ship while his friends trained together and shared meals and played capture-the-flag for fun and prizes. Even his two best friends, Piper and Jason, often treated him like an outsider. Since they’d started dating,

their idea of “quality time” didn’t include Leo. His only other friend, Festus the dragon, had been reduced to a figurehead when his control disk had gotten destroyed on their last adventure. Leo didn’t have the technical skill to repair it.

The seventh wheel. Leo had heard of a fifth wheel—an extra, useless piece of equipment. He figured a seventh wheel was worse.

He’d thought maybe this quest would be a fresh start for him. All his hard work on the *Argo II* would pay off. He’d have six good friends who would admire and appreciate him, and they’d go sailing off into the sunrise to fight giants. Maybe, Leo secretly hoped, he’d even find a girlfriend.

Do the math, he chided himself.

Nemesis was right. He might be part of a group of seven, but he was still isolated. He had fired on the Romans and brought his friends nothing but trouble. *You will not find a place among your brethren.*

“Leo?” Hazel asked gently. “You can’t take what Nemesis said to heart.”

He frowned. “What if it’s true?”

“She’s the goddess of revenge,” Hazel reminded him. “Maybe she’s on our side, maybe not; but she exists to stir up resentment.”

Leo wished he could dismiss his feelings that easily. He couldn’t. Still, it wasn’t Hazel’s fault.

“We should keep going,” he said. “I wonder what Nemesis meant about finishing before dark.”

Hazel glanced at the sun, which was just touching the horizon. “And who is the *cursed boy* she mentioned?”

Below them, a voice said, “Cursed boy she mentioned.”

At first, Leo saw no one. Then his eyes adjusted. He realized a young woman was standing only ten feet from the base of the boulder. Her dress was a Greek-style tunic the same color as the rocks. Her wispy hair was somewhere between brown and blond and gray, so it blended with the dry grass. She wasn’t invisible, exactly, but she was almost perfectly camouflaged until she moved. Even then, Leo had trouble focusing on her. Her face was pretty but not memorable. In fact, each time Leo blinked, he couldn’t remember what she looked like, and he had to concentrate to find her again.

“Hello,” Hazel said. “Who are you?”

“Who are you?” the girl answered. Her voice sounded weary, like she was tired of answering that question.

Hazel and Leo exchanged looks. With this demigod gig, you never knew what you’d run into. Nine times out of ten, it wasn’t good. A ninja girl camouflaged in earth tones didn’t strike Leo as something he wanted to deal with just then.

“Are you the cursed kid Nemesis mentioned?” Leo asked. “But you’re a girl.”

“You’re a girl,” said the girl.

“Excuse me?” Leo said.

“Excuse me,” the girl said miserably.

“You’re repeating...” Leo stopped. “Oh. Hold it. Hazel, wasn’t there some myth about a girl who repeated everything—?”

“Echo,” Hazel said.

“Echo,” the girl agreed. She shifted, her dress changing with the landscape. Her eyes were the color of the salt water. Leo tried to home in on her features, but he couldn’t.

“I don’t remember the myth,” he admitted. “You were cursed to repeat the last thing you heard?”

“You heard,” Echo said.

“Poor thing,” Hazel said. “If I remember right, a goddess did this?”

“A goddess did this,” Echo confirmed.

Leo scratched his head. “But wasn’t that thousands of years...oh. You’re one of the mortals who came back through the Doors of Death. I really wish we could stop running into dead people.”

“Dead people,” Echo said, like she was chastising him.

He realized Hazel was staring at her feet.

“Uh...sorry,” he muttered. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

“That way.” Echo pointed toward the far shore of the island.

“You want to show us something?” Hazel asked. She climbed down the boulder, and Leo followed.

Even up close, Echo was hard to see. In fact, she seemed to get more invisible

the longer he looked at her.

“You sure you’re real?” he asked. “I mean...flesh and blood?”

“Flesh and blood.” She touched Leo’s face and made him flinch. Her fingers were warm.

“So...you have to repeat everything?” he asked.

“Everything.”

Leo couldn’t help smiling. “That could be fun.”

“Fun,” she said unhappily.

“Blue elephants.”

“Blue elephants.”

“Kiss me, you fool.”

“You fool.”

“Hey!”

“Hey!”

“Leo,” Hazel pleaded, “don’t tease her.”

“Don’t tease her,” Echo agreed.

“Okay, okay,” Leo said, though he had to resist the urge. It wasn’t every day he met somebody with a built-in talkback feature. “So what were you pointing at? Do you need our help?”

“Help,” Echo agreed emphatically. She gestured for them to follow and sprinted down the slope. Leo could only follow her progress by the movement of the grass and the shimmer of her dress as it changed to match the rocks.

“We’d better hurry,” Hazel said. “Or we’ll lose her.”

They found the problem—if you can call a mob of good-looking girls a problem. Echo led them down into a grassy meadow shaped like a blast crater, with a small pond in the middle. Gathered at the water’s edge were several dozen nymphs. At least, Leo guessed they were nymphs. Like the ones at Camp Half-Blood, these wore gossamer dresses. Their feet were bare. They had elfish features, and their skin had a slightly greenish tinge.

Leo didn’t understand what they were doing, but they were all crowded together in one spot, facing the pond and jostling for a better view. Several held

up phone cameras, trying to get a shot over the heads of the others. Leo had never seen nymphs with phones. He wondered if they were looking at a dead body. If so, why were they bouncing up and down and giggling so excitedly?

“What are they looking at?” Leo wondered.

“Looking at,” Echo sighed.

“One way to find out.” Hazel marched forward and began nudging her way through the crowd. “Excuse us. Pardon me.”

“Hey!” one nymph complained. “We were here first!”

“Yeah,” another sniffed. “He won’t be interested in *you*.”

The second nymph had large red hearts painted on her cheeks. Over her dress, she wore a T-shirt that read: OMG, I <3 N!!!!

“Uh, demigod business,” Leo said, trying to sound official. “Make room. Thanks.”

The nymphs grumbled, but they parted to reveal a young man kneeling at the edge of the pond, gazing intently at the water.

Leo usually didn’t pay much attention to how other guys looked. He supposed that came from hanging around Jason—tall, blond, rugged, and basically everything Leo could never be. Leo was used to not being noticed by girls. At least, he knew he’d never get a girl by his looks. He hoped his personality and sense of humor would do that someday, though it definitely hadn’t worked yet.

At any rate, Leo couldn’t miss the fact that the guy at the pond was one super good-looking dude. He had a chiseled face with lips and eyes that were somewhere between feminine beautiful and masculine handsome. Dark hair swept over his brow. He might’ve been seventeen or twenty, it was hard to say, but he was built like a dancer—with long graceful arms and muscular legs, perfect posture and an air of regal calm. He wore a simple white T-shirt and jeans, with a bow and quiver strapped to his back. The weapons obviously hadn’t been used in a while. The arrows were covered in dust. A spider had woven a web in the top of the bow.

As Leo edged closer, he realized the guy’s face was unusually golden. In the sunset, the light was bouncing off a large flat sheet of Celestial bronze that lay at

the bottom of the pond, washing Mr. Handsome's features in a warm glow.

The guy seemed fascinated with his reflection in the metal.

Hazel inhaled sharply. "He's gorgeous."

Around her, the nymphs squealed and clapped in agreement.

"I am," the young man murmured dreamily, his gaze still fixed on the water.
"I am so gorgeous."

One of the nymphs showed her iPhone screen. "His latest YouTube video got a million hits in like, an *hour*. I think I was half of those!"

The other nymphs giggled.

"YouTube video?" Leo asked. "What does he do in the video, sing?"

"No, silly!" the nymph chided. "He used to be a prince, and a wonderful hunter and stuff. But that doesn't matter. Now he just...well, look!" She showed Leo the video. It was exactly what they were seeing in real life—the guy staring at himself in the pond.

"He is sooooo hot!" said another girl. Her T-shirt read: MRS. NARCISSUS.

"Narcissus?" Leo asked.

"Narcissus," Echo agreed sadly.

Leo had forgotten Echo was there. Apparently none of the nymphs had noticed her either.

"Oh, not *you* again!" Mrs. Narcissus tried to push Echo away, but she misjudged where the camouflaged girl was and ended up shoving several other nymphs.

"You had your chance, Echo!" said the nymph with the iPhone. "He dumped you four thousand years ago! You are *so* not good enough for him."

"For him," Echo said bitterly.

"Wait." Hazel clearly had trouble tearing her eyes away from the handsome guy, but she managed it. "What's going on here? Why did Echo bring us here?"

One nymph rolled her eyes. She was holding an autograph pen and a crumpled poster of Narcissus. "Echo was a nymph like us, a long time ago, but she was a total chatterbox! Gossiping, blah, blah, blah, all the time."

"I know!" another nymph shrieked. "Like, who could stand that? Just the other day, I told Cleopeia—you know she lives in the boulder next to me?—I

said: *Stop gossiping or you'll end up like Echo*. Cleopeia is such a big mouth! Did you hear what she said about that cloud nymph and the satyr?"

"Totally!" said the nymph with the poster. "So anyway, as punishment for blabbing, Hera cursed Echo so she could only repeat things, which was *fine* with us. But then Echo fell in love with our gorgeous guy, Narcissus—as if he would ever notice her."

"As if!" said half a dozen others.

"Now she's got some weird idea he needs saving," said Mrs. Narcissus. "She should just go away."

"Go away," Echo growled back.

"I'm so glad Narcissus is alive again," said another nymph in a gray dress. She had the words NARCISSUS + LAIEA written up and down her arms in black marker. "He's like *the best!* And he's in *my* territory."

"Oh, stop it, Laiea," her friend said. "*I'm* the pond nymph. You're just the rock nymph."

"Well, I'm the grass nymph," another protested.

"No, he obviously came here because he likes the wildflowers!" another said. "Those are mine!"

The whole mob began arguing while Narcissus stared at the lake, ignoring them.

"Hold it!" Leo yelled. "Ladies, hold it! I need to ask Narcissus something."

Slowly the nymphs settled down and went back to taking pictures.

Leo knelt next to the handsome dude. "So, Narcissus. What's up?"

"Could you move?" Narcissus asked distractedly. "You're ruining the view."

Leo looked in the water. His own reflection rippled next to Narcissus's on the surface of the submerged bronze. Leo didn't have any desire to stare at himself. Compared to Narcissus, he looked like an undergrown troll. But there was no doubt the metal was a sheet of hammered Celestial bronze, roughly circular, about five feet in diameter.

What it was doing in this pond, Leo wasn't sure. Celestial bronze fell to earth in odd places. He'd heard that most pieces were cast off from his dad's various workshops. Hephaestus would lose his temper when projects didn't work out,

and he'd toss his scraps into the mortal world. This piece looked like it might have been meant as a shield for a god, but it hadn't turned out properly. If Leo could get it back to the ship, it would be just enough bronze for his repairs.

"Right, great view," Leo said. "Happy to move, but if you're not using it, could I just take that sheet of bronze?"

"No," Narcissus said. "I love him. He's so gorgeous."

Leo looked around to see if the nymphs were laughing. This *had* to be a huge joke. But they were swooning and nodding in agreement. Only Hazel seemed appalled. She wrinkled her nose as if she'd come to the conclusion that Narcissus smelled worse than he looked.

"Man," Leo said to Narcissus. "You *do* realize that you're looking at *yourself* in the water, right?"

"I am so great," Narcissus sighed. He stretched out a hand longingly to touch the water, but held back. "No, I can't make ripples. That ruins the image. Wow...I am so great."

"Yeah," Leo muttered. "But if I took the bronze, you could still see yourself in the water. Or here..." He reached in his tool belt and pulled out a simple mirror the size of a monocle. "I'll trade you."

Narcissus took the mirror, reluctantly, and admired himself. "Even *you* carry a picture of me? I don't blame you. I am gorgeous. Thank you." He set the mirror down and returned his attention to the pond. "But I already have a much better image. The color flatters me, don't you think?"

"Oh, gods, yes!" a nymph screamed. "Marry me, Narcissus!"

"No, me!" another cried. "Would you sign my poster?"

"No, sign my shirt!"

"No, sign my forehead!"

"No, sign my—"

"Stop it!" Hazel snapped.

"Stop it," Echo agreed.

Leo had lost sight of Echo again, but now he realized she was kneeling on the other side of Narcissus, waving her hand in front of his face as if trying to break his concentration. Narcissus didn't even blink.

The nymph fan club tried to shove Hazel out of the way, but she drew her cavalry sword and forced them back. “Snap out of it!” she yelled.

“He won’t sign your sword,” the poster nymph complained.

“He won’t marry you,” said the iPhone girl. “And you can’t take his bronze mirror! That’s what *keeps* him here!”

“You’re all ridiculous,” Hazel said. “He’s so *full* of himself! How can you possibly like him?”

“Like him,” Echo sighed, still waving her hand in front of his face.

The others sighed along with her.

“I am so hot,” Narcissus said sympathetically.

“Narcissus, listen.” Hazel kept her sword at the ready. “Echo brought us here to help you. Didn’t you, Echo?”

“Echo,” said Echo.

“Who?” Narcissus said.

“The only girl who cares what happens to you, apparently,” Hazel said. “Do you remember dying?”

Narcissus frowned. “I...no. That can’t be right. I am much too important to die.”

“You died staring at yourself,” Hazel insisted. “I remember the story now. Nemesis was the goddess who cursed you, because you broke so many hearts. Your punishment was to fall in love with your own reflection.”

“I love me so, so much,” Narcissus agreed.

“You finally died,” Hazel continued. “I don’t know which version of the story is true. You either drowned yourself or turned into a flower hanging over the water or—Echo, which is it?”

“Which is it?” she said hopelessly.

Leo stood. “It doesn’t matter. The point is you’re alive again, man. You have a second chance. That’s what Nemesis was telling us. You can get up, and get on with your life. Echo is trying to save you. Or you can stay here and stare at yourself until you die again.”

“Stay here!” all the nymphs screamed.

“Marry me before you die!” another squeaked.

Narcissus shook his head. “You just want my reflection. I don’t blame you, but you can’t have it. I belong to me.”

Hazel sighed in exasperation. She glanced at the sun, which was sinking fast. Then she gestured with her sword toward the edge of the crater. “Leo, could we talk for a minute?”

“Excuse us,” Leo told Narcissus. “Echo, want to come with?”

“Come with,” Echo confirmed.

The nymphs clustered around Narcissus again and began recording new videos and taking more photos.

Hazel led the way until they were out of earshot. “Nemesis was right,” she said. “Some demigods can’t change their nature. Narcissus is going to stay there until he dies again.”

“No,” Leo said.

“No,” Echo agreed.

“We need that bronze,” Leo said. “If we take it away, it might give Narcissus a reason to snap out of it. Echo could have a chance to save him.”

“A chance to save him,” Echo said gratefully.

Hazel stabbed her sword in the sand. “It could also make several dozen nymphs very angry with us,” she said. “And Narcissus might still know how to shoot his bow.”

Leo pondered that. The sun was just about down. Nemesis had mentioned that Narcissus got agitated after dark, probably because he couldn’t see his reflection anymore. Leo didn’t want to stick around long enough to find out what the goddess meant by *agitated*. He’d also had experience with mobs of crazed nymphs. He wasn’t anxious to repeat that.

“Hazel,” he said, “your power with precious metal— Can you just detect it, or can you actually summon it to you?”

She frowned. “Sometimes I can summon it. I’ve never tried with a piece of Celestial bronze that big before. I might be able to draw it to me through the earth, but I’d have to be fairly close. It would take a lot of concentration, and it wouldn’t be fast.”

“Be fast,” Echo warned.

Leo cursed. He had hoped they could just go back to the ship, and Hazel could teleport the Celestial bronze from a safe distance.

“All right,” he said. “We’ll have to try something risky. Hazel, how about you try to summon the bronze from right here? Make it sink through the sand and tunnel over to you, then grab it and run for the ship.”

“But Narcissus is looking at it all the time,” she said.

“All the time,” Echo echoed.

“That’ll be my job,” Leo said, hating his own plan already. “Echo and I will cause a distraction.”

“Distraction?” Echo asked.

“I’ll explain,” Leo promised. “Are you willing?”

“Willing,” Echo said.

“Great,” Leo said. “Now, let’s hope we don’t die.”

V I I I

LEO

LEO PSYCHED HIMSELF UP for an extreme makeover. He summoned some breath mints and a pair of welding goggles from his tool belt. The goggles weren't exactly sunglasses, but they'd have to do. He rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. He used some machine oil to grease back his hair. He stuck a wrench in his back pocket (why exactly, he wasn't sure) and he had Hazel draw a tattoo on his biceps with a marker: HOT STUFF, with a skull and crossbones.

"What in the world are you thinking?" She sounded pretty flustered.

"I try not to think," Leo admitted. "It interferes with being nuts. Just concentrate on moving that Celestial bronze. Echo, you ready?"

"Ready," she said.

Leo took a deep breath. He strutted back toward the pond, hoping he looked awesome and not like he had some sort of nervous affliction. "Leo is the coolest!" he shouted.

"Leo is the coolest!" Echo shouted back.

"Yeah, baby, check me out!"

"Check me out!" Echo said.

"Make way for the king!"

"The king!"

“Narcissus is weak!”

“Weak!”

The crowd of nymphs scattered in surprise. Leo shooed them away as if they were bothering him. “No autographs, girls. I know you want some Leo time, but I’m way too cool. You better just hang around that ugly dweeb Narcissus. He’s lame!”

“Lame!” Echo said with enthusiasm.

The nymphs muttered angrily.

“What are you talking about?” one demanded.

“*You’re* lame,” said another.

Leo adjusted his goggles and smiled. He flexed his biceps, though he didn’t have much to flex, and showed off his HOT STUFF tattoo. He had the nymphs’ attention, if only because they were stunned; but Narcissus was still fixed on his own reflection.

“You know how ugly Narcissus is?” Leo asked the crowd. “He’s so ugly, when he was born his mama thought he was a backward centaur—with a horse butt for a face.”

Some of the nymphs gasped. Narcissus frowned, as though he was vaguely aware of a gnat buzzing around his head.

“You know why his bow has cobwebs?” Leo continued. “He uses it to hunt for dates, but he can’t find one!”

One of the nymphs laughed. The others quickly elbowed her into silence.

Narcissus turned and scowled at Leo. “Who *are* you?”

“I’m the Super-sized McShizzle, man!” Leo said. “I’m Leo Valdez, bad boy supreme. And the ladies *love* a bad boy.”

“Love a bad boy!” Echo said, with a convincing squeal.

Leo took out a pen and autographed the arm of one of the nymphs. “Narcissus is a loser! He’s so weak, he can’t bench-press a Kleenex. He’s so lame, when you look up *lame* on Wikipedia, it’s got a picture of Narcissus—only the picture’s so *ugly*, no one ever checks it out.”

Narcissus knit his handsome eyebrows. His face was turning from bronze to salmon pink. For the moment, he’d totally forgotten about the pond, and Leo

could see the sheet of bronze sinking into the sand.

“What are you talking about?” Narcissus demanded. “I am amazing. Everyone knows this.”

“Amazing at *pure suck*,” Leo said. “If I was as *suck* as you, I’d drown myself. Oh wait, you already did that.”

Another nymph giggled. Then another. Narcissus growled, which did make him look a little less handsome. Meanwhile Leo beamed and wiggled his eyebrows over his goggles and spread his hands, gesturing for applause.

“That’s right!” he said. “Team Leo for the win!”

“Team Leo for the win!” Echo shouted. She’d wriggled into the mob of nymphs, and because she was so hard to see, the nymphs apparently thought the voice came from one of their own.

“Oh my god, I am so awesome!” Leo bellowed.

“So awesome!” Echo yelled back.

“He *is* funny,” a nymph ventured.

“And cute, in a scrawny way,” another said.

“Scrawny?” Leo asked. “Baby, I *invented* scrawny. Scrawny is the new *sizzling hot*. And I GOT the scrawny. Narcissus? He’s such a loser even the Underworld didn’t want him. He couldn’t get the ghost girls to date him.”

“Eww,” said a nymph.

“Eww!” Echo agreed.

“Stop!” Narcissus got to his feet. “This is not right! This person is obviously not awesome, so he must be...” He struggled for the right words. It had probably been a long time since he’d talked about anything other than himself. “He must be tricking us.”

Apparently Narcissus wasn’t completely stupid. Realization dawned on his face. He turned back to the pond. “The bronze mirror is gone! My reflection! Give me back to me!”

“Team Leo!” one of the nymphs squeaked. But the others returned their attention to Narcissus.

“*I’m* the beautiful one!” Narcissus insisted. “He’s stolen my mirror, and I’m going to leave unless we get it back!”

The girls gasped. One pointed. “There!”

Hazel was at the top of the crater, running away as fast as she could while lugging a large sheet of bronze.

“Get it back!” cried a nymph.

Probably against her will, Echo muttered, “Get it back.”

“Yes!” Narcissus unslung his bow and grabbed an arrow from his dusty quiver. “The first one who gets that bronze, I will like you *almost* as much as I like me. I might even kiss you, right after I kiss my reflection!”

“Oh my gods!” the nymphs screamed.

“And kill those demigods!” Narcissus added, glaring very handsomely at Leo. “They are *not* as cool as me!”

Leo could run pretty fast when someone was trying to kill him. Sadly, he’d had a lot of practice.

He overtook Hazel, which was easy, since she was struggling with fifty pounds of Celestial bronze. He took one side of the metal plate and glanced back. Narcissus was nocking an arrow, but it was so old and brittle, it broke into splinters.

“Ow!” he yelled very attractively. “My manicure!”

Normally nymphs were quick—at least the ones at Camp Half-Blood were—but these were burdened with posters, T-shirts, and other Narcissus™ merchandise. The nymphs also weren’t great at working as a team. They kept stumbling over one another, pushing and shoving. Echo made things worse by running among them, tripping and tackling as many as she could.

Still, they were closing rapidly.

“Call Arion!” Leo gasped.

“Already did!” Hazel said.

They ran for the beach. They made it to the edge of the water and could see the *Argo II*, but there was no way to get there. It was much too far to swim, even if they hadn’t been toting bronze.

Leo turned. The mob was coming over the dunes, Narcissus in the lead, holding his bow like a band major’s baton. The nymphs had conjured assorted

weapons. Some held rocks. Some had wooden clubs wreathed in flowers. A few of the water nymphs had squirt guns—which seemed not quite as terrifying—but the look in their eyes was still murderous.

“Oh, man,” Leo muttered, summoning fire in his free hand. “Straight-up fighting isn’t my thing.”

“Hold the Celestial bronze.” Hazel drew her sword. “Get behind me!”

“Get behind me!” Echo repeated. The camouflaged girl was racing ahead of the mob now. She stopped in front of Leo and turned, spreading her arms as if she meant to personally shield him.

“Echo?” Leo could hardly talk with the lump in his throat. “You’re one brave nymph.”

“Brave nymph?” Her tone made it a question.

“I’m proud to have you on Team Leo,” he said. “If we survive this, you should forget Narcissus.”

“Forget Narcissus?” she said uncertainly.

“You’re way too good for him.”

The nymphs surrounded them in a semicircle.

“Trickery!” Narcissus said. “They don’t love me, girls! *We* all love me, don’t we?”

“Yes!” the girls screamed, except for one confused nymph in a yellow dress who squeaked, “Team Leo!”

“Kill them!” Narcissus ordered.

The nymphs surged forward, but the sand in front of them exploded. Arion raced out of nowhere, circling the mob so quickly he created a sandstorm, showering the nymphs in white lime, spraying their eyes.

“I love this horse!” Leo said.

The nymphs collapsed, coughing and gagging. Narcissus stumbled around blindly, swinging his bow like he was trying to hit a piñata.

Hazel climbed into the saddle, hoisted up the bronze, and offered Leo a hand.

“We can’t leave Echo!” Leo said.

“Leave Echo,” the nymph repeated.

She smiled, and for the first time Leo could clearly see her face. She really

was pretty. Her eyes were bluer than he'd realized. How had he missed that?

"Why?" Leo asked. "You don't think you can still save Narcissus..."

"Save Narcissus," she said confidently. And even though it was only an echo, Leo could tell that she meant it. She'd been given a second chance at life, and she was determined to use it to save the guy she loved—even if he was a completely hopeless (though very handsome) moron.

Leo wanted to protest, but Echo leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek, then pushed him gently away.

"Leo, come on!" Hazel called.

The other nymphs were starting to recover. They wiped the lime out of their eyes, which were now glowing green with anger. Leo looked for Echo again, but she had dissolved into the scenery.

"Yeah," he said, his throat dry. "Yeah, okay."

He climbed up behind Hazel. Arion took off across the water, the nymphs screaming behind them, and Narcissus shouting, "Bring me back! Bring me back!"

As Arion raced toward the *Argo II*, Leo remembered what Nemesis had said about Echo and Narcissus: *Perhaps they'll teach you a lesson.*

Leo had thought she'd meant Narcissus, but now he wondered if the real lesson for him was Echo—invisible to her brethren, cursed to love someone who didn't care for her. *A seventh wheel.* He tried to shake that thought. He clung to the sheet of bronze like a shield.

He was determined never to forget Echo's face. She deserved at least one person who saw her and knew how good she was. Leo closed his eyes, but the memory of her smile was already fading.

PIPER

PIPER DIDN'T WANT TO USE THE KNIFE.

But sitting in Jason's cabin, waiting for him to wake up, she felt alone and helpless.

Jason's face was so pale, he might've been dead. She remembered the awful sound of that brick hitting his forehead—an injury that had happened only because he'd tried to shield her from the Romans.

Even with the nectar and ambrosia they'd managed to force-feed him, Piper couldn't be sure he would be okay when he woke up. What if he'd lost his memories again—but this time, his memories of *her*?

That would be the cruelest trick the gods had played on her yet, and they'd played some pretty cruel tricks.

She heard Gleeson Hedge in his room next door, humming a military song—"Stars and Stripes Forever," maybe? Since the satellite TV was out, the satyr was probably sitting on his bunk reading back issues of *Guns & Ammo* magazine. He wasn't a bad chaperone, but he was definitely the most warlike old goat Piper had ever met.

Of course she was grateful to the satyr. He had helped her dad, movie actor Tristan McLean, get back on his feet after being kidnapped by giants the past

winter. A few weeks ago, Hedge had asked his girlfriend, Mellie, to take charge of the McLean household so he could come along to help with this quest.

Coach Hedge had tried to make it sound like returning to Camp Half-Blood had been all his idea, but Piper suspected there was more to it. The last few weeks, whenever Piper called home, her dad and Mellie had asked her what was wrong. Maybe something in her voice had tipped them off.

Piper couldn't share the visions she'd seen. They were too disturbing. Besides, her dad had taken a potion that had erased all of Piper's demigod secrets from his memory. But he could still tell when she was upset, and she was pretty sure her dad had encouraged Coach to look out for her.

She shouldn't draw her blade. It would only make her feel worse.

Finally the temptation was too great. She unsheathed Katoptris. It didn't look very special, just a triangular blade with an unadorned hilt, but it had once been owned by Helen of Troy. The dagger's name meant "looking glass."

Piper gazed at the bronze blade. At first, she saw only her reflection. Then light rippled across the metal. She saw a crowd of Roman demigods gathered in the forum. The blond scarecrow-looking kid, Octavian, was speaking to the mob, shaking his fist. Piper couldn't hear him, but the gist was obvious: *We need to kill those Greeks!*

Reyna, the praetor, stood to one side, her face tight with suppressed emotion. Bitterness? Anger? Piper wasn't sure.

She'd been prepared to hate Reyna, but she couldn't. During the feast in the forum, Piper had admired the way Reyna kept her feelings in check.

Reyna had sized up Piper and Jason's relationship right away. As a daughter of Aphrodite, Piper could tell stuff like that. Yet Reyna had stayed polite and in control. She'd put her camp's needs ahead of her emotions. She'd given the Greeks a fair chance...right up until the *Argo II* had started destroying her city.

She'd almost made Piper feel guilty about being Jason's girlfriend, though that was silly. Jason hadn't ever *been* Reyna's boyfriend, not really.

Maybe Reyna wasn't so bad, but it didn't matter now. They'd messed up the chance for peace. Piper's power of persuasion had, for once, done absolutely no good.

Her secret fear? Maybe she hadn't tried hard enough. Piper had never wanted to make friends with the Romans. She was too worried about losing Jason to his old life. Maybe unconsciously she hadn't put her best effort into the charmspeak.

Now Jason was hurt. The ship had been almost destroyed. And according to her dagger, that crazy teddy-bear-strangling kid, Octavian, was whipping the Romans into a war frenzy.

The scene in her blade shifted. There was a rapid series of images she'd seen before, but she still didn't understand them: Jason riding into battle on horseback, his eyes gold instead of blue; a woman in an old-fashioned Southern belle dress, standing in an oceanside park with palm trees; a bull with the face of a bearded man, rising out of a river; and two giants in matching yellow togas, hoisting a rope on a pulley system, lifting a large bronze vase out of a pit.

Then came the worst vision: she saw herself with Jason and Percy, standing waist-deep in water at the bottom of a dark circular chamber, like a giant well. Ghostly shapes moved through the water as it rose rapidly. Piper clawed at the walls, trying to escape, but there was nowhere to go. The water reached their chests. Jason was pulled under. Percy stumbled and disappeared.

How could a child of the sea god drown? Piper didn't know, but she watched herself in the vision, alone and thrashing in the dark, until the water rose over her head.

Piper shut her eyes. *Don't show me that again*, she pleaded. *Show me something helpful.*

She forced herself to look at the blade again.

This time, she saw an empty highway cutting between fields of wheat and sunflowers. A mileage marker read: TOPEKA 32. On the shoulder of the road stood a man in khaki shorts and a purple camp shirt. His face was lost in the shadow of a broad hat, the brim wreathed in leafy vines. He held up a silver goblet and beckoned to Piper. Somehow she knew he was offering her some sort of gift—a cure, or an antidote.

"Hey," Jason croaked.

Piper was so startled she dropped the knife. "You're awake!"

"Don't sound so surprised." Jason touched his bandaged head and frowned.

“What...what happened? I remember the explosions, and—”

“You remember who I am?”

Jason tried to laugh, but it turned into a painful wince. “Last I checked, you were my awesome girlfriend Piper. Unless something has changed since I was out?”

Piper was so relieved she almost sobbed. She helped him sit up and gave him some nectar to sip while she brought him up to speed. She was just explaining Leo’s plan to fix the ship when she heard horse hooves clomping across the deck over their heads.

Moments later, Leo and Hazel stumbled to a stop in the doorway, carrying a large sheet of hammered bronze between them.

“Gods of Olympus.” Piper stared at Leo. “What happened to *you*?”

His hair was greased back. He had welding goggles on his forehead, a lipstick mark on his cheek, tattoos all over his arms, and a T-shirt that read **HOT STUFF, BAD BOY, and TEAM LEO.**

“Long story,” he said. “Others back?”

“Not yet,” Piper said.

Leo cursed. Then he noticed Jason sitting up, and his face brightened. “Hey, man! Glad you’re better. I’ll be in the engine room.”

He ran off with the sheet of bronze, leaving Hazel in the doorway.

Piper raised an eyebrow at her. “*Team Leo?*”

“We met Narcissus,” Hazel said, which didn’t really explain much. “Also Nemesis, the revenge goddess.”

Jason sighed. “I miss all the fun.”

On the deck above, something went *THUMP*, as if a heavy creature had landed. Annabeth and Percy came running down the hall. Percy was toting a steaming five-gallon plastic bucket that smelled horrible. Annabeth had a patch of black sticky stuff in her hair. Percy’s shirt was covered in it.

“Roofing tar?” Piper guessed.

Frank stumbled up behind them, which made the hallway pretty jam-packed with demigods. Frank had a big smear of the black sludge down his face.

“Ran into some tar monsters,” Annabeth said. “Hey, Jason, glad you’re

awake. Hazel, where's Leo?"

She pointed down. "Engine room."

Suddenly the entire ship listed to port. The demigods stumbled. Percy almost spilled his bucket of tar.

"Uh, what was that?" he demanded.

"Oh..." Hazel looked embarrassed. "We may have angered the nymphs who live in this lake. Like...*all* of them."

"Great." Percy handed the bucket of tar to Frank and Annabeth. "You guys help Leo. I'll hold off the water spirits as long as I can."

"On it!" Frank promised.

The three of them ran off, leaving Hazel at the cabin door. The ship listed again, and Hazel hugged her stomach like she was going to be sick.

"I'll just..." She swallowed, pointed weakly down the passageway, and ran off.

Jason and Piper stayed below as the ship rocked back and forth. For a hero, Piper felt pretty useless. Waves crashed against the hull as angry voices came from above deck—Percy shouting, Coach Hedge yelling at the lake. Festus the figurehead breathed fire several times. Down the hall, Hazel moaned miserably in her cabin. In the engine room below, it sounded like Leo and the others were doing an Irish line dance with anvils tied to their feet. After what seemed like hours, the engine began to hum. The oars creaked and groaned, and Piper felt the ship lift into the air.

The rocking and shaking stopped. The ship became quiet except for the drone of machinery. Finally Leo emerged from the engine room. He was caked in sweat, lime dust, and tar. His T-shirt looked like it had been caught in an escalator and chewed to shreds. The *TEAM LEO* on his chest now read: *AM LEO*. But he grinned like a madman and announced that they were safely under way.

"Meeting in the mess hall, one hour," he said. "Crazy day, huh?"

After everyone had cleaned up, Coach Hedge took the helm and the demigods gathered below for dinner. It was the first time they'd all sat down together—just the seven of them. Maybe their presence should've reassured Piper, but seeing

all of them in one place only reminded her that the Prophecy of Seven was unfolding at last. No more waiting for Leo to finish the ship. No more easy days at Camp Half-Blood, pretending the future was still a long way off. They were under way, with a bunch of angry Romans behind them and the ancient lands ahead. The giants would be waiting. Gaea was rising. And unless they succeeded in this quest, the world would be destroyed.

The others must've felt it too. The tension in the mess hall was like an electrical storm brewing, which was totally possible, considering Percy's and Jason's powers. In an awkward moment, the two boys tried to sit in the same chair at the head of the table. Sparks literally flew from Jason's hands. After a brief silent standoff, like they were both thinking, *Seriously, dude?*, they ceded the chair to Annabeth and sat at opposite sides of the table.

The crew compared notes on what had happened in Salt Lake City, but even Leo's ridiculous story about how he tricked Narcissus wasn't enough to cheer up the group.

"So where to now?" Leo asked with a mouthful of pizza. "I did a quick repair job to get us out of the lake, but there's still a lot of damage. We should really put down again and fix things right before we head across the Atlantic."

Percy was eating a piece of pie, which for some reason was completely blue—filling, crust, even the whipped cream. "We need to put some distance between us and Camp Jupiter," he said. "Frank spotted some eagles over Salt Lake City. We figure the Romans aren't far behind us."

That didn't improve the mood around the table. Piper didn't want to say anything, but she felt obliged...and a little guilty. "I don't suppose we should go back and try to reason with the Romans? Maybe—maybe I didn't try hard enough with the charmspeak."

Jason took her hand. "It wasn't your fault, Pipes. Or Leo's," he added quickly. "Whatever happened, it was Gaea's doing, to drive the two camps apart."

Piper was grateful for his support, but she still felt uneasy. "Maybe if we could explain that, though—"

"With no proof?" Annabeth asked. "And no idea what really happened? I

appreciate what you're saying, Piper. I don't want the Romans on our bad side, but until we understand what Gaea's up to, going back is suicide."

"She's right," Hazel said. She still looked a little queasy from seasickness, but she was trying to eat a few saltine crackers. The rim of her plate was embedded with rubies, and Piper was pretty sure they hadn't been there at the beginning of the meal. "Reyna might listen, but Octavian won't. The Romans have honor to think about. They've been attacked. They'll shoot first and ask questions post hac."

Piper stared at her own dinner. The magical plates could conjure up a great selection of vegetarian stuff. She especially liked the avocado and grilled pepper quesadilla, but tonight she didn't have much of an appetite.

She thought about the visions she'd seen in her knife: Jason with golden eyes; the bull with the human head; the two giants in yellow togas hoisting a bronze jar from a pit. Worst of all, she remembered herself drowning in black water.

Piper had always liked the water. She had good memories of surfing with her dad. But since she'd started seeing that vision in Katoptris, she'd been thinking more and more of an old Cherokee story her granddad used to tell to keep her away from the river near his cabin. He told her the Cherokees believed in good water spirits, like the naiads of the Greeks; but they also believed in evil water spirits, the water cannibals, who hunted mortals with invisible arrows and were especially fond of drowning small children.

"You're right," she decided. "We have to keep going. Not just because of the Romans. We have to hurry."

Hazel nodded. "Nemesis said we have only six days until Nico dies and Rome is destroyed."

Jason frowned. "You mean *Rome* Rome, not New Rome?"

"I think," Hazel said. "But if so, that's not much time."

"Why six days?" Percy wondered. "And how are they going to destroy Rome?"

No one answered. Piper didn't want to add further bad news, but she felt she had to.

"There's more," she said. "I've been seeing some things in my knife."

The big kid, Frank, froze with a forkful of spaghetti halfway to his mouth. “Things such as...?”

“They don’t really make sense,” Piper said, “just garbled images, but I saw two giants, dressed alike. Maybe twins.”

Annabeth stared at the magical video feed from Camp Half-Blood on the wall. Right now it showed the living room in the Big House: a cozy fire on the hearth and Seymour, the stuffed leopard head, snoring contentedly above the mantel.

“Twins, like in Ella’s prophecy,” Annabeth said. “If we could figure out those lines, it might help.”

“*Wisdom’s daughter walks alone,*” Percy said. “*The Mark of Athena burns through Rome.* Annabeth, that’s got to mean you. Juno told me...well, she said you had a hard task ahead of you in Rome. She said she doubted you could do it. But I know she’s wrong.”

Annabeth took a long breath. “Reyna was about to tell me something right before the ship fired on us. She said there was an old legend among the Roman praetors—something that had to do with Athena. She said it might be the reason Greeks and Romans could never get along.”

Leo and Hazel exchanged nervous looks.

“Nemesis mentioned something similar,” Leo said. “She talked about an old score that had to be settled—”

“The one thing that might bring the gods’ two natures into harmony,” Hazel recalled. “An old wrong finally avenged.”

Percy drew a frowny face in his blue whipped cream. “I was only a praetor for about two hours. Jason, you ever hear a legend like that?”

Jason was still holding Piper’s hand. His fingers had turned clammy.

“I...uh, I’m not sure,” he said. “I’ll give it some thought.”

Percy narrowed his eyes. “You’re not *sure*?”

Jason didn’t respond. Piper wanted to ask him what was wrong. She could tell he didn’t want to discuss this old legend. She caught his eye, and he pleaded silently, *Later*.

Hazel broke the silence. “What about the other lines?” She turned her ruby-

encrusted plate. *“Twins snuff out the angel’s breath, Who holds the key to endless death.”*

“Giants’ bane stands gold and pale,” Frank added, *“Won through pain from a woven jail.”*

“Giants’ bane,” Leo said. “Anything that’s a giants’ bane is good for us, right? That’s probably what we need to find. If it can help the gods get their schizophrenic act together, that’s good.”

Percy nodded. “We can’t kill the giants without the help of the gods.”

Jason turned to Frank and Hazel. “I thought you guys killed that one giant in Alaska without a god’s help, just the two of you.”

“Alcyoneus was a special case,” Frank said. “He was only immortal in the territory where he was reborn—Alaska. But not in Canada. I wish I could kill *all* the giants by dragging them across the border from Alaska into Canada, but...” He shrugged. “Percy’s right, we’ll need the gods.”

Piper gazed at the walls. She really wished Leo hadn’t enchanted them with images of Camp Half-Blood. It was like a doorway to home that she could never go through. She watched the hearth of Hestia burning in the middle of the green as the cabins turned off their lights for curfew.

She wondered how the Roman demigods, Frank and Hazel, felt about those images. They’d never even been to Camp Half-Blood. Did it seem alien to them, or unfair that Camp Jupiter wasn’t represented? Did it make them miss their own home?

The other lines of the prophecy turned in Piper’s mind. What was a woven jail? How could twins snuff out an angel’s breath? The key to endless death didn’t sound very cheerful, either.

“So...” Leo pushed his chair away from the table. “First things first, I guess. We’ll have to put down in the morning to finish repairs.”

“Someplace close to a city,” Annabeth suggested, “in case we need supplies. But somewhere out of the way, so the Romans will have trouble finding us. Any ideas?”

No one spoke. Piper remembered her vision in the knife: the strange man in purple, holding out a goblet and beckoning to her. He’d been standing in front of

a sign that read TOPEKA 32.

“Well,” she ventured, “how do you guys feel about Kansas?”

X

PIPER

PIPER HAD TROUBLE FALLING ASLEEP.

Coach Hedge spent the first hour after curfew doing his nightly duty, walking up and down the passageway yelling, “Lights out! Settle down! Try to sneak out, and I’ll smack you back to Long Island!”

He banged his baseball bat against a cabin door whenever he heard a noise, shouting at everyone to go to sleep, which made it impossible for *anyone* to go to sleep. Piper figured this was the most fun the satyr had had since he’d pretended to be a gym teacher at the Wilderness School.

She stared at the bronze beams on the ceiling. Her cabin was pretty cozy. Leo had programmed their quarters to adjust automatically to the occupant’s preferred temperature, so it was never too cold or too hot. The mattress and the pillows were stuffed with pegasus down (no pegasi were harmed in the making of these products, Leo had assured her), so they were über-comfortable. A bronze lantern hung from the ceiling, glowing at whatever brightness Piper wished. The lantern’s sides were perforated with pinholes, so at night glimmering constellations drifted across her walls.

Piper had so many things on her mind, she thought she’d never sleep. But

there was something peaceful about the rocking of the boat and the drone of the aerial oars as they scooped through the sky.

Finally her eyelids got heavy, and she drifted off.

It seemed like only a few seconds had passed before she woke to the breakfast bell.

“Yo, Piper!” Leo knocked on her door. “We’re landing!”

“Landing?” She sat up groggily.

Leo opened her door and poked his head in. He had his hand over his eyes, which would’ve been a nice gesture if he hadn’t been peeking through his fingers. “You decent?”

“Leo!”

“Sorry.” He grinned. “Hey, nice Power Ranger jammies.”

“They are not Power Rangers! They’re Cherokee eagles!”

“Yeah, sure. Anyway, we’re setting down a few miles outside Topeka, as requested. And, um...” He glanced out in the passageway, then leaned inside again. “Thanks for not hating me, about blowing up the Romans yesterday.”

Piper rubbed her eyes. The feast in New Rome had been only yesterday? “That’s okay, Leo. You weren’t in control of yourself.”

“Yeah, but still...you didn’t have to stick up for me.”

“Are you kidding? You’re like the annoying little brother I never had. Of course I’ll stick up for you.”

“Uh...thanks?”

From above, Coach Hedge yelled, “Thar she blows! Kansas, ahoy!”

“Holy Hephaestus,” Leo muttered. “He really needs to work on his shipspeak. I’d better get above deck.”

By the time Piper had showered, changed, and grabbed a bagel from the mess hall, she could hear the ship’s landing gear extending. She climbed on deck and joined the others as the *Argo II* settled in the middle of a field of sunflowers. The oars retracted. The gangplank lowered itself.

The morning air smelled of irrigation, warm plants, and fertilized earth. Not a bad smell. It reminded Piper of Grandpa Tom’s place in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, back on the reservation.

Percy was the first to notice her. He smiled in greeting, which for some reason surprised Piper. He was wearing faded jeans and a fresh orange Camp Half-Blood T-shirt, as if he'd never been away from the Greek side. The new clothes had probably helped his mood—and of course the fact that he was standing at the rail with his arm around Annabeth.

Piper was happy to see Annabeth with a sparkle in her eyes, because Piper had never had a better friend. For months, Annabeth had been tormenting herself, her every waking moment consumed with the search for Percy. Now, despite the dangerous quest they were facing, at least she had her boyfriend back.

“So!” Annabeth plucked the bagel out of Piper’s hand and took a bite, but that didn’t bother Piper. Back at camp, they’d had a running joke about stealing each other’s breakfast. “Here we are. What’s the plan?”

“I want to check out the highway,” Piper said. “Find the sign that says Topeka 32.”

Leo spun his Wii controller in a circle, and the sails lowered themselves. “We shouldn’t be far,” he said. “Festus and I calculated the landing as best we could. What do you expect to find at the mile marker?”

Piper explained what she’d seen in the knife—the man in purple with a goblet. She kept quiet about the other images, though, like the vision of Percy, Jason, and herself drowning. She wasn’t sure what it meant, anyway; and everyone seemed in such better spirits this morning, she didn’t want to ruin the mood.

“Purple shirt?” Jason asked. “Vines on his hat? Sounds like Bacchus.”

“Dionysus,” Percy muttered. “If we came all the way to Kansas to see *Mr. D*—”

“Bacchus isn’t so bad,” Jason said. “I don’t like his followers much....”

Piper shuddered. Jason, Leo, and she had had an encounter with the maenads a few months ago and almost gotten torn to pieces.

“But the god himself is okay,” Jason continued. “I did him a favor once up in the wine country.”

Percy looked appalled. “Whatever, man. Maybe he’s better on the Roman

side. But why would he be hanging around in Kansas? Didn't Zeus order the gods to cease all contact with mortals?"

Frank grunted. The big guy was wearing a blue tracksuit this morning, like he was ready to go for a jog in the sunflowers.

"The gods haven't been very good at following *that* order," he noted. "Besides, if the gods *have* gone schizophrenic like Hazel said—"

"And *Leo* said," added Leo.

Frank scowled at him. "Then who knows what's going on with the Olympians? Could be some pretty bad stuff out there."

"Sounds dangerous!" Leo agreed cheerfully. "Well...you guys have fun. I've got to finish repairs on the hull. Coach Hedge is gonna work on the broken crossbows. And, uh, Annabeth—I could really use your help. You're the only other person who even *sort of* understands engineering."

Annabeth looked apologetically at Percy. "He's right. I should stay and help."

"I'll come back to you." He kissed her on the cheek. "Promise."

They were so easy together, it made Piper's heart ache.

Jason was great, of course. But sometimes he acted so distant, like last night, when he'd been reluctant to talk about that old Roman legend. So often he seemed to be thinking of his old life at Camp Jupiter. Piper wondered if she would ever be able to break through that barrier.

The trip to Camp Jupiter, seeing Reyna in person, hadn't helped. Neither did the fact that Jason had chosen to wear a purple shirt today—the color of the Romans.

Frank slid his bow off his shoulder and propped it against the rail. "I think I should turn into a crow or something and fly around, keep an eye out for Roman eagles."

"Why a crow?" Leo asked. "Man, if you can turn into a dragon, why don't you just turn into a dragon every time? That's the coolest."

Frank's face looked like it was being infused with cranberry juice. "That's like asking why you don't bench-press your maximum weight every time you lift. Because it's hard, and you'd hurt yourself. Turning into a dragon isn't easy."

"Oh." Leo nodded. "I wouldn't know. I don't lift weights."

“Yeah. Well, maybe you should consider it, Mr.—”

Hazel stepped between them.

“I’ll help you, Frank,” she said, shooting Leo an evil look. “I can summon Arion and scout around below.”

“Sure,” Frank said, still glaring at Leo. “Yeah, thanks.”

Piper wondered what was going on with those three. The boys showing off for Hazel and razzing each other—*that* she understood. But it almost seemed like Hazel and Leo had a history. So far as she knew, they’d met for the first time just yesterday. She wondered if something else had happened on their trip to the Great Salt Lake—something they hadn’t mentioned.

Hazel turned to Percy. “Just be careful when you go out there. Lots of fields, lots of crops. Could be *karpoi* on the loose.”

“*Karpoi*?” Piper asked.

“Grain spirits,” Hazel said. “You don’t want to meet them.”

Piper didn’t see how a grain spirit could be so bad, but Hazel’s tone convinced her not to ask.

“That leaves three of us to check on the mile marker,” Percy said. “Me, Jason, Piper. I’m not psyched about seeing Mr. D again. That guy is a pain. But, Jason, if you’re on better terms with him—”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “If we find him, I’ll talk to him. Piper, it’s your vision. You should take the lead.”

Piper shivered. She’d seen the three of them drowning in that dark well. Was Kansas where it would happen? That didn’t seem right, but she couldn’t be sure.

“Of course,” she said, trying to sound upbeat. “Let’s find the highway.”

Leo had said they were close. His idea of “close” needed some work.

After trudging half a mile through hot fields, getting bitten by mosquitoes and whacked in the face with scratchy sunflowers, they finally reached the road. An old billboard for Bubba’s Gas ’n’ Grub indicated they were still forty miles from the first Topeka exit.

“Correct my math,” Percy said, “but doesn’t that mean we have eight miles to walk?”

Jason peered both ways down the deserted road. He looked better today, thanks to the magical healing of ambrosia and nectar. His color was back to normal, and the scar on his forehead had almost vanished. The new *gladius* that Hera had given him last winter hung at his belt. Most guys would look pretty awkward walking around with a scabbard strapped to their jeans, but on Jason it seemed perfectly natural.

“No cars...” he said. “But I guess we wouldn’t want to hitchhike.”

“No,” Piper agreed, gazing nervously down the highway. “We’ve already spent too much time going overland. The earth is Gaea’s territory.”

“Hmm...” Jason snapped his fingers. “I can call a friend for a ride.”

Percy raised his eyebrows. “Oh, yeah? Me too. Let’s see whose friend gets here first.”

Jason whistled. Piper knew what he was doing, but he’d succeeded in summoning Tempest only three times since they’d met the storm spirit at the Wolf House last winter. Today, the sky was so blue, Piper didn’t see how it could work.

Percy simply closed his eyes and concentrated.

Piper hadn’t studied him up close before. After hearing so much at Camp Half-Blood about Percy Jackson *this* and Percy Jackson *that*, she thought he looked...well, unimpressive, especially next to Jason. Percy was more slender, about an inch shorter, with slightly longer, much darker hair.

He wasn’t really Piper’s type. If she’d seen him in the mall somewhere, she probably would’ve thought he was a skater—cute in a scruffy way, a little on the wild side, definitely a troublemaker. She would have steered clear. She had enough trouble in her life. But she could see why Annabeth liked him, and she could definitely see why Percy needed Annabeth in his life. If anybody could keep a guy like that under control, it was Annabeth.

Thunder crackled in the clear sky.

Jason smiled. “Soon.”

“Too late.” Percy pointed east, where a black winged shape was spiraling toward them. At first, Piper thought it might be Frank in crow form. Then she realized it was much too big to be a bird.

“A black pegasus?” she said. “Never seen one like that.”

The winged stallion came in for a landing. He trotted over to Percy and nuzzled his face, then turned his head inquisitively toward Piper and Jason.

“Blackjack,” Percy said, “this is Piper and Jason. They’re friends.”

The horse nickered.

“Uh, maybe later,” Percy answered.

Piper had heard that Percy could speak to horses, being the son of the horse lord Poseidon, but she’d never seen it in action.

“What does Blackjack want?” she asked.

“Donuts,” Percy said. “Always donuts. He can carry all three of us if—”

Suddenly the air turned cold. Piper’s ears popped. About fifty yards away, a miniature cyclone three stories tall tore across the tops of the sunflowers like a scene from *The Wizard of Oz*. It touched down on the road next to Jason and took the form of a horse—a misty steed with lightning flickering through its body.

“Tempest,” Jason said, grinning broadly. “Long time, my friend.”

The storm spirit reared and whinnied. Blackjack backed up skittishly.

“Easy, boy,” Percy said. “He’s a friend too.” He gave Jason an impressed look. “Nice ride, Grace.”

Jason shrugged. “I made friends with him during our fight at the Wolf House. He’s a free spirit, literally, but once in a while he agrees to help me.”

Percy and Jason climbed on their respective horses. Piper had never been comfortable with Tempest. Riding full gallop on a beast that could vaporize at any moment made her a bit nervous. Nevertheless, she accepted Jason’s hand and climbed on.

Tempest raced down the road with Blackjack soaring overhead. Fortunately, they didn’t pass any cars, or they might have caused a wreck. In no time, they arrived at the thirty-two-mile marker, which looked exactly as Piper had seen it in her vision.

Blackjack landed. Both horses pawed the asphalt. Neither looked pleased to have stopped so suddenly, just when they’d found their stride.

Blackjack whinnied.

“You’re right,” Percy said. “No sign of the wine dude.”

“I beg your pardon?” said a voice from the fields.

Tempest turned so quickly, Piper almost fell off.

The wheat parted, and the man from her vision stepped into view. He wore a wide-brimmed hat wreathed in grapevines, a purple short-sleeved shirt, khaki shorts, and Birkenstocks with white socks. He looked maybe thirty, with a slight potbelly, like a frat boy who hadn’t yet realized college was over.

“Did someone just call me the *wine dude*?” he asked in a lazy drawl. “It’s Bacchus, please. Or Mr. Bacchus. Or Lord Bacchus. Or, sometimes, Oh-My-Gods-Please-Don’t-Kill-Me, Lord Bacchus.”

Percy urged Blackjack forward, though the pegasus didn’t seem happy about it.

“You look different,” Percy told the god. “Skinnier. Your hair is longer. And your shirt isn’t so loud.”

The wine god squinted up at him. “What in blazes are you talking about? Who are you, and where is Ceres?”

“Uh...what series?”

“I think he means Ceres,” Jason said. “The goddess of agriculture. You’d call her Demeter.” He nodded respectfully to the god. “Lord Bacchus, do you remember me? I helped you with that missing leopard in Sonoma.”

Bacchus scratched his stubbly chin. “Ah...yes. John Green.”

“Jason Grace.”

“Whatever,” the god said. “Did Ceres send you, then?”

“No, Lord Bacchus,” Jason said. “Were you expecting to meet her here?”

The god snorted. “Well, I didn’t come to Kansas to *party*, my boy. Ceres asked me here for a council of war. What with Gaea rising, the crops are withering. Droughts are spreading. The *karpoi* are in revolt. Even my grapes aren’t safe. Ceres wanted a united front in the plant war.”

“The plant war,” Percy said. “You’re going to arm all the little grapes with tiny assault rifles?”

The god narrowed his eyes. “Have we met?”

“At Camp Half-Blood,” Percy said, “I know you as Mr. D—Dionysus.”

“Agh!” Bacchus winced and pressed his hands to his temples. For a moment, his image flickered. Piper saw a different person—fatter, dumpier, in a much louder, leopard-patterned shirt. Then Bacchus returned to being Bacchus. “Stop that!” he demanded. “Stop thinking about me in Greek!”

Percy blinked. “Uh, but—”

“Do you have any idea how *hard* it is to stay focused? Splitting headaches all the time! I never know what I’m doing or where I’m going! Constantly grumpy!”

“That sounds pretty normal for you,” Percy said.

The god’s nostrils flared. One of the grape leaves on his hat burst into flame. “If we know each other from that *other* camp, it’s a wonder I haven’t already turned you into a dolphin.”

“It was discussed,” Percy assured him. “I think you were just too lazy to do it.”

Piper had been watching with horrified fascination, the way she might watch a car wreck in progress. Now she realized Percy was *not* making things better, and Annabeth wasn’t around to rein him in. Piper figured her friend would never forgive her if she brought Percy back transformed into a sea mammal.

“Lord Bacchus!” she interrupted, slipping off Tempest’s back.

“Piper, careful,” Jason said.

She shot him a warning glance: *I’ve got this*.

“Sorry to trouble you, my lord,” she told the god, “but actually we came here to get your advice. Please, we need your wisdom.”

She used her most agreeable tone, pouring respect into her charmspeak.

The god frowned, but the purple glow faded in his eyes. “You’re well-spoken, girl. Advice, eh? Very well. I would avoid karaoke. Really, theme parties in general are out. In these austere times, people are looking for a simple, low-key affair, with locally produced organic snacks and—”

“Not about parties,” Piper interrupted. “Although that’s incredibly useful advice, Lord Bacchus. We were hoping you’d help us on our quest.”

She explained about the *Argo II* and their voyage to stop the giants from awakening Gaea. She told him what Nemesis had said: that in six days, Rome

would be destroyed. She described the vision reflected in her knife, where Bacchus offered her a silver goblet.

“Silver goblet?” The god didn’t sound very excited. He grabbed a Diet Pepsi from nowhere and popped the top of the can.

“You drink Diet Coke,” Percy said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Bacchus snapped. “As to this vision of the goblet, young lady, I have nothing for you to drink unless you want a Pepsi. Jupiter has put me under strict orders to avoid giving wine to minors. Bothersome, but there you have it. As for the giants, I know them well. I fought in the first Giant War, you know.”

“You can fight?” Percy asked.

Piper wished he hadn’t sounded so incredulous.

Dionysus snarled. His Diet Pepsi transformed into a five-foot staff wreathed in ivy, topped with a pinecone.

“A *thyrsus!*” Piper said, hoping to distract the god before he whacked Percy on the head. She’d seen weapons like that before in the hands of crazy nymphs, and wasn’t thrilled to see one again, but she tried to sound impressed. “Oh, what a mighty weapon!”

“Indeed,” Bacchus agreed. “I’m glad *someone* in your group is smart. The pinecone is a fearsome tool of destruction! I was a demigod myself in the first Giant War, you know. The son of Jupiter!”

Jason flinched. Probably he wasn’t thrilled to be reminded that the Wine Dude was technically his big brother.

Bacchus swung his staff through the air, though his potbelly almost threw him off balance. “Of course that was long before I invented wine and became an immortal. I fought side by side with the gods and some other demigod...Harry Cleese, I think.”

“Heracles?” Piper suggested politely.

“Whatever,” Bacchus said. “Anyway, I killed the giant Ephialtes and his brother Otis. Horrible boors, those two. Pinecone in the face for both of them!”

Piper held her breath. All at once, several ideas came together in her head—the visions in the knife, the lines of the prophecy they’d been discussing the

night before. She felt like she used to when she was scuba diving with her father, and he would wipe her mask for her underwater. Suddenly, everything was clearer.

“Lord Bacchus,” she said, trying to control the nervousness in her voice. “Those two giants, Ephialtes and Otis...would they happen to be twins?”

“Hmm?” The god seemed distracted by his *thyrsus*-swinging, but he nodded. “Yes, twins. That’s right.”

Piper turned to Jason. She could tell he was following her thoughts: *Twins snuff out the angel’s breath.*

In the blade of Katoptris, she’d seen two giants in yellow robes, lifting a jar from a deep pit.

“That’s why we’re here,” Piper told the god. “You’re part of our quest!”

Bacchus frowned. “I’m sorry, my girl. I’m not a demigod anymore. I don’t *do* quests.”

“But giants can only be killed by heroes and gods working together,” she insisted. “You’re a god now, and the two giants we have to fight are Ephialtes and Otis. I think...I think they’re waiting for us in Rome. They’re going to destroy the city somehow. The silver goblet I saw in my vision—maybe it’s meant as a symbol for your help. You *have* to help us kill the giants!”

Bacchus glared at her, and Piper realized she’d chosen her words poorly.

“My girl,” he said coldly, “I don’t *have* to do anything. Besides, I only help those who give me proper tribute, which no one has managed to do in many, many centuries.”

Blackjack whinnied uneasily.

Piper couldn’t blame him. She didn’t like the sound of *tribute*. She remembered the maenads, the crazed followers of Bacchus, who would tear up nonbelievers with their bare hands. And that was when they were in a *good* mood.

Percy voiced the question that she was too scared to ask. “What kind of tribute?”

Bacchus waved his hand dismissively. “Nothing *you* could handle, insolent Greek. But I will give you some free advice, since this girl does have *some*

manners. Seek out Gaea's son, Phorcys. He always hated his mother, not that I can blame him. He didn't have much use for his siblings the twins, either. You'll find him in the city they named after that heroine—Atalanta.”

Piper hesitated. “You mean Atlanta?”

“That's the one.”

“But this Phorcys,” Jason said. “Is he a giant? A Titan?”

Bacchus laughed. “Neither. Seek out the salt water.”

“Salt water...” Percy said. “In Atlanta?”

“Yes,” Bacchus said. “Are you hard of hearing? If anyone can give you insight on Gaea and the twins, it's Phorcys. Just watch out for him.”

“What do you mean?” Jason asked.

The god glanced at the sun, which had climbed almost to high noon. “It's unlike Ceres to be late, unless she sensed something dangerous in this area. Or...”

The god's face suddenly went slack. “Or a trap. Well, I must be going! And if I were you, I'd do the same!”

“Lord Bacchus, wait!” Jason protested.

The god shimmered and disappeared with a sound like a soda-can top being popped.

The wind rustled through the sunflowers. The horses paced in agitation. Despite the dry, hot day, Piper shivered. A cold feeling...Annabeth and Leo had both described a cold feeling....

“Bacchus is right,” she said. “We need to leave—”

Too late, said a sleepy voice, humming through the fields all around them and resonating in the ground at Piper's feet.

Percy and Jason drew their swords. Piper stood on the road between them, frozen with fear. The power of Gaea was suddenly everywhere. The sunflowers turned to look at them. The wheat bent toward them like a million scythes.

Welcome to my party, Gaea murmured. Her voice reminded Piper of corn growing—a crackling, hissing, hot and persistent noise she used to hear at Grandpa Tom's on those quiet nights in Oklahoma.

What did Bacchus say? the goddess mocked. *A simple, low-key affair with*

organic snacks? Yes. For my snacks, I need only two: the blood of a female demigod, and the blood of a male. Piper, my dear, choose which hero will die with you.

“Gaea!” Jason yelled. “Stop hiding in the wheat. Show yourself!”

Such bravado, Gaea hissed. But the other one, Percy Jackson, also has appeal. Choose, Piper McLean, or I will.

Piper’s heart raced. Gaea meant to kill her. That was no surprise. But what was this about choosing one of the boys? Why would Gaea let either of them go? It had to be a trap.

“You’re insane!” she shouted. “I’m not choosing anything for you!”

Suddenly Jason gasped. He sat up straight in his saddle.

“Jason!” Piper cried. “What’s wrong—?”

He looked down at her, his expression deadly calm. His eyes were no longer blue. They glowed solid gold.

“Percy, help!” Piper stumbled back from Tempest.

But Percy galloped away from them. He stopped thirty feet down the road and wheeled his pegasus around. He raised his sword and pointed the tip toward Jason.

“*One will die,*” Percy said, but the voice wasn’t his. It was deep and hollow, like someone whispering from inside the barrel of a cannon.

“*I will choose,*” Jason answered, in the same hollow voice.

“No!” Piper yelled.

All around her, the fields crackled and hissed, laughing in Gaea’s voice as Percy and Jason charged at each other, their weapons ready.

PIPER

IF NOT FOR THE HORSES, PIPER WOULD'VE DIED.

Jason and Percy charged each other, but Tempest and Blackjack balked long enough for Piper to leap out of the way.

She rolled to the edge of the road and looked back, dazed and horrified, as the boys crossed swords, gold against bronze. Sparks flew. Their blades blurred—strike and parry—and the pavement trembled. The first exchange took only a second, but Piper couldn't believe the speed of their sword fighting. The horses pulled away from each other—Tempest thundering in protest, Blackjack flapping his wings.

“Stop it!” Piper yelled.

For a moment, Jason heeded her voice. His golden eyes turned toward her, and Percy charged, slamming his blade into Jason. Thank the gods, Percy turned his sword—maybe on purpose, maybe accidentally—so the flat of it hit Jason's chest; but the impact was still enough to knock Jason off his mount.

Blackjack cantered away as Tempest reared in confusion. The spirit horse charged into the sunflowers and dissipated into vapor.

Percy struggled to turn his pegasus around.

“Percy!” Piper yelled. “Jason's your friend. Drop your weapon!”

Percy's sword arm dipped. Piper might have been able to bring him under control, but unfortunately Jason got to his feet.

Jason roared. A bolt of lightning arced out of the clear blue sky. It ricocheted off his *gladius* and blasted Percy off his horse.

Blackjack whinnied and fled into the wheat fields. Jason charged at Percy, who was now on his back, his clothes smoking from the lightning blast.

For a horrible moment, Piper couldn't find her voice. Gaea seemed to be whispering to her: *You must choose one. Why not let Jason kill him?*

"No!" she screamed. "Jason, stop!"

He froze, his sword six inches from Percy's face.

Jason turned, the gold light in his eyes flickering uncertainly. *"I cannot stop. One must die."*

Something about that voice...it wasn't Gaea. It wasn't Jason. Whoever it was spoke haltingly, as if English was its second language.

"Who are you?" Piper demanded.

Jason's mouth twisted in a gruesome smile. *"We are the eidolons. We will live again."*

"Eidolons...?" Piper's mind raced. She'd studied all sorts of monsters at Camp Half-Blood, but that term wasn't familiar. "You're—you're some sort of ghost?"

"He must die." Jason turned his attention back to Percy, but Percy had recovered more than either of them realized. He swept out his leg and knocked Jason off his feet.

Jason's head hit the asphalt with a nauseating *conk*.

Percy rose.

"Stop it!" Piper screamed again, but there was no charmspeak in her voice. She was shouting in sheer desperation.

Percy raised Riptide over Jason's chest.

Panic closed up Piper's throat. She wanted to attack Percy with her dagger, but she knew that wouldn't help. Whatever was controlling him had all of Percy's skill. There was no way she could beat him in combat.

She forced herself to focus. She poured all of her anger into her voice.

“Eidolon, stop.”

Percy froze.

“Face me,” Piper ordered.

The son of the sea god turned. His eyes were gold instead of green, his face pale and cruel, not at all like Percy’s.

“*You have not chosen,*” he said. “*So this one will die.*”

“You’re a spirit from the Underworld,” Piper guessed. “You’re possessing Percy Jackson. Is that it?”

Percy sneered. “*I will live again in this body. The Earth Mother has promised. I will go where I please, control whom I wish.*”

A wave of cold washed over Piper. “Leo...that’s what happened to Leo. He was being controlled by an eidolon.”

The thing in Percy’s form laughed without humor. “*Too late you realize. You can trust no one.*”

Jason still wasn’t moving. Piper had no help, no way to protect him.

Behind Percy, something rustled in the wheat. Piper saw the tip of a black wing, and Percy began to turn toward the sound.

“Ignore it!” she yelled. “Look at me.”

Percy obeyed. “*You cannot stop me. I will kill Jason Grace.*”

Behind him, Blackjack emerged from the wheat field, moving with surprising stealth for such a large animal.

“You won’t kill him,” Piper ordered. But she wasn’t looking at Percy. She locked eyes with the pegasus, pouring all her power into her words and hoping Blackjack would understand. “You will knock him out.”

The charmspeak washed over Percy. He shifted his weight indecisively. “*I... will knock him out?*”

“Oh, sorry.” Piper smiled. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

Blackjack reared and brought his hoof down on Percy’s head.

Percy crumpled to the pavement next to Jason.

“Oh, gods!” Piper ran to the boys. “Blackjack, you didn’t *kill* him, did you?”

The pegasus snorted. Piper couldn’t speak Horse, but she thought he might have said: *Please. I know my own strength.*

Tempest was nowhere to be seen. The lightning steed had apparently returned to wherever storm spirits live on clear days.

Piper checked on Jason. He was breathing steadily, but two knocks on the skull in two days couldn't have been good for him. Then she examined Percy's head. She didn't see any blood, but a large knot was forming where the horse had kicked him. "We have to get them both back to the ship," she told Blackjack.

The pegasus bobbed his head in agreement. He knelt to the ground, so that Piper could drape Percy and Jason over his back. After a lot of hard work (unconscious boys were heavy), she got them reasonably secured, climbed onto Blackjack's back herself, and they took off for the ship.

The others were a little surprised when Piper came back on a pegasus with two unconscious demigods. While Frank and Hazel tended to Blackjack, Annabeth and Leo helped get Piper and the boys to the sickbay.

"At this rate, we're going to run out of ambrosia," Coach Hedge grumbled as he tended their wounds. "How come I never get invited on these violent trips?"

Piper sat at Jason's side. She herself felt fine after a swig of nectar and some water, but she was still worried about the boys.

"Leo," Piper said, "are we ready to sail?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Set course for Atlanta. I'll explain later."

"But...okay." He hurried off.

Annabeth didn't argue with Piper either. She was too busy examining the horseshoe-shaped dent on the back of Percy's head.

"What *hit* him?" she demanded.

"Blackjack," Piper said.

"*What?*"

Piper tried to explain while Coach Hedge applied some healing paste to the boys' heads. She'd never been impressed with Hedge's nursing abilities before, but he must have done something right. Either that, or the spirits that possessed the boys had also made them extra resilient. They both groaned and opened their

eyes.

Within a few minutes, Jason and Percy were sitting up in their berths and able to talk in complete sentences. Both had fuzzy memories of what had happened. When Piper described their duel on the highway, Jason winced.

“Knocked out twice in two days,” he muttered. “Some demigod.” He glanced sheepishly at Percy. “Sorry, man. I didn’t mean to blast you.”

Percy’s shirt was peppered with burn holes. His hair was even more disheveled than normal. Despite that, he managed a weak laugh. “Not the first time. Your big sister got me good once at camp.”

“Yeah, but...I could have killed you.”

“Or I could have killed you,” Percy said.

Jason shrugged. “If there’d been an ocean in Kansas, maybe.”

“I don’t need an ocean—”

“Boys,” Annabeth interrupted, “I’m sure you both would’ve been wonderful at killing each other. But right now, you need some rest.”

“Food first,” Percy said. “Please? And we really need to talk. Bacchus said some things that don’t—”

“Bacchus?” Annabeth raised her hand. “Okay, fine. We need to talk. Mess hall. Ten minutes. I’ll tell the others. And please, Percy...change your clothes. You smell like you’ve been run over by an electric horse.”

Leo gave the helm to Coach Hedge again, after making the satyr promise he would not steer them to the nearest military base “for fun.”

They gathered around the dining table, and Piper explained what had happened at TOPEKA 32—their conversation with Bacchus, the trap sprung by Gaea, the eidolons that had possessed the boys.

“Of course!” Hazel slapped the table, which startled Frank so much, he dropped his burrito. “That’s what happened to Leo too.”

“So it wasn’t my fault.” Leo exhaled. “I didn’t start World War Three. I just got possessed by an evil spirit. That’s a relief!”

“But the Romans don’t know that,” Annabeth said. “And why would they take our word for it?”

“We could contact Reyna,” Jason suggested. “She would believe us.”

Hearing the way Jason said her name, like it was a lifeline to his past, made Piper’s heart sink.

Jason turned to her with a hopeful gleam in his eyes. “You could convince her, Pipes. I know you could.”

Piper felt like all the blood in her body was draining into her feet. Annabeth looked at her sympathetically, as if to say: *Boys are so clueless*. Even Hazel winced.

“I could try,” she said halfheartedly. “But Octavian is the one we have to worry about. In my dagger blade, I saw him taking control of the Roman crowd. I’m not sure Reyna can stop him.”

Jason’s expression darkened. Piper didn’t get any pleasure from bursting his bubble, but the other Romans—Hazel and Frank—nodded in agreement.

“She’s right,” Frank said. “This afternoon when we were scouting, we saw eagles again. They were a long way off, but closing fast. Octavian is on the warpath.”

Hazel grimaced. “This is exactly the sort of opportunity Octavian has always wanted. He’ll try to seize power. If Reyna objects, he’ll say she’s soft on the Greeks. As for those eagles...It’s like they could smell us.”

“They can,” Jason said. “Roman eagles can hunt demigods by their magical scent even better than monsters can. This ship might conceal us somewhat, but not completely—not from them.”

Leo drummed his fingers. “Great. I should have installed a smoke screen that makes the ship smell like a giant chicken nugget. Remind me to invent that, next time.”

Hazel frowned. “What is a chicken nugget?”

“Oh, man...” Leo shook his head in amazement. “That’s right. You’ve missed the last like, seventy years. Well, my apprentice, a chicken nugget—”

“Doesn’t matter,” Annabeth interrupted. “The point is, we’ll have a hard time explaining the truth to the Romans. Even if they believe us—”

“You’re right.” Jason leaned forward. “We should just keep going. Once we’re over the Atlantic, we’ll be safe—at least from the legion.”

He sounded so depressed, Piper didn't know whether to feel sorry for him or resentful. "How can you be sure?" she asked. "Why wouldn't they follow us?"

He shook his head. "You heard Reyna talking about the ancient lands. They're much too dangerous. Roman demigods have been forbidden to go there for generations. Even Octavian couldn't get around that rule."

Frank swallowed a bite of burrito like it had turned to cardboard in his mouth. "So, if we go there..."

"We'll be outlaws as well as traitors," Jason confirmed. "Any Roman demigod would have the right to kill us on sight. But I wouldn't worry about that. If we get across the Atlantic, they'll give up on chasing us. They'll assume that we'll die in the Mediterranean—the Mare Nostrum."

Percy pointed his pizza slice at Jason. "You, sir, are a ray of sunshine."

Jason didn't argue. The other demigods stared at their plates, except for Percy, who continued to enjoy his pizza. Where he put all that food, Piper didn't know. The guy could eat like a satyr.

"So let's plan ahead," Percy suggested, "and make sure we *don't* die. Mr. D—Bacchus— Ugh, do I have to call him Mr. *B* now? Anyway, he mentioned the twins in Ella's prophecy. Two giants. Otis and, uh, something that started with an F?"

"Ephialtes," Jason said.

"Twin giants, like Piper saw in her blade..." Annabeth ran her finger along the rim of her cup. "I remember a story about twin giants. They tried to reach Mount Olympus by piling up a bunch of mountains."

Frank nearly choked. "Well, that's great. Giants who can use mountains like building blocks. And you say Bacchus killed these guys with a pinecone on a stick?"

"Something like that," Percy said. "I don't think we should count on his help this time. He wanted a tribute, and he made it pretty clear it would be a tribute we couldn't handle."

Silence fell around the table. Piper could hear Coach Hedge above deck singing "Blow the Man Down," except he didn't know the lyrics, so he mostly sang, "Blah-blah-hum-de-dum-dum."

Piper couldn't shake the feeling that Bacchus was *meant* to help them. The giant twins were in Rome. They were keeping something the demigods needed—something in that bronze jar. Whatever it was, she got the feeling it held the answer to sealing the Doors of Death—the *key to endless death*. She also felt sure they could never defeat the giants without Bacchus's help. And if they couldn't do that in five days, Rome would be destroyed, and Hazel's brother, Nico, would die.

On the other hand, if the vision of Bacchus offering her a silver goblet was false, maybe the other visions didn't have to come true either—especially the one of her, Percy, and Jason drowning. Maybe that was just symbolic.

The blood of a female demigod, Gaea had said, and the blood of a male. Piper, my dear, choose which hero will die with you.

"She wants two of us," Piper murmured.

Everyone turned to look at her.

Piper hated being the center of attention. Maybe that was strange for a child of Aphrodite, but she'd watched her dad, the movie star, deal with fame for years. She remembered when Aphrodite had claimed her at the bonfire in front of the entire camp, zapping her with a magic beauty-queen makeover. That had been the most embarrassing moment of her life. Even here, with only six other demigods, Piper felt exposed.

They're my friends, she told herself. It's okay.

But she had a strange feeling...as if more than six sets of eyes were watching her.

"Today on the highway," she said, "Gaea told me that she needed the blood of only two demigods—one female, one male. She—she asked me to choose which boy would die."

Jason squeezed her hand. "But neither of us died. You saved us."

"I know. It's just...Why would she want that?"

Leo whistled softly. "Guys, remember at the Wolf House? Our favorite ice princess, Khione? She talked about spilling Jason's blood, how it would taint the place for generations. Maybe demigod blood has some kind of power."

"Oh..." Percy set down his third pizza slice. He leaned back and stared at

nothing, as if the horse kick to his head had just now registered.

“Percy?” Annabeth gripped his arm.

“Oh, bad,” he muttered. “Bad. Bad.” He looked across the table at Frank and Hazel. “You guys remember Polybotes?”

“The giant who invaded Camp Jupiter,” Hazel said. “The anti-Poseidon you whacked in the head with a Terminus statue. Yes, I think I remember.”

“I had a dream,” Percy said, “when we were flying to Alaska. Polybotes was talking to the gorgons, and he said—he said he wanted me taken prisoner, not killed. He said: ‘I want that one chained at my feet, so I can kill him when the time is ripe. His blood shall water the stones of Mount Olympus and wake Earth Mother!’”

Piper wondered if the room’s temperature controls were broken, because suddenly she couldn’t stop shaking. It was the same way she’d felt on the highway outside Topeka. “You think the giants would use our blood...the blood of two of us—”

“I don’t know,” Percy said. “But until we figure it out, I suggest we all try to avoid getting captured.”

Jason grunted. “*That* I agree with.”

“But how do we figure it out?” Hazel asked. “The Mark of Athena, the twins, Ella’s prophecy...how does it all fit together?”

Annabeth pressed her hands against the edge of the table. “Piper, you told Leo to set our course for Atlanta.”

“Right,” Piper said. “Bacchus told us we should seek out...what was his name?”

“Phorcys,” Percy said.

Annabeth looked surprised, like she wasn’t used to her boyfriend having the answers. “You know him?”

Percy shrugged. “I didn’t recognize the name at first. Then Bacchus mentioned salt water, and it rang a bell. Phorcys is an old sea god from before my dad’s time. Never met him, but supposedly he’s a son of Gaea. I still don’t understand what a sea god would be doing in Atlanta.”

Leo snorted. “What’s a wine god doing in Kansas? Gods are weird. Anyway,

we should reach Atlanta by noon tomorrow, unless something *else* goes wrong.”

“Don’t even say that,” Annabeth muttered. “It’s getting late. We should all get some sleep.”

“Wait,” Piper said.

Once more, everyone looked at her.

She was rapidly losing her courage, wondering if her instincts were wrong, but she forced herself to speak.

“There’s one last thing,” she said. “The eidolons—the possessing spirits. They’re still here, in this room.”

PIPER

PIPER COULDN'T EXPLAIN HOW SHE KNEW.

Stories of phantoms and tortured souls had always freaked her out. Her dad used to joke about Grandpa Tom's Cherokee legends from back on the rez, but even at home in their big Malibu mansion, looking out over the Pacific, whenever her dad recounted the ghost stories for her, she could never get them out of her head.

Cherokee spirits were always restless. They often lost their way to the Land of the Dead, or stayed behind with the living out of sheer stubbornness. Sometimes they didn't even realize they *were* dead.

The more Piper learned about being a demigod, the more convinced she was that Cherokee legends and Greek myths weren't so different. These eidolons acted a lot like the spirits in her dad's stories.

Piper had a gut sense they were still present, simply because no one had told them to go away.

When she was done explaining, the others looked at her uncomfortably. Up on deck, Hedge sang something that sounded like "In the Navy" while Blackjack stomped his hooves, whinnying in protest.

Finally Hazel exhaled. "Piper is right."

“How can you be sure?” Annabeth asked.

“I’ve met eidolons,” Hazel said. “In the Underworld, when I was...you know.”

Dead.

Piper had forgotten that Hazel was a second-timer. In her own way, Hazel too was a ghost reborn.

“So...” Frank rubbed his hand across his buzz-cut hair as if some ghosts might have invaded his scalp. “You think these things are lurking on the ship, or —”

“Possibly lurking inside some of us,” Piper said. “We don’t know.”

Jason clenched his fist. “If that’s true—”

“We have to take steps,” Piper said. “I think I can do this.”

“Do what?” Percy asked.

“Just listen, okay?” Piper took a deep breath. “Everybody listen.”

Piper met their eyes, one person at a time.

“Eidolons,” she said, using her charmspeak, “raise your hands.”

There was tense silence.

Leo laughed nervously. “Did you really think that was going to—?”

His voice died. His face went slack. He raised his hand.

Jason and Percy did the same. Their eyes had turned glassy and gold. Hazel caught her breath. Next to Leo, Frank scrambled out of his chair and put his back against the wall.

“Oh, gods.” Annabeth looked at Piper imploringly. “Can you cure them?”

Piper wanted to whimper and hide under the table, but she *had* to help Jason. She couldn’t believe she’d held hands with...No, she refused to think about it.

She focused on Leo because he was the least intimidating.

“Are there more of you on this ship?” she asked.

“No,” Leo said in a hollow voice. “*The Earth Mother sent three. The strongest, the best. We will live again.*”

“Not here, you won’t,” Piper growled. “All three of you, listen carefully.”

Jason and Percy turned toward her. Those gold eyes were unnerving, but seeing all three boys like that fueled Piper’s anger.

“You will leave those bodies,” she commanded.

“No,” Percy said.

Leo let out a soft hiss. “*We must live.*”

Frank fumbled for his bow. “Mars Almighty, that’s creepy! Get out of here, spirits! Leave our friends alone!”

Leo turned toward him. “*You cannot command us, child of war. Your own life is fragile. Your soul could burn at any moment.*”

Piper wasn’t sure what that meant, but Frank staggered like he’d been punched in the gut. He drew an arrow, his hands shaking. “I—I’ve faced down worse things than you. If you want a fight—”

“Frank, don’t.” Hazel rose.

Next to her, Jason drew his sword.

“Stop!” Piper ordered, but her voice quavered. She was rapidly losing faith in her plan. She’d made the idolons appear, but what now? If she couldn’t persuade them to leave, any bloodshed would be her fault. In the back of her mind, she could almost hear Gaea laughing.

“Listen to Piper.” Hazel pointed at Jason’s sword. The gold blade seemed to grow heavy in his hand. It clunked to the table and Jason sank back into his chair.

Percy growled in a very un-Percy-like way. “*Daughter of Pluto, you may control gems and metals. You do not control the dead.*”

Annabeth reached toward him as if to restrain him, but Hazel waved her off.

“Listen, idolons,” Hazel said sternly, “you do not belong here. I may not command you, but Piper does. Obey her.”

She turned toward Piper, her expression clear: *Try again. You can do this.*

Piper mustered all her courage. She looked straight at Jason—straight into the eyes of the thing that was controlling him. “You will leave those bodies,” Piper repeated, even more forcefully.

Jason’s face tightened. His forehead beaded with sweat. “*We—we will leave these bodies.*”

“You will vow on the River Styx never to return to this ship,” Piper continued, “and never to possess any member of this crew.”

Leo and Percy both hissed in protest.

“You will promise on the River Styx,” Piper insisted.

A moment of tension—she could feel their wills fighting against hers. Then all three eidolons spoke in unison: “*We promise on the River Styx.*”

“You are dead,” Piper said.

“*We are dead,*” they agreed.

“Now, leave.”

All three boys slumped forward. Percy fell face-first into his pizza.

“Percy!” Annabeth grabbed him.

Piper and Hazel caught Jason’s arms as he slipped out of his chair.

Leo wasn’t so lucky. He fell toward Frank, who made no attempt to intercept him. Leo hit the floor.

“Ow!” he groaned.

“Are you all right?” Hazel asked.

Leo pulled himself up. He had a piece of spaghetti in the shape of a 3 stuck to his forehead. “Did it work?”

“It worked,” Piper said, feeling pretty sure she was right. “I don’t think they’ll be back.”

Jason blinked. “Does that mean I can stop getting head injuries now?”

Piper laughed, exhaling all her nervousness. “Come on, Lightning Boy. Let’s get you some fresh air.”

Piper and Jason walked back and forth along the deck. Jason was still wobbly, so Piper encouraged him to wrap his arm around her for support.

Leo stood at the helm, conferring with Festus through the intercom; he knew from experience to give Jason and Piper some space. Since the satellite TV was up again, Coach Hedge was in his cabin happily catching up on his mixed martial arts cage matches. Percy’s pegasus Blackjack had flown off somewhere. The other demigods were settling in for the night.

The *Argo II* raced east, cruising several hundred feet above the ground. Below them small towns passed by like lit-up islands in a dark sea of prairie.

Piper remembered last winter, flying Festus the dragon over the city of

Quebec. She had never seen anything so beautiful, or felt so happy to have Jason's arms around her—but this was even better.

The night was warm. The ship sailed along more smoothly than a dragon. Best of all, they were flying away from Camp Jupiter as fast as they possibly could. No matter how dangerous the ancient lands were, Piper couldn't wait to get there. She hoped Jason was right that the Romans wouldn't follow them across the Atlantic.

Jason stopped amidships and leaned against the rail. The moonlight turned his blond hair silver.

"Thanks, Pipes," he said. "You saved me again."

He put his arm around her waist. She thought about the day they'd fallen into the Grand Canyon—the first time she'd learned that Jason could control the air. He'd held her so tightly, she could feel his heartbeat. Then they'd stopped falling and floated in midair. Best. Boyfriend. Ever.

She wanted to kiss him now, but something held her back.

"I don't know if Percy will trust me anymore," she said. "Not after I let his horse knock him out."

Jason laughed. "Don't worry about that. Percy's a nice guy, but I get the feeling he needs a knock on the head every once in a while."

"You could have killed him."

Jason's smile faded. "That wasn't me."

"But I almost *let* you," Piper said. "When Gaea said I had to choose, I hesitated and..."

She blinked, cursing herself for crying.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Jason said. "You saved us both."

"But if two of our crew really have to die, a boy and a girl—"

"I don't accept that. We're going to stop Gaea. All seven of us are going to come back alive. I promise you."

Piper wished that he hadn't *promised*. The word only reminded her of the Prophecy of Seven: *an oath to keep with a final breath*.

Please, she thought, wondering if her mom, the goddess of love, could hear her. *Don't let it be Jason's final breath. If love means anything, don't take him*

away.

As soon as she had made the wish, she felt guilty. How could she stand to see Annabeth in that kind of pain if Percy died? How could she live with herself if *any* of the seven demigods died? Already, each of them had endured so much. Even the two new Roman kids, Hazel and Frank, whom Piper barely knew, felt like kin. At Camp Jupiter, Percy had recounted their trip to Alaska, which sounded as harrowing as anything Piper had experienced. And from the way Hazel and Frank tried to help during the exorcism, she could tell they were brave, good people.

“The legend that Annabeth mentioned,” she said, “about the Mark of Athena...why didn’t you want to talk about it?”

She was afraid Jason might shut her out, but he just lowered his head like he’d been expecting the question. “Piper, I don’t know what’s true and what’s not. That legend...it could be really dangerous.”

“For who?”

“All of us,” he said grimly. “The story goes that the Romans stole something important from the Greeks, back in ancient times, when the Romans conquered the Greeks’ cities.”

Piper waited, but Jason seemed lost in thought.

“What did they steal?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m not sure anyone in the legion has ever known. But according to the story, this thing was taken away to Rome and hidden there. The children of Athena, Greek demigods, have hated us ever since. They’ve always stirred up their brethren against the Romans. Like I said, I don’t know how much of that is true—”

“But why not just tell Annabeth?” Piper asked. “She’s not going to suddenly hate you.”

He seemed to have trouble focusing on her. “I hope not. But the legend says that the children of Athena have been searching for this thing for millennia. Every generation, a few are chosen by the goddess to find it. Apparently, they’re led to Rome by some sign...the Mark of Athena.”

“If Annabeth is one of those searchers...we should help her.”

Jason hesitated. “Maybe. When we get closer to Rome, I’ll tell her what little I know. Honest. But the story, at least the way I heard it—it claims that if the Greeks ever found what was stolen, they’d never forgive us. They’d destroy the legion and Rome, once and for all. After what Nemesis told Leo, about Rome’s being destroyed five days from now...”

Piper studied Jason’s face. He was, without a doubt, the bravest person she’d ever known, but she realized he was afraid. This legend—the idea that it might tear apart their group and level a city—absolutely terrified him.

Piper wondered what could have been stolen from the Greeks that would be so important. She couldn’t imagine anything that would make Annabeth suddenly turn vengeful.

Then again, Piper couldn’t imagine choosing one demigod’s life over another, and today on that deserted road, just for a moment, Gaea had almost tempted her....

“I’m sorry, by the way,” Jason said.

Piper wiped the last tear from her face. “Sorry for what? It was the eidolon who attacked—”

“Not about that.” The little scar on Jason’s upper lip seemed to glow white in the moonlight. She’d always loved that scar. The imperfection made his face much more interesting.

“I was stupid to ask you to contact Reyna,” he said. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“Oh.” Piper looked up at the clouds and wondered if her mother, Aphrodite, was somehow influencing him. His apology seemed too good to be true.

But don’t stop, she thought. “Really, it’s okay.”

“It’s just...I never felt that way toward Reyna,” Jason said, “so I didn’t think about its making you uncomfortable. You’ve got nothing to worry about, Pipes.”

“I wanted to hate her,” Piper admitted. “I was so afraid you’d go back to Camp Jupiter.”

Jason looked surprised. “That would never happen. Not unless you came with me. I promise.”

Piper held his hand. She managed a smile, but she was thinking: Another promise. *An oath to keep with a final breath.*

She tried to put those thoughts out of her mind. She knew she should just enjoy this quiet moment with Jason. But as she looked over the side of the ship, she couldn't help remembering how much the prairie at night looked like dark water—like the drowning room she'd seen in the blade of her knife.

X I I I

PERCY

FORGET THE CHICKEN-NUGGET SMOKE SCREEN. Percy wanted Leo to invent an anti-dream hat.

That night he had horrible nightmares. First he dreamed he was back in Alaska on the quest for the legion's eagle. He was hiking along a mountain road, but as soon as he stepped off the shoulder he was swallowed by the bog—muskeg, Hazel had called it. He found himself choking in mud, unable to move or see or breathe. For the first time in his life, he understood what it was like to drown.

It's just a dream, he told himself. I'll wake up.

But that didn't make it any less terrifying.

Percy had never been scared of water. It was his father's element. But since the muskeg experience, he'd developed a fear of suffocation. He could never admit this to anyone, but it had even made him nervous about going in the water. He knew that was silly. He couldn't drown. But he also suspected that if he didn't control the fear, it might start controlling him.

He thought about his friend Thalia, who was scared of heights even though she was the daughter of the sky god. Her brother, Jason, could fly by summoning the winds. Thalia couldn't, maybe because she was too afraid to try. If Percy

started to believe he could drown...

The muskeg pressed against his chest. His lungs wanted to burst.

Stop panicking, he told himself. *This isn't real.*

Just when he couldn't hold his breath any longer, the dream changed.

He stood in a vast gloomy space like an underground parking garage. Rows of stone pillars marched off in every direction, holding up the ceiling about twenty feet above. Freestanding braziers cast a dim red glow over the floor.

Percy couldn't see very far in the shadows, but hanging from the ceiling were pulley systems, sandbags, and rows of dark theater lights. Piled around the chamber, wooden crates were labeled PROPS, WEAPONS, and COSTUMES. One read: ASSORTED ROCKET LAUNCHERS.

Percy heard machinery creaking in the darkness, huge gears turning, and water rushing through pipes.

Then he saw the giant...or at least Percy guessed that he was a giant.

He was about twelve feet tall—a respectable height for a Cyclops, but only half as tall as other giants Percy had dealt with. He also looked more human than a typical giant, without the dragonlike legs of his larger kin. Nevertheless, his long purple hair was braided in a ponytail of dreadlocks, woven with gold and silver coins, which struck Percy as a giantish hairstyle. He had a ten-foot spear strapped to his back—a giantish weapon.

He wore the largest black turtleneck Percy had ever seen, black pants, and black leather shoes with points so long and curly, they might have been jester slippers. He paced back and forth in front of a raised platform, examining a bronze jar about the size of Percy.

“No, no, no,” the giant muttered to himself. “Where’s the splash? Where’s the value?” He yelled into the darkness, “Otis!”

Percy heard something shuffling in the distance. Another giant appeared out of the gloom. He wore exactly the same black outfit, right down to the curly shoes. The only difference between the two giants was that the second one's hair was green rather than purple.

The first giant cursed. “Otis, why do you do this to me *every day*? I told you *I was wearing the black turtleneck today*. You could wear anything but the black

turtleneck!”

Otis blinked as if he'd just woken up. “I thought you were wearing the yellow toga today.”

“That was yesterday! When *you* showed up in the yellow toga!”

“Oh. Right. Sorry, Ephie.”

His brother snarled. They had to be twins, because their faces were identically ugly.

“And don't call me Ephie,” Ephie demanded. “Call me *Ephialtes*. That's my name. Or you can use my stage name: The BIG F!”

Otis grimaced. “I'm still not sure about that stage name.”

“Nonsense! It's perfect. Now, how are the preparations coming along?”

“Fine.” Otis didn't sound very enthusiastic. “The man-eating tigers, the spinning blades...But I still think a few ballerinas would be nice.”

“No ballerinas!” Ephialtes snapped. “And *this* thing.” He waved at the bronze jar in disgust. “What does it do? It's not exciting.”

“But that's the whole point of the show. He dies unless the others rescue him. And if they arrive on schedule—”

“Oh, they'd better!” Ephialtes said. “July First, the Kalends of July, sacred to Juno. That's when Mother wants to destroy those stupid demigods and *really* rub it in Juno's face. Besides, I'm not paying overtime for those gladiator ghosts!”

“Well, then, they all die,” Otis said, “and we start the destruction of Rome. Just like Mother wants. It'll be perfect. The crowd will love it. Roman ghosts adore this sort of thing.”

Ephialtes looked unconvinced. “But the jar just *stands* there. Couldn't we suspend it above a fire, or dissolve it in a pool of acid or something?”

“We need him alive for a few more days,” Otis reminded his brother. “Otherwise, the seven won't take the bait and rush to save him.”

“Hmm. I suppose. I'd still like a little more screaming. This slow death is boring. Ah, well, what about our talented friend? Is she ready to receive her visitor?”

Otis made a sour face. “I *really* don't like talking to her. She makes me nervous.”

“But is she ready?”

“Yes,” Otis said reluctantly. “She’s been ready for centuries. No one will be removing *that* statue.”

“Excellent.” Ephialtes rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “This is our big chance, my brother.”

“That’s what you said about our last stunt,” Otis mumbled. “I was hanging in that block of ice suspended over the River Lethe for six months, and we didn’t even get any media attention.”

“This is different!” Ephialtes insisted. “We will set a new standard for entertainment! If Mother is pleased, we can write our own ticket to fame and fortune!”

“If you say so,” Otis sighed. “Though I still think those ballerina costumes from *Swan Lake* would look lovely—”

“No ballet!”

“Sorry.”

“Come,” Ephialtes said. “Let’s examine the tigers. I want to be sure they are hungry!”

The giants lumbered off into the gloom, and Percy turned toward the jar.

I need to see inside, he thought.

He willed his dream forward, right to the surface of the jar. Then he passed through.

The air in the jar smelled of stale breath and tarnished metal. The only light came from the dim purple glow of a dark sword, its Stygian iron blade set against one side of the container. Huddled next to it was a dejected-looking boy in tattered jeans, a black shirt, and an old aviator jacket. On his right hand, a silver skull ring glittered.

“Nico,” Percy called. But the son of Hades couldn’t hear him.

The container was completely sealed. The air was turning poisonous. Nico’s eyes were closed, his breathing shallow. He appeared to be meditating. His face was pale, and thinner than Percy remembered.

On the inner wall of the jar, it looked as though Nico had scratched three hash marks with his sword—maybe it had been three days that he’d been imprisoned?

It didn't seem possible he could have survived so long without suffocating. Even in a dream, Percy was already starting to feel panicky, struggling to get enough oxygen.

Then he noticed something between Nico's feet—a small collection of glistening objects no bigger than baby teeth.

Seeds, Percy realized. Pomegranate seeds. Three had been eaten and spit out. Five were still encased in dark red pulp.

"Nico," Percy said, "where is this place? We'll save you...."

The image faded, and a girl's voice whispered: "Percy."

At first, Percy thought he was still asleep. When he'd lost his memory, he'd spent weeks dreaming about Annabeth, the only person he remembered from his past. As his eyes opened and his vision cleared, he realized she was really there.

She was standing by his berth, smiling down at him.

Her blond hair fell across her shoulders. Her storm-gray eyes were bright with amusement. He remembered his first day at Camp Half-Blood, five years ago, when he'd woken from a daze and found Annabeth standing over him. She had said, *You drool when you sleep.*

She was sentimental that way.

"Wh—what's going on?" he asked. "Are we there?"

"No," she said, her voice low. "It's the middle of the night."

"You mean..." Percy's heart started to race. He realized he was in his pajamas, in bed. He probably *had* been drooling, or at least making weird noises as he dreamed. No doubt he had a severe case of pillow hair and his breath didn't smell great. "You sneaked into my cabin?"

Annabeth rolled her eyes. "Percy, you'll be seventeen in two months. You can't seriously be worried about getting into trouble with Coach Hedge."

"Uh, have you seen his baseball bat?"

"Besides, Seaweed Brain, I just thought we could take a walk. We haven't had any time to be together alone. I want to show you something—my favorite place aboard the ship."

Percy's pulse was still in overdrive, but it wasn't from fear of getting into trouble. "Can I, you know, brush my teeth first?"

“You’d better,” Annabeth said. “Because I’m not kissing you until you do. And brush your hair while you’re at it.”

For a trireme, the ship was huge, but it still felt cozy to Percy—like his dorm building back at Yancy Academy, or any of the other boarding schools he’d gotten kicked out of. Annabeth and he crept downstairs to the second deck, which Percy hadn’t explored except for sickbay.

She led him past the engine room, which looked like a very dangerous, mechanized jungle gym, with pipes and pistons and tubes jutting from a central bronze sphere. Cables resembling giant metal noodles snaked across the floor and ran up the walls.

“How does that thing even work?” Percy asked.

“No idea,” Annabeth said. “And I’m the only one besides Leo who can operate it.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“It should be fine. It’s only threatened to blow up once.”

“You’re kidding, I hope.”

She smiled. “Come on.”

They worked their way past the supply rooms and the armory. Toward the stern of the ship, they reached a set of wooden double doors that opened into a large stable. The room smelled of fresh hay and wool blankets. Lining the left wall were three empty horse stalls like the ones they used for pegasi back at camp. The right wall had two empty cages big enough for large zoo animals.

In the center of the floor was a twenty-foot-square see-through panel. Far below, the night landscape whisked by—miles of dark countryside crisscrossed with illuminated highways like the strands of a web.

“A glass-bottomed boat?” Percy asked.

Annabeth grabbed a blanket from the nearest stable gate and spread it across part of the glass floor. “Sit with me.”

They relaxed on the blanket as if they were having a picnic, and watched the world go by below.

“Leo built the stables so pegasi could come and go easily,” Annabeth said.

“Only he didn’t realize that pegasi prefer to roam free, so the stables are always empty.”

Percy wondered where Blackjack was—roaming the skies somewhere, hopefully following their progress. Percy’s head still throbbed from getting whopped by Blackjack’s hoof, but he didn’t hold that against the horse.

“What do you mean, *come and go easily*?” he asked. “Wouldn’t a pegasus have to make it down two flights of stairs?”

Annabeth rapped her knuckles on the glass. “These are bay doors, like on a bomber.”

Percy gulped. “You mean we’re sitting on *doors*? What if they opened?”

“I suppose we’d fall to our deaths. But they won’t open. Most likely.”

“Great.”

Annabeth laughed. “You know why I like it here? It’s not just the view. What does this place remind you of?”

Percy looked around: the cages and stables, the Celestial bronze lamp hanging from the beam, the smell of hay, and of course Annabeth sitting close to him, her face ghostly and beautiful in the soft amber light.

“That zoo truck,” Percy decided. “The one we took to Las Vegas.”

Her smile told him he’d gotten the answer right.

“That was so long ago,” Percy said. “We were in bad shape, struggling to get across the country to find that stupid lightning bolt, trapped in a truck with a bunch of mistreated animals. How can you be nostalgic for that?”

“Because, Seaweed Brain, it’s the first time we really talked, you and me. I told you about my family, and...” She took out her camp necklace, strung with her dad’s college ring and a colorful clay bead for each year at Camp Half-Blood. Now there was something else on the leather cord: a red coral pendant Percy had given her when they had started dating. He’d brought it from his father’s palace at the bottom of the sea.

“And,” Annabeth continued, “it reminds me how long we’ve known each other. We were *twelve*, Percy. Can you believe that?”

“No,” he admitted. “So...you knew you liked me from that moment?”

She smirked. “I hated you at first. You annoyed me. Then I tolerated you for

a few years. Then—”

“Okay, fine.”

She leaned over and kissed him: a good, proper kiss without anyone watching—no Romans anywhere, no screaming satyr chaperones.

She pulled away. “I missed you, Percy.”

Percy wanted to tell her the same thing, but it seemed too small a comment. While he had been on the Roman side, he’d kept himself alive almost solely by thinking of Annabeth. *I missed you* didn’t really cover that.

He remembered earlier in the night, when Piper had forced the eidolon to leave his mind. Percy hadn’t been aware of its presence until she had used her charmspeak. After the eidolon was gone, he felt as if a hot spike had been removed from his forehead. He hadn’t realized how much pain he had been in until the spirit left. Then his thoughts became clearer. His soul settled comfortably back into his body.

Sitting here with Annabeth made him feel the same way. The past few months could have been one of his strange dreams. The events at Camp Jupiter seemed as fuzzy and unreal as that fight with Jason, when they had both been controlled by the eidolons.

Yet he didn’t regret the time he’d spent at Camp Jupiter. It had opened his eyes in a lot of ways.

“Annabeth,” he said hesitantly, “in New Rome, demigods can live their whole lives in peace.”

Her expression turned guarded. “Reyna explained it to me. But, Percy, you belong at Camp Half-Blood. That other life—”

“I know,” Percy said. “But while I was there, I saw so many demigods living without fear: kids going to college, couples getting married and raising families. There’s nothing like that at Camp Half-Blood. I kept thinking about you and me...and maybe someday when this war with the giants is over...”

It was hard to tell in the golden light, but he thought Annabeth was blushing. “Oh,” she said.

Percy was afraid he’d said too much. Maybe he’d scared her with his big dreams of the future. She was usually the one with the plans. Percy cursed

himself silently.

As long as he'd known Annabeth, he still felt like he understood so little about her. Even after they'd been dating several months, their relationship had always felt new and delicate, like a glass sculpture. He was terrified of doing something wrong and breaking it.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just...I had to think of that to keep going. To give me hope. Forget I mentioned—"

"No!" she said. "No, Percy. Gods, that's so sweet. It's just...we may have burned that bridge. If we can't repair things with the Romans—well, the two sets of demigods have *never* gotten along. That's why the gods kept us separate. I don't know if we could ever belong there."

Percy didn't want to argue, but he couldn't let go of the hope. It felt important—not just for Annabeth and him, but for all the other demigods. It *had* to be possible to belong in two different worlds at once. After all, that's what being a demigod was all about—not quite belonging in the mortal world or on Mount Olympus, but trying to make peace with both sides of their nature.

Unfortunately, that got him thinking about the gods, the war they were facing, and his dream about the twins Ephialtes and Otis.

"I was having a nightmare when you woke me up," he admitted.

He told Annabeth what he'd seen.

Even the most troubling parts didn't seem to surprise her. She shook her head sadly when he described Nico's imprisonment in the bronze jar. She got an angry glint in her eyes when he told her about the giants planning some sort of Rome-destroying extravaganza that would include their painful deaths as the opening event.

"Nico is the bait," she murmured. "Gaea's forces must have captured him somehow. But we don't know exactly where they're holding him."

"Somewhere in Rome," Percy said. "Somewhere underground. They made it sound like Nico still had a few days to live, but I don't see how he could hold out so long with no oxygen."

"Five more days, according to Nemesis," Annabeth said. "The Kalends of July. At least the deadline makes sense now."

“What’s a Kalends?”

Annabeth smirked, like she was pleased they were back in their old familiar pattern—Percy being ignorant, she herself explaining stuff. “It’s just the Roman term for the first of the month. That’s where we get the word *calendar*. But how can Nico survive that long? We should talk to Hazel.”

“Now?”

She hesitated. “No. It can wait until morning. I don’t want to hit her with this news in the middle of the night.”

“The giants mentioned a statue,” Percy recalled. “And something about a talented friend who was guarding it. Whoever this friend was, she scared Otis. Anyone who can scare a giant...”

Annabeth gazed down at a highway snaking through dark hills. “Percy, have you seen Poseidon lately? Or had any kind of sign from him?”

He shook his head. “Not since...Wow. I guess I haven’t thought about it. Not since the end of the Titan War. I saw him at Camp Half-Blood, but that was last August.” A sense of dread settled over him. “Why? Have you seen Athena?”

She didn’t meet his eyes.

“A few weeks ago,” she admitted. “It...it wasn’t good. She didn’t seem like herself. Maybe it’s the Greek/Roman schizophrenia that Nemesis described. I’m not sure. She said some hurtful things. She said I had failed her.”

“Failed her?” Percy wasn’t sure he’d heard her right. Annabeth was the *perfect* demigod child. She was everything a daughter of Athena should be. “How could you ever—?”

“I don’t know,” she said miserably. “On top of that, I’ve been having nightmares of my own. They don’t make as much sense as yours.”

Percy waited, but Annabeth didn’t share any more details. He wanted to make her feel better and tell her it would be okay, but he knew he couldn’t. He wanted to fix everything for both of them so they could have a happy ending. After all these years, even the cruelest gods would have to admit they deserved it.

But he had a gut feeling that there was nothing he could do to help Annabeth this time, other than simply *be* there. *Wisdom’s daughter walks alone.*

He felt as trapped and helpless as when he’d sunk into the muskeg.

Annabeth managed a faint smile. “Some romantic evening, huh? No more bad things until the morning.” She kissed him again. “We’ll figure everything out. I’ve got you back. For now, that’s all that matters.”

“Right,” Percy said. “No more talk about Gaea rising, Nico being held hostage, the world ending, the giants—”

“Shut up, Seaweed Brain,” she ordered. “Just hold me for a while.”

They sat together cuddling, enjoying each other’s warmth. Before Percy knew it, the drone of the ship’s engine, the dim light, and the comfortable feeling of being with Annabeth made his eyes heavy, and he drifted to sleep.

When he woke, daylight was coming through the glass floor, and a boy’s voice said, “Oh...You are in so much trouble.”

X I V

PERCY

PERCY HAD SEEN FRANK SURROUNDED by cannibal ogres, facing down an unkillable giant, and even unleashing Thanatos, the god of death. But he'd never seen Frank look as terrified as he did now, finding the two of them passed out in the stables.

"What...?" Percy rubbed his eyes. "Oh, we just fell asleep."

Frank swallowed. He was dressed in running shoes, dark cargo pants, and a Vancouver Winter Olympics T-shirt with his Roman centurion badge pinned to the neck (which seemed either sad or hopeful to Percy, now that they were renegades). Frank averted his eyes as if the sight of them together might burn him.

"Everyone thinks you've been kidnapped," he said. "We've been scouring the ship. When Coach Hedge finds out—oh, gods, you've been here *all night*?"

"Frank!" Annabeth's ears were as red as strawberries. "We just came down here to talk. We fell asleep. Accidentally. That's *it*."

"Kissed a couple of times," Percy said.

Annabeth glared at him. "Not helping!"

"We'd better..." Frank pointed to the stable doors. "Uh, we're supposed to meet for breakfast. Would you explain what you did—I mean didn't do? I

mean... I really don't want that faun—I mean satyr—to kill me.”

Frank ran.

When everyone finally gathered in the mess hall, it wasn't quite as bad as Frank had feared. Jason and Piper were mostly relieved. Leo couldn't stop grinning and muttering, “Classic. Classic.” Only Hazel seemed scandalized, maybe because she was from the 1940s. She kept fanning her face and wouldn't meet Percy's eyes.

Naturally, Coach Hedge went ballistic; but Percy found it hard to take the satyr seriously since he was barely five feet tall.

“Never in my life!” Coach bellowed, waving his bat and knocking over a plate of apples. “Against the rules! Irresponsible!”

“Coach,” Annabeth said, “it was an accident. We were talking, and we fell asleep.”

“Besides,” Percy said, “you're starting to sound like Terminus.”

Hedge narrowed his eyes. “Is that an insult, Jackson? 'Cause I'll—I'll terminus you, buddy!”

Percy tried not to laugh. “It won't happen again, Coach. I promise. Now, don't we have other things to discuss?”

Hedge fumed. “Fine! But I'm watching you, Jackson. And you, Annabeth Chase, I thought you had more sense—”

Jason cleared his throat. “So grab some food, everybody. Let's get started.”

The meeting was like a war council with donuts. Then again, back at Camp Half-Blood they used to have their most serious discussions around the Ping-Pong table in the rec room with crackers and Cheez Whiz, so Percy felt right at home.

He told them about his dream—the twin giants planning a reception for them in an underground parking lot with rocket launchers; Nico di Angelo trapped in a bronze jar, slowly dying from asphyxiation with pomegranate seeds at his feet.

Hazel choked back a sob. “Nico... Oh, gods. The seeds.”

“You know what they are?” Annabeth asked.

Hazel nodded. “He showed them to me once. They're from our stepmother's garden.”

“Your step... oh,” Percy said. “You mean Persephone.”

Percy had met the wife of Hades once. She hadn’t been exactly warm and sunny. He had also been to her Underworld garden—a creepy place full of crystal trees and flowers that bloomed bloodred and ghost white.

“The seeds are a last-resort food,” Hazel said. Percy could tell she was nervous, because all the silverware on the table was starting to move toward her. “Only children of Hades can eat them. Nico always kept some in case he got stuck somewhere. But if he’s really imprisoned—”

“The giants are trying to lure us,” Annabeth said. “They’re assuming we’ll try to rescue him.”

“Well, they’re right!” Hazel looked around the table, her confidence apparently crumbling. “Won’t we?”

“Yes!” Coach Hedge yelled with a mouthful of napkins. “It’ll involve fighting, right?”

“Hazel, of course we’ll help him,” Frank said. “But how long do we have before... uh, I mean, how long can Nico hold out?”

“One seed a day,” Hazel said miserably. “That’s if he puts himself in a death trance.”

“A death trance?” Annabeth scowled. “That doesn’t sound fun.”

“It keeps him from consuming all his air,” Hazel said. “Like hibernation, or a coma. One seed can sustain him one day, barely.”

“And he has five seeds left,” Percy said. “That’s five days, including today. The giants must have planned it that way, so we’d have to arrive by July first. Assuming Nico is hidden somewhere in Rome—”

“That’s not much time,” Piper summed up. She put her hand on Hazel’s shoulder. “We’ll find him. At least we know what the lines of the prophecy mean now. ‘Twins snuff out the angel’s breath, who holds the key to endless death.’ Your brother’s last name: di Angelo. *Angelo* is Italian for ‘angel.’”

“Oh, gods,” Hazel muttered. “Nico...”

Percy stared at his jelly donut. He had a rocky history with Nico di Angelo. The guy had once tricked him into visiting Hades’s palace, and Percy had ended up in a cell. But most of the time, Nico sided with the good guys. He certainly

didn't deserve slow suffocation in a bronze jar, and Percy couldn't stand seeing Hazel in pain.

"We'll rescue him," he promised her. "We *have* to. The prophecy says he holds the key to endless death."

"That's right," Piper said encouragingly. "Hazel, your brother went searching for the Doors of Death in the Underworld, right? He must've found them."

"He can tell us where the doors are," Percy said, "and how to close them."

Hazel took a deep breath. "Yes. Good."

"Uh..." Leo shifted in his chair. "One thing. The giants are expecting us to do this, right? So we're walking into a trap?"

Hazel looked at Leo like he'd made a rude gesture. "We have no choice!"

"Don't get me wrong, Hazel. It's just that your brother, Nico... he knew about both camps, right?"

"Well, yes," Hazel said.

"He's been going back and forth," Leo said, "and he didn't tell either side."

Jason sat forward, his expression grim. "You're wondering if we can trust the guy. So am I."

Hazel shot to her feet. "I don't believe this. He's my *brother*. He brought me back from the Underworld, and you don't want to help him?"

Frank put his hand on her shoulder. "Nobody's saying that." He glared at Leo. "Nobody had *better* be saying that."

Leo blinked. "Look, guys. All I mean is—"

"Hazel," Jason said. "Leo is raising a fair point. I remember Nico from Camp Jupiter. Now I find out he also visited Camp Half-Blood. That does strike me as... well, a little shady. Do we really know where his loyalties lie? We just have to be careful."

Hazel's arms shook. A silver platter zoomed toward her and hit the wall to her left, splattering scrambled eggs. "You... the *great* Jason Grace... the praetor I looked up to. You were supposed to be so fair, such a good leader. And now you..." Hazel stomped her foot and stormed out of the mess hall.

"Hazel!" Leo called after her. "Ah, jeez. I should—"

"You've done enough," Frank growled. He got up to follow her, but Piper

gestured for him to wait.

“Give her time,” Piper advised. Then she frowned at Leo and Jason. “You guys, that *was* pretty cold.”

Jason looked shocked. “Cold? I’m just being cautious!”

“Her brother is dying,” Piper said.

“I’ll go talk to her,” Frank insisted.

“No,” Piper said. “Let her cool down first. Trust me on this. I’ll go check on her in a few minutes.”

“But...” Frank huffed like an irritated bear. “Fine. I’ll wait.”

From up above came a whirring sound like a large drill.

“That’s Festus,” Leo said. “I’ve got him on autopilot, but we must be nearing Atlanta. I’ll have to get up there... uh, assuming we know where to land.”

Everyone turned to Percy.

Jason raised an eyebrow. “You’re Captain Salt Water. Any ideas from the expert?”

Was that resentment in his voice? Percy wondered if Jason was secretly miffed about the duel in Kansas. Jason had joked about it, but Percy figured that they both harbored a little grudge. You couldn’t put two demigods in a fight and not have them wonder who was stronger.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted. “Somewhere central, high up so we can get a good view of the city. Maybe a park with some woods? We don’t want to land a warship in the middle of downtown. I doubt even the Mist could cover up something that huge.”

Leo nodded. “On it.” He raced for the stairs.

Frank settled back in his chair uneasily. Percy felt bad for him. On the trip to Alaska, he had watched Hazel and Frank grow close. He knew how protective Frank felt toward her. He also noticed the baleful look Frank was giving Leo. He decided it might be a good idea to get Frank off the ship for a while.

“When we land, I’ll scout around in Atlanta,” Percy said. “Frank, I could use your help.”

“You mean turn into a dragon again? Honestly, Percy, I don’t want to spend the whole quest being everyone’s flying taxi.”

“No,” Percy said. “I want you with me because you’ve got the blood of Poseidon. Maybe you can help me figure out where to find salt water. Besides, you’re good in a fight.”

That seemed to make Frank feel a little better. “Sure. I guess.”

“Great,” Percy said. “We should take one more. Annabeth—”

“Oh, no!” Coach Hedge barked. “Young lady, you are *grounded*.”

Annabeth stared at him like he was speaking a foreign language. “Excuse me?”

“You and Jackson are not going *anywhere* together!” Hedge insisted. He glared at Percy, daring him to mouth off. “I’ll go with Frank and Mr. Sneaky Jackson. The rest of you guard the ship and make sure Annabeth doesn’t break any more rules!”

Wonderful, Percy thought. A boys’ day out with Frank and a bloodthirsty satyr, to find salt water in a landlocked city.

“This,” he said, “is going to be so much fun.”

PERCY

PERCY CLIMBED OUT ON DECK AND SAID, “Wow.”

They had landed near the summit of a forested hill. A complex of white buildings, like a museum or a university, nestled in a grove of pines to the left. Below them spread the city of Atlanta—a cluster of brown and silver downtown skyscrapers two miles away, rising from what looked like an endless flat sprawl of highways, railroad tracks, houses, and green swathes of forest.

“Ah, lovely spot.” Coach Hedge inhaled the morning air. “Good choice, Valdez.”

Leo shrugged. “I just picked a tall hill. That’s a presidential library or something over there. At least that’s what Festus says.”

“I don’t know about that!” Hedge barked. “But do you realize what happened on this hill? Frank Zhang, you should know!”

Frank flinched. “I should?”

“A son of Ares stood here!” Hedge cried indignantly.

“I’m Roman...so Mars, actually.”

“Whatever! Famous spot in the American Civil War!”

“I’m Canadian, actually.”

“Whatever! General Sherman, Union leader. He stood on this hill watching

the city of Atlanta burn. Cut a path of destruction all the way from here to the sea. Burning, looting, pillaging—now *there* was a demigod!”

Frank inched away from the satyr. “Uh, okay.”

Percy didn’t care much about history, but he wondered whether landing here was a bad omen. He’d heard that most human civil wars started as fights between Greek and Roman demigods. Now they were standing on the site of one such battle. The entire city below them had been leveled on orders of a child of Ares.

Percy could imagine some of the kids at Camp Half-Blood giving such a command. Clarisse La Rue, for instance, wouldn’t hesitate. But he couldn’t imagine Frank being so harsh.

“Anyway,” Percy said, “let’s try not to burn down the city this time.”

The coach looked disappointed. “All right. But where to?”

Percy pointed toward downtown. “When in doubt, start in the middle.”

Catching a ride there was easier than they thought. The three of them headed to the presidential library—which turned out to be the Carter Center—and asked the staff if they could call a taxi or give them directions to the nearest bus stop. Percy could have summoned Blackjack, but he was reluctant to ask the pegasus for help so soon after their last disaster. Frank didn’t want to polymorph into anything. And besides, Percy was kind of hoping to travel like a regular mortal for a change.

One of the librarians, whose name was Esther, insisted on driving them personally. She was so nice about it, Percy thought she must be a monster in disguise; but Hedge pulled him aside and assured him that Esther smelled like a normal human.

“With a hint of potpourri,” he said. “Cloves. Rose petals. Tasty!”

They piled into Esther’s big black Cadillac and drove toward downtown. Esther was so tiny, she could barely see over the steering wheel; but that didn’t seem to bother her. She muscled her car through traffic while regaling them with stories about the crazy families of Atlanta—the old plantation owners, the founders of Coca-Cola, the sports stars, and the CNN news people. She sounded

so knowledgeable that Percy decided to try his luck.

“Uh, so, Esther,” he said, “here’s a hard question for you. Salt water in Atlanta. What’s the first thing that comes to mind?”

The old lady chuckled. “Oh, sugar. That’s easy. Whale sharks!”

Frank and Percy exchanged looks.

“Whale sharks?” Frank asked nervously. “You have those in Atlanta?”

“At the aquarium, sugar,” Esther said. “Very famous! Right downtown. Is that where you wanted to go?”

An aquarium. Percy considered that. He didn’t know what an Ancient Greek sea god would be doing at a Georgia aquarium, but he didn’t have any better ideas.

“Yes,” Percy said. “That’s where we’re going.”

Esther dropped them at the main entrance, where a line was already forming. She insisted on giving them her cell phone number for emergencies, money for a taxi ride back to the Carter Center, and a jar of homemade peach preserves, which for some reason she kept in a box in her trunk. Frank stuck the jar in his backpack and thanked Esther, who had already switched from calling him *sugar* to *son*.

As she drove away, Frank said, “Are all people in Atlanta that nice?”

Hedge grunted. “Hope not. I can’t fight them if they’re nice. Let’s go beat up some whale sharks. They sound dangerous!”

It hadn’t occurred to Percy that they might have to pay admission, or stand in line behind a bunch of families and kids from summer camps.

Looking at the elementary schoolers in their colorful T-shirts from various day camps, Percy felt a twinge of sadness. He should be at Camp Half-Blood right now, settling into his cabin for the summer, teaching sword-fighting lessons in the arena, planning pranks on the other counselors. These kids had no idea just how crazy a summer camp could be.

He sighed. “Well, I guess we wait in line. Anybody have money?”

Frank checked his pockets. “Three denarii from Camp Jupiter. Five dollars Canadian.”

Hedge patted his gym shorts and pulled out what he found. “Three quarters,

two dimes, a rubber band and—score! A piece of celery.”

He started munching on the celery, eyeing the change and the rubber band like they might be next.

“Great,” Percy said. His own pockets were empty except for his pen/sword, Riptide. He was pondering whether or not they could sneak in somehow, when a woman in a blue-and-green Georgia Aquarium shirt came up to them, smiling brightly.

“Ah, VIP visitors!” She had perky dimpled cheeks, thick-framed glasses, braces, and frizzy black hair pulled to the sides in pigtails, so that even though she was probably in her late twenties, she looked like a schoolgirl nerd—sort of cute, but sort of odd. Along with her Georgia Aquarium polo shirt, she wore dark slacks and black sneakers, and she bounced on the balls of her feet like she simply couldn’t contain her energy. Her name tag read KATE.

“You have your payment, I see,” she said. “Excellent!”

“What?” Percy asked.

Kate scooped the three denarii out of Frank’s hand. “Yes, that’s fine. Right this way!”

She spun and trotted off toward the main entrance.

Percy looked at Coach Hedge and Frank. “A trap?”

“Probably,” Frank said.

“She’s not mortal,” Hedge said, sniffing the air. “Probably some sort of goat-eating, demigod-destroying fiend from Tartarus.”

“No doubt,” Percy agreed.

“Awesome.” Hedge grinned. “Let’s go.”

Kate got them past the ticket queue and into the aquarium with no problem.

“Right this way.” Kate grinned at Percy. “It’s a *wonderful* exhibit. You won’t be disappointed. So rare we get VIPs.”

“Uh, you mean demigods?” Frank asked.

Kate winked at him impishly and put a finger to her mouth. “So over here is the cold-water experience, with your penguins and beluga whales and whatnot. And over there...well, those are some fish, obviously.”

For an aquarium worker, she didn’t seem to know much or care much about

the smaller fish. They passed one huge tank full of tropical species, and when Frank pointed to a particular fish and asked what it was, Kate said, “Oh, those are the yellow ones.”

They passed the gift shop. Frank slowed down to check out a clearance table with clothes and toys.

“Take what you want,” Kate told him.

Frank blinked. “Really?”

“Of course! You’re a VIP!”

Frank hesitated. Then he stuffed some T-shirts in his backpack.

“Dude,” Percy said, “what are you doing?”

“She said I could,” Frank whispered. “Besides, I need more clothes. I didn’t pack for a long trip!”

He added a snow globe to his stash, which didn’t seem like clothing to Percy. Then Frank picked up a braided cylinder about the size of a candy bar.

He squinted at it. “What is—?”

“Chinese handcuffs,” Percy said.

Frank, who was Chinese Canadian, looked offended. “How is this Chinese?”

“I don’t know,” Percy said. “That’s just what it’s called. It’s like a gag gift.”

“Come along, boys!” Kate called from across the hall.

“I’ll show you later,” Percy promised.

Frank stuffed the handcuffs in his backpack, and they kept walking.

They passed through an acrylic tunnel. Fish swam over their heads, and Percy felt irrational panic building in his throat.

This is dumb, he told himself. I’ve been underwater a million times. And I’m not even in the water.

The real threat was Kate, he reminded himself. Hedge had already detected that she wasn’t human. Any minute she might turn into some horrible creature and attack them. Unfortunately, Percy didn’t see much choice but to play along with her VIP tour until they could find the sea god Phorcys, even if they were walking deeper into a trap.

They emerged in a viewing room awash with blue light. On the other side of a glass wall was the biggest aquarium tank Percy had ever seen. Cruising in

circles were dozens of huge fish, including two spotted sharks, each twice Percy's size. They were fat and slow, with open mouths and no teeth.

"Whale sharks," Coach Hedge growled. "Now we shall battle to the death!"

Kate giggled. "Silly satyr. Whale sharks are peaceful. They only eat plankton."

Percy scowled. He wondered how Kate knew the coach was a satyr. Hedge was wearing pants and specially fitted shoes over his hooves, like satyrs usually did to blend in with mortals. His baseball cap covered his horns. The more Kate giggled and acted friendly, the more Percy didn't like her; but Coach Hedge didn't seem fazed.

"Peaceful sharks?" the coach said with disgust. "What's the point of that?"

Frank read the plaque next to the tank. "The only whale sharks in captivity in the world," he mused. "That's kind of amazing."

"Yes, and these are small," Kate said. "You should see some of my other babies out in the wild."

"Your babies?" Frank asked.

Judging from the wicked glint in Kate's eyes, Percy was pretty sure he didn't want to meet Kate's *babies*. He decided it was time to get to the point. He didn't want to go any farther into this aquarium than he had to.

"So, Kate," he said, "we're looking for a guy...I mean a god, named Phorcys. Would you happen to know him?"

Kate snorted. "Know him? He's my brother. That's where we're going, sillies. The *real* exhibits are right through here."

She gestured at the far wall. The solid black surface rippled, and another tunnel appeared, leading through a luminous purple tank.

Kate strolled inside. The last thing Percy wanted to do was follow, but if Phorcys was really on the other side, and if he had information that would help their quest...Percy took a deep breath and followed his friends into the tunnel.

As soon as they entered, Coach Hedge whistled. "Now *that's* interesting."

Gliding above them were multicolored jellyfish the size of trash cans, each with hundreds of tentacles that looked like silky barbed wire. One jellyfish had a paralyzed ten-foot-long swordfish tangled in its grasp. The jellyfish slowly

wrapped its tendrils tighter and tighter around its prey.

Kate beamed at Coach Hedge. “You see? Forget the whale sharks! And there’s much more.”

Kate led them into an even larger chamber, lined with more aquariums. On one wall, a glowing red sign proclaimed: DEATH IN THE DEEP SEAS! *Sponsored by Monster Donut.*

Percy had to read the sign twice because of his dyslexia, and then twice more to let the message sink in. “Monster Donut?”

“Oh, yes,” Kate said. “One of our corporate sponsors.”

Percy gulped. His last experience with Monster Donut hadn’t been pleasant. It had involved acid-spitting serpent heads, much screaming, and a cannon.

In one aquarium, a dozen hippocampi—horses with the tails of fish—drifted aimlessly. Percy had seen many hippocampi in the wild. He’d even ridden a few; but he had never seen any in an aquarium. He tried to speak with them, but they just floated around, occasionally bonking against the glass. Their minds seemed addled.

“This isn’t right,” Percy muttered.

He turned and saw something even worse. At the bottom of a smaller tank, two Nereids—female sea spirits—sat cross-legged, facing each other, playing a game of Go Fish. They looked incredibly bored. Their long green hair floated listlessly around their faces. Their eyes were half closed.

Percy felt so angry, he could hardly breathe. He glared at Kate. “How can you keep them here?”

“I know.” Kate sighed. “They aren’t very interesting. We tried to teach them some tricks, but with no luck, I’m afraid. I think you’ll like this tank over here much better.”

Percy started to protest, but Kate had already moved on.

“Holy mother of goats!” cried Coach Hedge. “Look at these beauties!”

He was gawking at two sea serpents—thirty-foot-long monsters with glowing blue scales and jaws that could have bitten a whale shark in half. In another tank, peeking out from its cement cave, was a squid the size of an eighteen-wheeler, with a beak like a giant bolt cutter.

A third tank held a dozen humanoid creatures with sleek seal bodies, doglike faces, and human hands. They sat on the sand at the bottom of the tank, building things out of Legos, though the creatures seemed just as dazed as the Nereids.

“Are those—?” Percy struggled to form the question.

“Telkhines?” Kate said. “Yes! The only ones in captivity.”

“But they fought for Kronos in the last war!” Percy said. “They’re dangerous!”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Well, we couldn’t call it ‘Death in the Deep Seas’ if these exhibits weren’t dangerous. Don’t worry. We keep them well sedated.”

“Sedated?” Frank asked. “Is that legal?”

Kate appeared not to have heard. She kept walking, pointing out other exhibits. Percy looked back at the telkhines. One was obviously a youngster. He was trying to make a sword out of Legos, but he seemed too groggy to put the pieces together. Percy had never liked sea demons, but now he felt sorry for them.

“And *these* sea monsters,” Kate narrated up ahead, “can grow five hundred feet long in the deep ocean. They have over a thousand teeth. And these? Their favorite food is demigod—”

“Demigod?” Frank yelped.

“But they will eat whales or small boats, too.” Kate turned to Percy and blushed. “Sorry...I’m *such* a monster nerd! I’m sure you know all this, being the son of Poseidon, and all.”

Percy’s ears were ringing like alarm bells. He didn’t like how much Kate knew about him. He didn’t like the way she casually tossed out information about drugging captive creatures or which of her *babies* liked to devour demigods.

“Who *are* you?” he demanded. “Does Kate stand for something?”

“Kate?” She looked momentarily confused. Then she glanced at her name tag. “Oh...” She laughed. “No, it’s—”

“Hello!” said a new voice, booming through the aquarium.

A small man scuttled out of the darkness. He walked sideways on bowed legs like a crab, his back hunched, his arms raised on either side like he was holding

invisible plates.

He wore a wet suit that was several horrible shades of green. Glittery silver words printed down the side read: PORKY'S FOLLIES. A headset microphone was clamped over his greasy wiry hair. His eyes were milky blue, one higher than the other, and though he smiled, he didn't look friendly—more like his face was being peeled back in a wind tunnel.

“Visitors!” the man said, the word thundering through the microphone. He had a DJ's voice, deep and resonant, which did not at all match his appearance. “Welcome to Phorcys's Follies!”

He swept his arms in one direction, as if directing their attention to an explosion. Nothing happened.

“Curse it,” the man grumbled. “Telkhines, that's your cue! I wave my hands, and you leap energetically in your tank, do a synchronized double spin, and land in pyramid formation. We practiced this!”

The sea demons paid him no attention.

Coach Hedge leaned toward the crab man and sniffed his glittery wet suit. “Nice outfit.”

He didn't sound like he was kidding. Of course, the satyr wore gym uniforms for fun.

“Thank you!” The man beamed. “I am Phorcys.”

Frank shifted his weight from foot to foot. “Why does your suit say *Porky*?”

Phorcys snarled. “Stupid uniform company! They can't get anything right.”

Kate tapped her name tag. “I told them my name was *Keto*. They misspelled it as *Kate*. My brother...well, now he's *Porky*.”

“I am not!” the man snapped. “I'm not even a *little* porky. The name doesn't work with Follies, either. What kind of show is called *Porky's Follies*? But you folks don't want to hear us complain. Behold, the wondrous majesty of the giant killer squid!”

He gestured dramatically toward the squid tank. This time, fireworks shot off in front of the glass right on cue, sending up geysers of golden sparkles. Music swelled from the loudspeakers. The lights brightened and revealed the wondrous majesty of an empty tank.

The squid had apparently skulked back into its cave.

“Curse it!” Phorcys yelled again. He wheeled on his sister. “Keto, training the squid was *your* job. Juggling, I said. Maybe a bit of flesh-rending for the finale. Is that too much to ask?”

“He’s shy,” Keto said defensively. “Besides, each of his tentacles has sixty-two razorlike barbs that have to be sharpened daily.” She turned toward Frank. “Did you know the monstrous squid is the only beast known to eat demigods whole, armor and all, without getting indigestion? It’s true!”

Frank stumbled away from her, hugging his gut as if making sure he was still in one piece.

“Keto!” Porky snapped—literally, since he clicked his fingers to his thumbs like crab claws. “You’ll bore our guests with so much information. Less education, more entertainment! We’ve discussed this.”

“But—”

“No buts! We’re here to present ‘Death in the Deep Seas!’ Sponsored by Monster Donut!”

The last words reverberated through the room with extra echo. Lights flashed. Smoke clouds billowed from the floor, making donut-shaped rings that smelled like real donuts.

“Available at the concession stand,” Phorcys advised. “But you’ve spent your hard-earned denarii to get the VIP tour, and so you shall! Come with me!”

“Um, hold it,” Percy said.

Phorcys’s smile melted in an ugly way. “Yes?”

“You’re a sea god, aren’t you?” Percy asked. “Son of Gaea?”

The crab man sighed. “Five thousand years, and I’m still known as Gaea’s little boy. Never mind that I’m one of the oldest sea gods in existence. Older than *your* upstart father, by the way. I’m god of the hidden depths! Lord of watery terrors! Father of a thousand monsters! But, no...nobody even knows me. I make one little mistake, supporting the Titans in their war, and I’m exiled from the ocean—to Atlanta, of all places.”

“We thought the Olympians said *Atlantis*,” Keto explained. “Their idea of a joke, I guess, sending us here instead.”

Percy narrowed his eyes. “And you’re a goddess?”

“Keto, yes!” She smiled happily. “Goddess of sea monsters, naturally! Whales, sharks, squids, and other giant sea life, but my heart always belonged to the monsters. Did you know that young sea serpents can regurgitate the flesh of their victims and keep themselves fed for up to six years on the same meal? It’s true!”

Frank was still clutching his stomach like he was going to be sick.

Coach Hedge whistled. “Six years? That’s fascinating.”

“I know!” Keto beamed.

“And how exactly does a killer squid rend the flesh from its victims?” Hedge asked. “I *love* nature.”

“Oh, well—”

“Stop!” Phorcys demanded. “You’re ruining the show! Now, witness our Nereid gladiators fight to the death!”

A mirrored disco ball descended into the Nereid exhibit, making the water dance with multicolored light. Two swords fell to the bottom and plunked in the sand. The Nereids ignored them and kept playing Go Fish.

“Curse it!” Phorcys stomped his legs sideways.

Keto grimaced at Coach Hedge. “Don’t mind Porky. He’s *such* a windbag. Come with me, my fine satyr. I’ll show you full-color diagrams of the monsters’ hunting habits.”

“Excellent!”

Before Percy could object, Keto led Coach Hedge away through a maze of aquarium glass, leaving Frank and him alone with the crabby sea god.

A bead of sweat traced its way down Percy’s neck. He exchanged a nervous look with Frank. This felt like a *divide-and-conquer* strategy. He didn’t see any way the encounter was going to end well. Part of him wanted to attack Phorcys now—at least that might give them the element of surprise—but they hadn’t found out any useful information yet. Percy wasn’t sure he could find Coach Hedge again. He wasn’t even sure he could find the exit.

Phorcys must’ve read his expression.

“Oh, it’s fine!” the god assured him. “Keto might be a little boring, but she’ll

take good care of your friend. And honestly, the best part of the tour is still to come!”

Percy tried to think, but he was starting to get a headache. He wasn't sure if it was from yesterday's head injury, Phorcys's special effects, or his sister's lectures on nauseating sea monster facts. “So...” he managed. “Dionysus sent us here.”

“Bacchus,” Frank corrected.

“Right.” Percy tried to keep his annoyance in check. He could barely remember one name for each god. Two was pushing it. “The wine god. Whatever.” He looked at Phorcys. “Bacchus said you might know what your mom Gaea is up to, and these twin giant brothers of yours—Ephialtes and Otis. And if you happen to know anything about this Mark of Athena—”

“Bacchus thought I would help you?” Phorcys asked.

“Well, yeah,” Percy said. “I mean, you're Phorcys. Everybody talks about you.”

Phorcys tilted his head so that his mismatched eyes almost lined up. “They do?”

“Of course. Don't they, Frank?”

“Oh...sure!” Frank said. “People talk about you all the time.”

“What do they say?” the god asked.

Frank looked uncomfortable. “Well, you have great pyrotechnics. And a good announcer's voice. And, um, a disco ball—”

“It's true!” Phorcys clacked his fingers and thumbs excitedly. “I also have the largest collection of captive sea monsters in the world!”

“And you *know* stuff,” Percy added. “Like about the twins and what they're up to.”

“The twins!” Phorcys made his voice echo. Sparklers blazed to life in front of the sea serpent tank. “Yes, I know all about Ephialtes and Otis. Those wannabes! They never fit in with the other giants. Too puny—and those snakes for feet.”

“Snakes for feet?” Percy remembered the long, curly shoes the twins had been wearing in his dream.

“Yes, yes,” Phorcys said impatiently. “They knew they couldn't get by on

their strength, so they decided to go for drama—illusions, stage tricks, that sort of thing. You see, Gaea *shaped* her giant children with specific enemies in mind. Each giant was born to kill a certain god. Ephialtes and Otis...well, together they were sort of the anti-Dionysus.”

Percy tried to wrap his mind around that idea. “So...they want to replace all wine with cranberry juice or something?”

The sea god snorted. “Nothing like that! Ephialtes and Otis always wanted to do things better, flashier, more spectacular! Oh, of course they wanted to kill Dionysus. But first they wanted to humiliate him by making his revelries look tame!”

Frank glanced at the sparklers. “By using stuff like fireworks and disco balls?”

Phorcys’s mouth stretched into that wind tunnel smile. “Exactly! I taught the twins everything they know, or at least I tried to. They never listened. Their first big trick? They tried to reach Olympus by piling mountains on top of one another. It was just an illusion, of course. I told them it was ridiculous. ‘You should start small,’ I said. ‘Sawing each other in half, pulling gorgons out of a hat. That sort of thing. And matching sequined outfits. Twins need those!’”

“Good advice,” Percy agreed. “And now the twins are—”

“Oh, preparing for their doomsday show in Rome,” Phorcys sneered. “It’s one of Mother’s silly ideas. They’re keeping some prisoner in a large bronze jar.” He turned toward Frank. “You’re a child of Ares, aren’t you? You’ve got that smell. The twins imprisoned your father the same way, once.”

“Child of Mars,” Frank corrected. “Wait...these giants trapped my dad in a bronze jar?”

“Yes, another stupid stunt,” said the sea god. “How can you show off your prisoner if he’s in a bronze jar? No entertainment value. Not like my lovely specimens!”

He gestured to the hippocampi, who were bonking their heads apathetically against the glass.

Percy tried to think. He felt like the lethargy of the addled sea creatures was starting to affect him. “You said this—this doomsday show was Gaea’s idea?”

“Well...Mother’s plans always have lots of layers.” He laughed. “The earth has layers! I suppose that makes sense!”

“Uh-huh,” Percy said. “And so her plan...”

“Oh, she’s put out a general bounty on some group of demigods,” Phorcys said. “She doesn’t really care *who* kills them, as long as they’re killed. Well...I take that back. She was very specific that *two* must be spared. One boy and one girl. Tartarus only knows why. At any rate, the twins have their little show planned, hoping it will lure these demigods to Rome. I suppose the prisoner in the jar is a friend of theirs or some such. That, or perhaps they think this group of demigods will be foolish enough to come into their territory searching for the Mark of Athena.” Phorcys elbowed Frank in the ribs. “Ha! Good luck with that, eh?”

Frank laughed nervously. “Yeah. Ha-ha. That would be really dumb because, uh...”

Phorcys narrowed his eyes.

Percy slipped his hand into his pocket. He closed his fingers around Riptide. Even this old sea god must be smart enough to realize they were the demigods with the bounty on their heads.

But Phorcys just grinned and elbowed Frank again. “Ha! Good one, child of Mars. I suppose you’re right. No point talking about it. Even if the demigods found that map in Charleston, they’d never make it to Rome alive!”

“Yes, the MAP IN CHARLESTON,” Frank said loudly, giving Percy a wide-eyed look to make sure he hadn’t missed the information. He couldn’t have been more obvious if he had held up a large sign that read *CLUE!!!!*

“But enough boring educational stuff!” Phorcys said. “You’ve paid for the VIP treatment. Won’t you *please* let me finish the tour? The three denarii entrance fee is nonrefundable, you know.”

Percy wasn’t excited about more fireworks, donut-scented smoke, or depressing captive sea creatures. But he glanced at Frank and decided they’d better humor the crabby old god, at least until they found Coach Hedge and got safely to the exit. Besides, they might be able to get more information out of Phorcys.

“Afterward,” Percy said, “can we ask questions?”

“Of course! I’ll tell you everything you need to know.” Phorcys clapped his hands twice. On the wall under the glowing red sign, a new tunnel appeared, leading into another tank.

“Walk this way!” Phorcys scuttled sideways through the tunnel.

Frank scratched his head. “Do we have to—?” He turned sideways.

“It’s just a figure of speech, man,” Percy said. “Come on.”

PERCY

THE TUNNEL RAN ALONG THE FLOOR of a gymnasium-sized tank. Except for water and some cheap decorations, it seemed majestically empty. Percy guessed there were about fifty thousand gallons of water over their heads. If the tunnel were to shatter for some reason...

No big deal, Percy thought. I've been surrounded by water thousands of times. This is my home court.

But his heart was pounding. He remembered sinking into the cold Alaskan bog—black mud covering his eyes, mouth, and nose.

Phorcys stopped in the middle of the tunnel and spread his arms proudly. "Beautiful exhibit, isn't it?"

Percy tried to distract himself by concentrating on details. In one corner of the tank, snuggled in a forest of fake kelp, was a life-sized plastic gingerbread cottage with bubbles coming out of the chimney. In the opposite corner, a plastic sculpture of a guy in an old-fashioned diving suit knelt beside a treasure chest, which popped open every few seconds, spewed bubbles, and closed again. Littered across the white sand floor were glass marbles the size of bowling balls, and a strange assortment of weapons like tridents and spearguns. Outside the tank's display wall was an amphitheater with seating for several hundred.

“What do you keep in here?” Frank asked. “Giant killer goldfish?”

Phorcys raised his eyebrows. “Oh, that would be good! But, no, Frank Zhang, descendant of Poseidon. This tank is not for goldfish.”

At *descendant of Poseidon*, Frank flinched. He stepped back, gripping his backpack like a mace he was prepared to swing.

A sense of dread trickled down Percy’s throat like cough syrup. Unfortunately, it was a feeling he was used to.

“How do you know Frank’s last name?” he demanded. “How do you know he’s descended from Poseidon?”

“Well...” Phorcys shrugged, trying to look modest. “It was probably in the descriptions Gaea provided. You know, for the bounty, Percy Jackson.”

Percy uncapped his pen. Instantly, Riptide appeared in his hand. “Don’t double-cross me, Phorcys. You promised me answers.”

“After the VIP treatment, yes,” Phorcys agreed. “I promised to tell you everything you need to know. The thing is, however, you don’t really need to know anything.” His grotesque smile stretched wide. “You see, even if you made it to Rome, which is *quite* unlikely, you’d never defeat my giant brothers without a god fighting at your side. And what god would help you? So I have a better plan. You’re not leaving. You’re VIPs—Very Important Prisoners!”

Percy lunged. Frank hurled his backpack at the sea god’s head. Phorcys simply disappeared.

The god’s voice reverberated through the aquarium’s sound system, echoing down the tunnel. “Yes, good! Fighting is good! You see, Mother never trusted me with big assignments, but she *did* agree that I could keep anything I caught. You two will make an excellent exhibit—the only demigod spawn of Poseidon in captivity. ‘Demigod Terrors’—yes, I like that! We already have sponsorship lined up with Bargain Mart. You can fight each other every day at eleven AM and one PM, with an evening show at seven PM.”

“You’re crazy!” Frank yelled.

“Don’t sell yourself short!” Phorcys said. “You’ll be our biggest draw!”

Frank ran for the exit, only to slam into a glass wall. Percy ran the other way and found it blocked as well. Their tunnel had become a bubble. He put his hand

against the glass and realized it was softening, melting like ice. Soon the water would come crashing in.

“We won’t cooperate, Phorcys!” he shouted.

“Oh, I’m optimistic,” the sea god’s voice boomed. “If you won’t fight each other at first, no problem! I can send in fresh sea monsters every day. After you get used to the food here, you’ll be properly sedated and will follow directions. Believe me, you’ll come to love your new home.”

Over Percy’s head, the glass dome cracked and began to leak.

“I’m the son of Poseidon!” Percy tried to keep the fear out of his voice. “You can’t imprison me in water. This is where I’m strongest.”

Phorcys’s laugh seemed to come from all around them. “What a coincidence! It’s also where *I’m* strongest. This tank is specially designed to contain demigods. Now, have fun, you two. I’ll see you at feeding time!”

The glass dome shattered, and the water crashed in.

Percy held his breath until he couldn’t stand it. When he finally filled his lungs with water, it felt just like normal breathing. The water pressure didn’t bother him. His clothes didn’t even get wet. His underwater abilities were as good as ever.

It’s just a stupid phobia, he assured himself. I’m not going to drown.

Then he remembered Frank, and he immediately felt a surge of panic and guilt. Percy had been so worried about himself that he’d forgotten his friend was only a distant descendant of Poseidon. *Frank* couldn’t breathe underwater.

But where *was* he?

Percy turned in a full circle. Nothing. Then he glanced up. Hovering about him was a giant goldfish. Frank had turned—clothes, backpack, and all—into a koi the size of a teenaged boy.

Dude. Percy sent his thoughts through the water, the way he spoke with other sea creatures. *A goldfish?*

Frank’s voice came back to him: *I freaked. We were talking about goldfish, so it was on my mind. Sue me.*

I’m having a telepathic conversation with a giant koi, Percy said. *Great. Can*

you turn into something more...useful?

Silence. Maybe Frank was concentrating, though it was impossible to tell, since koi don't have many expressions.

Sorry. Frank sounded embarrassed. *I'm stuck. That happens sometimes when I panic.*

Fine. Percy gritted his teeth. *Let's figure out how to escape.*

Frank swam around the tank and reported no exits. The top was covered with Celestial bronze mesh, like the curtains that roll down over closed storefronts at the mall. Percy tried to cut through with Riptide, but he couldn't make a dent. He tried to smash through the glass wall with his sword hilt—again, no luck. Then he repeated his efforts with several of the weapons lying around the bottom of the tank and managed to break three tridents, a sword, and a speargun.

Finally he tried to control the water. He wanted it to expand and break the tank, or explode out the top. The water didn't obey. Maybe it was enchanted, or under the power of Phorcys. Percy concentrated until his ears popped, but the best he could do was blow the lid off the plastic treasure chest.

Well, that's it, he thought dejectedly. I'll have to live in a plastic gingerbread house the rest of my life, fighting my giant goldfish friend and waiting for feeding time.

Phorcys had promised they'd learn to love it. Percy thought about the dazed telkhines, the Nereids and hippocampi, all swimming in bored, lazy circles. The thought of ending up like that didn't help to lower his anxiety level.

He wondered if Phorcys was right. Even if they managed to escape, how could they defeat the giants if the gods were all incapacitated? Bacchus might be able to help. He had killed the twin giants once before, but he would only join the fight if he got an impossible tribute, and the idea of giving Bacchus *any* kind of tribute made Percy want to gag himself with a Monster Donut.

Look! Frank said.

Outside the glass, Keto was leading Coach Hedge through the amphitheater, lecturing him on something while the coach nodded and admired the stadium seating.

Coach! Percy yelled. Then he realized it was hopeless. The coach couldn't

hear telepathic yelling.

Frank bumped his head against the glass.

Hedge didn't seem to notice. Keto walked him briskly across the amphitheater. She didn't even look through the glass, probably because she assumed the tank was still empty. She pointed to the far end of the room as if saying, *Come on. More gruesome sea monsters this way.*

Percy realized he had only a few seconds before the coach would be gone. He swam after them, but the water didn't help him move as it usually did. In fact, it seemed to be pushing him back. He dropped Riptide and used both arms.

Coach Hedge and Keto were five feet from the exit.

In desperation, Percy scooped up a giant marble and hurled it underhanded like a bowling ball.

It hit the glass with a *thunk*—not nearly loud enough to attract attention.

Percy's heart sank.

But Coach Hedge had the ears of a satyr. He glanced over his shoulder. When he saw Percy, his expression went through several changes in a matter of microseconds—incomprehension, surprise, outrage, then a mask of calm.

Before Keto could notice, Hedge pointed toward the top of the amphitheater. It looked like he might be screaming, *Gods of Olympus, what is that?*

Keto turned. Coach Hedge promptly took off his fake foot and ninja-kicked her in the back of the head with his goat hoof. Keto crumpled to the floor.

Percy winced. His own recently whopped head throbbed in sympathy, but he had never been happier to have a chaperone who liked mixed martial arts cage matches.

Hedge ran to the glass. He held up his palms like: *What are you doing in there, Jackson?*

Percy pounded his fist on the glass and mouthed: *Break it!*

Hedge yelled a question that might have been: *Where's Frank?*

Percy pointed at the giant koi.

Frank waved his left dorsal fin. *'Sup?*

Behind Hedge, the sea goddess began to move. Percy pointed frantically.

Hedge shook his leg like he was warming up his kicking hoof, but Percy

waved his arms, *No*. They couldn't keep whopping Keto on the head forever. Since she was immortal, she wouldn't stay down, and it wouldn't get them out of this tank. It was only a matter of time before Phorcys came back to check on them.

On three, Percy mouthed, holding up three fingers and then gesturing at the glass. *All of us hit it at the same time.*

Percy had never been good at charades, but Hedge nodded like he understood. Hitting things was a language the satyr knew well.

Percy hefted another giant marble. *Frank, we'll need you too. Can you change form yet?*

Maybe back to human.

Human is fine! Just hold your breath. If this works...

Keto rose to her knees. No time to waste.

Percy counted on his fingers. *One, two, three!*

Frank turned to human and shoved his shoulder against the glass. The coach did a Chuck Norris roundhouse kick with his hoof. Percy used all his strength to slam the marble into the wall, but he did more than that. He called on the water to obey him, and this time he refused to take no for an answer. He felt all the pent-up pressure inside the tank, and he put it to use. Water liked to be free. Given time, water could overcome any barrier, and it *hated* to be trapped, just like Percy. He thought about getting back to Annabeth. He thought about destroying this horrible prison for sea creatures. He thought about shoving Phorcys's microphone down his ugly throat. Fifty thousand gallons of water responded to his anger.

The glass wall cracked. Fracture lines zigzagged from the point of impact, and suddenly the tank burst. Percy was sucked out in a torrent of water. He tumbled across the amphitheater floor with Frank, some large marbles, and a clump of plastic seaweed. Keto was just getting to her feet when the diver statue slammed into her like it wanted a hug.

Coach Hedge spit salt water. "Pan's pipes, Jackson! What were you *doing* in there?"

"Phorcys!" Percy spluttered. "Trap! Run!"

Alarms blared as they fled the exhibits. They ran past the Nereids' tank, then the telkhines. Percy wanted to free them, but how? They were drugged and sluggish, and they were sea creatures. They wouldn't survive unless he found a way to transport them to the ocean.

Besides, if Phorcys caught them, Percy was pretty sure the sea god's power would overcome his. And Keto would be after them too, ready to feed them to her sea monsters.

I'll be back, Percy promised, but if the creatures in the exhibits could hear him, they gave no sign.

Over the sound system, Phorcys's voice boomed: "Percy Jackson!"

Flash pots and sparklers exploded randomly. Donut-scented smoke filled the halls. Dramatic music—five or six different tracks—blared simultaneously from the speakers. Lights popped and caught fire as all the special effects in the building were triggered at once.

Percy, Coach Hedge, and Frank stumbled out of the glass tunnel and found themselves back in the whale shark room. The mortal section of the aquarium was filled with screaming crowds—families and day camp groups running in every direction while the staff raced around frantically, trying to assure everyone it was just a faulty alarm system.

Percy knew better. He and his friends joined the mortals and ran for the exit.

XVII

ANNABETH

ANNABETH WAS TRYING TO CHEER UP HAZEL, regaling her with Percy's greatest Seaweed Brain moments, when Frank stumbled down the hall and burst into her cabin.

"Where's Leo?" he gasped. "Take off! Take off!"

Both girls shot to their feet.

"Where's *Percy*?" Annabeth demanded. "And the goat?"

Frank grabbed his knees, trying to breathe. His clothes were stiff and damp, like they'd been washed in pure starch. "On deck. They're fine. We're being followed!"

Annabeth pushed past him and took the stairs three at a time, Hazel right behind her and Frank trailing, still gasping for air. Percy and Hedge lay on the deck, looking exhausted. Hedge was missing his shoes. He grinned at the sky, muttering, "Awesome. Awesome." Percy was covered with nicks and scratches, like he'd jumped through a window. He didn't say anything, but he grasped Annabeth's hand weakly as if to say, *Be right with you, as soon as the world stops spinning.*

Leo, Piper, and Jason, who'd been eating in the mess hall, came rushing up the stairs.

“What? What?” Leo cried, holding a half-eaten grilled cheese sandwich. “Can’t a guy even take a lunch break? What’s wrong?”

“Followed!” Frank yelled again.

“Followed by *what*?” Jason asked.

“I don’t know!” Frank panted. “Whales? Sea monsters? Maybe Kate and Porky!”

Annabeth wanted to strangle the guy, but she wasn’t sure her hands would fit around his thick neck. “That makes absolutely no sense. Leo, you’d better get us out of here.”

Leo put his sandwich between his teeth, pirate style, and ran for the helm.

Soon the *Argo II* was rising into the sky. Annabeth manned the aft crossbow. She saw no sign of pursuit by whales or otherwise, but Percy, Frank, and Hedge didn’t start to recover until the Atlanta skyline was a hazy smudge in the distance.

“Charleston,” Percy said, hobbling around the deck like an old man. He still sounded pretty shaken up. “Set course for Charleston.”

“Charleston?” Jason said the name as if it brought back bad memories. “What exactly did you find in Atlanta?”

Frank unzipped his backpack and starting bringing out souvenirs. “Some peach preserves. A couple of T-shirts. A snow globe. And, um, these not-really-Chinese handcuffs.”

Annabeth forced herself to stay calm. “How about you start from the top—of the story, not the backpack.”

They gathered on the quarterdeck so Leo could hear the conversation as he navigated. Percy and Frank took turns relating what had happened at the Georgia Aquarium, with Coach Hedge interjecting from time to time: “That was awesome!” or “Then I kicked her in the head!”

At least the coach seemed to have forgotten about Percy and Annabeth falling asleep in the stable the night before. But judging from Percy’s story, Annabeth had worse problems to worry about than being grounded.

When Percy explained about the captive sea creatures in the aquarium, she understood why he seemed so upset.

“That’s terrible,” she said. “We need to help them.”

“We will,” Percy promised. “In time. But I have to figure out *how*. I wish...” He shook his head. “Never mind. First we have to deal with this bounty on our heads.”

Coach Hedge had lost interest in the conversation—probably because it was no longer about him—and wandered toward the bow of the ship, practicing his roundhouse kicks and complimenting himself on his technique.

Annabeth gripped the hilt of her dagger. “A bounty on our heads...as if we didn’t attract enough monsters already.”

“Do we get WANTED posters?” Leo asked. “And do they have our bounties, like, broken down on a price list?”

Hazel wrinkled her nose. “*What* are you talking about?”

“Just curious how much I’m going for these days,” Leo said. “I mean, I can understand not being as pricey as Percy or Jason, maybe...but am I worth, like, two Franks, or three Franks?”

“Hey!” Frank complained.

“Knock it off,” Annabeth ordered. “At least we know our next step is to go to Charleston, to find this map.”

Piper leaned against the control panel. She’d done her braid with white feathers today, which looked good with her dark brown hair. Annabeth wondered how she found the time. Annabeth could barely remember to *brush* her hair.

“A map,” Piper said. “But a map to *what*?”

“The Mark of Athena.” Percy looked cautiously at Annabeth, like he was afraid he’d overstepped. She must have been putting out a strong *I don’t want to talk about it* vibe.

“*Whatever* that is,” he continued. “We know it leads to something important in Rome, something that might heal the rift between the Romans and Greeks.”

“*The giants’ bane*,” Hazel added.

Percy nodded. “And in my dream, the twin giants said something about a statue.”

“Um...” Frank rolled his not-exactly-Chinese handcuffs between his fingers.

“According to Phorcys, we’d have to be insane to try to find it. But what *is* it?”

Everyone looked at Annabeth. Her scalp tingled, as if the thoughts in her brain were agitating to get out: a statue...Athena...Greek and Roman, her nightmares, and her argument with her mom. She saw how the pieces were coming together, but she couldn’t believe it was true. The answer was too big, too important, and much too scary.

She noticed Jason studying her, as if he knew *exactly* what she was thinking and didn’t like it any more than she did. Again she couldn’t help but wonder: *Why does this guy make me so nervous? Is he really on my side? Or maybe that was her mom talking....*

“I—I’m close to an answer,” she said. “I’ll know more if we find this map. Jason, the way you reacted to the name *Charleston*...have you been there before?”

Jason glanced uneasily at Piper, though Annabeth wasn’t sure why.

“Yeah,” he admitted. “Reyna and I did a quest there about a year ago. We were salvaging Imperial gold weapons from the C.S.S. *Hunley*.”

“The what?” Piper asked.

“Whoa!” Leo said. “That’s the first successful military submarine. From the Civil War. I always wanted to see that.”

“It was designed by Roman demigods,” Jason said. “It held a secret stash of Imperial gold torpedoes—until we rescued them and brought them back to Camp Jupiter.”

Hazel crossed her arms. “So the Romans fought on the Confederate side? As a girl whose grandmother was a slave, can I just say...not cool?”

Jason put his hands in front of him, palms up. “I personally was not alive then. And it wasn’t *all* Greeks on one side and *all* Romans on the other. But, yes. Not cool. Sometimes demigods make bad choices.” He looked sheepishly at Hazel. “Like sometimes we’re too suspicious. And we speak without thinking.”

Hazel stared at him. Slowly it seemed to dawn on her that he was apologizing.

Jason elbowed Leo.

“Ow!” Leo yelped. “I mean, yeah...bad choices. Like not trusting people’s

brothers who, you know, might need saving. Hypothetically speaking.”

Hazel pursed her lips. “Fine. Back to Charleston. Are you saying we should check that submarine again?”

Jason shrugged. “Well...I can think of *two* places in Charleston we might search. The museum where they keep the *Hunley*—that’s one of them. It has a lot of relics from the Civil War. A map could be hidden in one. I know the layout. I could lead a team inside.”

“I’ll go,” Leo said. “That sounds cool.”

Jason nodded. He turned to Frank, who was trying to pull his fingers out of the Chinese handcuffs. “You should come too, Frank. We might need you.”

Frank looked surprised. “Why? Not like I was much good at that aquarium.”

“You did fine,” Percy assured him. “It took all three of us to break that glass.”

“Besides, you’re a child of Mars,” Jason said. “The ghosts of defeated causes are bound to serve you. And the museum in Charleston has *plenty* of Confederate ghosts. We’ll need you to keep them in line.”

Frank gulped. Annabeth remembered Percy’s comment about Frank turning into a giant goldfish, and she resisted the urge to smile. She would never be able to look at the big guy again without seeing him as a koi.

“Okay.” Frank relented. “Sure.” He frowned at his fingers, trying to pull them out of the trap. “Uh, how do you—?”

Leo chuckled. “Man, you’ve never seen those before? There’s a simple trick to getting out.”

Frank tugged again with no luck. Even Hazel was trying not to laugh.

Frank grimaced with concentration. Suddenly, he disappeared. On the deck where he’d been standing, a green iguana crouched next to an empty set of Chinese handcuffs.

“Well done, Frank Zhang,” Leo said dryly, doing his impression of Chiron the centaur. “That is exactly how people beat Chinese handcuffs. They turn into iguanas.”

Everybody busted out laughing. Frank turned back to human, picked up the handcuffs, and shoved them in his backpack. He managed an embarrassed smile.

“Anyway,” Frank said, clearly anxious to change the subject. “The museum is one place to search. But, uh, Jason, you said there were two?”

Jason’s smile faded. Whatever he was thinking about, Annabeth could tell it wasn’t pleasant.

“Yeah,” he said. “The other place is called the Battery—it’s a park right by the harbor. The last time I was there...with Reyna...” He glanced at Piper, then rushed on. “We saw something in the park. A ghost or some sort of spirit, like a Southern belle from the Civil War, glowing and floating along. We tried to approach it, but it disappeared whenever we got close. Then Reyna had this feeling—she said she should try it alone. Like maybe it would only talk to a girl. She went up to the spirit by herself, and sure enough, it spoke to her.”

Everyone waited.

“What did it say?” Annabeth asked.

“Reyna wouldn’t tell me,” Jason admitted. “But it must have been important. She seemed...shaken up. Maybe she got a prophecy or some bad news. Reyna never acted the same around me after that.”

Annabeth considered that. After their experience with the eidolons, she didn’t like the idea of approaching a ghost, especially one that changed people with bad news or prophecies. On the other hand, her mom was the goddess of knowledge, and knowledge was the most powerful weapon. Annabeth couldn’t turn down a possible source of information.

“A girls’ adventure, then,” Annabeth said. “Piper and Hazel can come with me.”

Both nodded, though Hazel looked nervous. No doubt her time in the Underworld had given her enough ghost experiences for two lifetimes. Piper’s eyes flashed defiantly, like anything Reyna could do, she could do.

Annabeth realized that if six of them went on these two quests, it would leave Percy alone on the ship with Coach Hedge, which was maybe not a situation a caring girlfriend should put him in. Nor was she eager to let Percy out of her sight again—not after they’d been apart for so many months. On the other hand, Percy looked so troubled by his experience with those imprisoned sea creatures, she thought maybe he could use a rest. She met his eyes, asking him a silent

question. He nodded as if to say, *Yeah. It'll be fine.*

“So that’s settled.” Annabeth turned to Leo, who was studying his console, listening to Festus creak and click over the intercom. “Leo, how long until we reach Charleston?”

“Good question,” he muttered. “Festus just detected a large group of eagles behind us—long-range radar, still not in sight.”

Piper leaned over the console. “Are you sure they’re Roman?”

Leo rolled his eyes. “No, Pipes. It could be a random group of giant eagles flying in perfect formation. Of course they’re Roman! I suppose we could turn the ship around and fight—”

“Which would be a very bad idea,” Jason said, “and remove any doubt that we’re enemies of Rome.”

“Or I’ve got another idea,” Leo said. “If we went straight to Charleston, we could be there in a few hours. But the eagles would overtake us, and things would get complicated. *Instead*, we could send out a decoy to trick the eagles. We take the ship on a detour, go the long way to Charleston, and get there tomorrow morning—”

Hazel started to protest, but Leo raised his hand. “I know, I know. Nico’s in trouble and we have to hurry.”

“It’s June twenty-seventh,” Hazel said. “After today, four more days. Then he dies.”

“I know! But this might throw the Romans off our trail. We still should have enough time to reach Rome.”

Hazel scowled. “When you say *should have enough*...”

Leo shrugged. “How do you feel about *barely enough*?”

Hazel put her face in her hands for a count of three. “Sounds about typical for us.”

Annabeth decided to take that as a green light. “Okay, Leo. What kind of decoy are we talking about?”

“I’m so glad you asked!” He punched a few buttons on the console, rotated the turntable, and repeatedly pressed the A button on his Wii controller really, really fast. He called into the intercom, “Buford? Report for duty, please.”

Frank took a step back. “There’s somebody else on the ship? Who is Buford?”

A puff of steam shot from the stairwell, and Leo’s automatic table climbed on deck.

Annabeth hadn’t seen much of Buford during the trip. He mostly stayed in the engine room. (Leo insisted that Buford had a secret crush on the engine.) He was a three-legged table with a mahogany top. His bronze base had several drawers, spinning gears, and a set of steam vents. Buford was toting a bag like a mail sack tied to one of his legs. He clattered to the helm and made a sound like a train whistle.

“This is Buford,” Leo announced.

“You name your furniture?” Frank asked.

Leo snorted. “Man, you just *wish* you had furniture this cool. Buford, are you ready for Operation End Table?”

Buford spewed steam. He stepped to the railing. His mahogany top split into four pie slices, which elongated into wooden blades. The blades spun, and Buford took off.

“A helicopter table,” Percy muttered. “Gotta admit, that’s cool. What’s in the bag?”

“Dirty demigod laundry,” Leo said. “I hope you don’t mind, Frank.”

Frank choked. “What?”

“It’ll throw the eagles off our scent.”

“Those were my only extra pants!”

Leo shrugged. “I asked Buford to get them laundered and folded while he’s out. Hopefully he will.” He rubbed his hands and grinned. “Well! I call that a good day’s work. I’m gonna calculate our detour route now. See you all at dinner!”

Percy passed out early, which left Annabeth with nothing to do in the evening except stare at her computer.

She’d brought Daedalus’s laptop with her, of course. Two years ago, she’d inherited the machine from the greatest inventor of all time, and it was loaded

with invention ideas, schematics, and diagrams, most of which Annabeth was still trying to figure out. After two years, a typical laptop would have been out of date, but Annabeth figured Daedalus's machine was still about fifty years ahead of its time. It could expand into a full-size laptop, shrink into a tablet computer, or fold into a wafer of metal smaller than a cell phone. It ran faster than any computer she'd ever had, could access satellites or Hephaestus-TV broadcasts from Mount Olympus, and ran custom-made programs that could do just about anything except tie shoelaces. There might have been an app for that, too, but Annabeth hadn't found it yet.

She sat on her bunk, using one of Daedalus's 3-D-rendering programs to study a model of the Parthenon in Athens. She'd always yearned to visit it, both because she loved architecture and because it was the most famous temple to her mother.

Now she might get her wish, if they lived long enough to reach Greece. But the more she thought about the Mark of Athena, and the old Roman legend Reyna had mentioned, the more nervous she got.

She didn't want to, but she recalled her argument with her mother. Even after so many weeks, the words still stung.

Annabeth had been riding the subway back from the Upper East Side after visiting Percy's mom. During those long months when Percy was missing, Annabeth made the trip at least once a week—partly to give Sally Jackson and her husband Paul an update on the search, and partly because Annabeth and Sally needed to lift each other's spirits and convince one another that Percy would be fine.

The spring had been especially hard. By then, Annabeth had reason to hope Percy was alive, since Hera's plan seemed to involve sending him to the Roman side, but she couldn't be sure where he was. Jason had remembered his old camp's location more or less, but all the Greeks' magic—even that of the campers of Hecate's cabin—couldn't confirm that Percy was there, or anywhere. He seemed to have disappeared from the planet. Rachel the Oracle had tried to read the future, and while she couldn't see much, she'd been certain that Leo needed to finish the *Argo II* before they could contact the Romans.

Nevertheless, Annabeth had spent every spare moment scouring all sources for any rumors of Percy. She had talked to nature spirits, read legends about Rome, dug for clues on Daedalus's notebook, and spent hundreds of golden drachmas on Iris-messages to every friendly spirit, demigod, or monster she'd ever met, all with no luck.

That particular afternoon, coming back from Sally's, Annabeth had felt even more drained than usual. She and Sally had first cried and then attempted to pull themselves together, but their nerves were frayed. Finally Annabeth took the Lexington Avenue subway down to Grand Central.

There were other ways to get back to her high school dorm from the Upper East Side, but Annabeth liked going through Grand Central Terminal. The beautiful design and the vast open space reminded her of Mount Olympus. Grand buildings made her feel better—maybe because being in a place so permanent made *her* feel more permanent.

She had just passed Sweet on America, the candy shop where Percy's mom used to work, and was thinking about going inside to buy some blue candy for old times' sake, when she saw Athena studying the subway map on the wall.

"Mother!" Annabeth couldn't believe it. She hadn't seen her mom in months—not since Zeus had closed the gates of Olympus and forbidden all communication with demigods.

Many times, Annabeth had tried to call on her mom anyway, pleading for guidance, sending up burnt offerings with every meal at camp. She'd had no response. Now here was Athena, dressed in jeans and hiking boots and a red flannel shirt, her dark hair cascading over her shoulders. She held a backpack and a walking stick like she was prepared for a long journey.

"I must return home," Athena murmured, studying the map. "The way is complex. I wish Odysseus were here. He would understand."

"Mom!" Annabeth said. "Athena!"

The goddess turned. She seemed to look right through Annabeth with no recognition.

"That was my name," the goddess said dreamily. "Before they sacked my city, took my identity, made me *this*." She looked at her clothes in disgust. "I

must return home.”

Annabeth stepped back in shock. “You’re...you’re Minerva?”

“Don’t call me that!” The goddess’s gray eyes flared with anger. “I used to carry a spear and a shield. I held victory in the palm of my hand. I was so much more than this.”

“Mom.” Annabeth’s voice trembled. “It’s me, Annabeth. Your *daughter*.”

“My daughter...” Athena repeated. “Yes, my children will avenge me. They must destroy the Romans. Horrible, dishonorable, copycat Romans. Hera argued that we must keep the two camps apart. I said, No, let them fight. Let my children destroy the usurpers.”

Annabeth’s heartbeat thumped in her ears. “You *wanted* that? But you’re wise. You understand warfare better than any—”

“Once!” the goddess said. “Replaced. Sacked. Looted like a trophy and carted off—away from my beloved homeland. I lost so much. I swore I would never forgive. Neither would my children.” She focused more closely on Annabeth. “You are my daughter?”

“Yes.”

The goddess fished something from the pocket of her shirt—an old-fashioned subway token—and pressed it into Annabeth’s hand.

“Follow the Mark of Athena,” the goddess said. “Avenge me.”

Annabeth had looked at the coin. As she watched, it changed from a New York subway token to an ancient silver drachma, the kind used by Athenians. It showed an owl, Athena’s sacred animal, with an olive branch on one side and a Greek inscription on the other.

The Mark of Athena.

At the time, Annabeth had had no idea what it meant. She didn’t understand why her mom was acting like this. Minerva or not, she shouldn’t be so confused.

“Mom...” She tried to make her tone as reasonable as possible. “Percy is missing. I need your help.” She had started to explain Hera’s plan for bringing the camps together to battle Gaea and the giants, but the goddess stamped her walking stick against the marble floor.

“Never!” she said. “Anyone who helps Rome must perish. If you would join

them, you are no child of mine. You have already failed me.”

“Mother!”

“I care nothing about this *Percy*. If he has gone over to the Romans, let him perish. Kill him. Kill all the Romans. Find the Mark, follow it to its source. Witness how Rome has disgraced me, and pledge your vengeance.”

“Athena isn’t the goddess of revenge.” Annabeth’s nails bit into her palms. The silver coin seemed to grow warmer in her hand. “Percy is everything to me.”

“And revenge is everything to me,” the goddess snarled. “Which of us is wiser?”

“Something is *wrong* with you. What’s happened?”

“Rome happened!” the goddess said bitterly. “See what they have done, making a *Roman* of me. They wish me to be their goddess? Then let them taste their own evil. Kill them, child.”

“No!”

“Then you are nothing.” The goddess turned to the subway map. Her expression softened, becoming confused and unfocused. “If I could find the route...the way home, then perhaps— But, no. Avenge me or leave me. You are no child of mine.”

Annabeth’s eyes stung. She thought of a thousand horrible things she wanted to say, but she couldn’t. She had turned and fled.

She’d tried to throw away the silver coin, but it simply reappeared in her pocket, the way Riptide did for Percy. Unfortunately, Annabeth’s drachma had no magical powers—at least nothing useful. It only gave her nightmares, and no matter what she tried, she couldn’t get rid of it.

Now, sitting in her cabin aboard the *Argo II*, she could feel the coin growing warm in her pocket. She stared at the model of the Parthenon on her computer screen and thought about the argument with Athena. Phrases she’d heard over the last few days swirled in her head: *A talented friend, ready for her visitor. No one will retrieve that statue. Wisdom’s daughter walks alone.*

She was afraid she finally understood what it all meant. She prayed to the gods that she was wrong.

A knock on her door made her jump.

She hoped it might be Percy, but instead Frank Zhang poked his head in.

“Um, sorry,” he said. “Could I—?”

She was so startled to see him, it took her a moment to realize he wanted to come in.

“Sure,” she said. “Yes.”

He stepped inside, looking around the cabin. There wasn’t much to see. On her desk sat a stack of books, a journal and pen, and a picture of her dad flying his Sopwith Camel biplane, grinning and giving the thumbs-up. Annabeth liked that photo. It reminded her of the time she’d felt closest to him, when he’d strafed an army of monsters with Celestial bronze machine guns just to protect her—pretty much the best present a girl could hope for.

Hanging from a hook on the wall was her New York Yankees cap, her most prized possession from her mom. Once, the cap had had the power to turn its wearer invisible. Since Annabeth’s argument with Athena, the cap had lost its magic. Annabeth wasn’t sure why, but she’d stubbornly brought it along on the quest. Every morning she would try it on, hoping it would work again. So far it had only served as a reminder of her mother’s wrath.

Otherwise, her cabin was bare. She kept it clean and simple, which helped her to think. Percy didn’t believe it because she always made excellent grades, but like most demigods, she was ADHD. When there were too many distractions in her personal space, she was never able to focus.

“So...Frank,” she ventured. “What can I do for you?”

Out of all the kids on the ship, Frank was the one she thought least likely to pay her a visit. She didn’t feel any less confused when he blushed and pulled his Chinese handcuffs out of his pocket.

“I don’t like being in the dark about this,” he muttered. “Could you show me the trick? I didn’t feel comfortable asking anyone else.”

Annabeth processed his words with a slight delay. Wait...Frank was asking *her* for help? Then it dawned on her: of course, Frank was embarrassed. Leo had been razzing him pretty hard. Nobody liked being a laughingstock. Frank’s determined expression said he never wanted that to happen again. He wanted to understand the puzzle, without the iguana solution.

Annabeth felt strangely honored. Frank trusted her not to make fun of him. Besides, she had a soft spot for anyone who was seeking knowledge—even about something as simple as Chinese handcuffs.

She patted the bunk next to her. “Absolutely. Sit down.”

Frank sat on the edge of the mattress, as if preparing for a quick escape. Annabeth took the Chinese handcuffs and held them next to her computer.

She hit the key for an infrared scan. A few seconds later a 3-D model of the Chinese handcuffs appeared on the screen. She turned the laptop so that Frank could see.

“How did you do that?” he marveled.

“Cutting-edge Ancient Greek technology,” she said. “Okay, look. The structure is a cylindrical biaxial braid, so it has excellent resilience.” She manipulated the image so it squeezed in and out like an accordion. “When you put your fingers inside, it loosens. But when you try to remove them, the circumference shrinks as the braid catches and tightens. There’s no way you can pull free by struggling.”

Frank stared at her blankly. “But what’s the answer?”

“Well...” She showed him some of her calculations—how the handcuffs could resist tearing under incredible stress, depending on the material used in the braid. “Pretty amazing for a woven structure, right? Doctors use it for traction, and electrical contractors—”

“Uh, but the answer?”

Annabeth laughed. “You don’t fight *against* the handcuffs. You push your fingers in, not out. That loosens the braid.”

“Oh.” Frank tried it. It worked. “Thanks, but...couldn’t you have just shown me on the handcuffs without the 3-D program and the calculations?”

Annabeth hesitated. Sometimes wisdom came from strange places, even from giant teenaged goldfish. “I guess you’re right. That was silly. I learned something too.”

Frank tried the handcuffs again. “It’s easy when you know the solution.”

“Many of the best traps are simple,” Annabeth said. “You just have to think about it, and hope your victim doesn’t.”

Frank nodded. He seemed reluctant to leave.

“You know,” Annabeth said, “Leo doesn’t intend to be mean. He’s just got a big mouth. When people make him nervous, he uses humor as a defense.”

Frank frowned. “Why would I make him nervous?”

“You’re twice his size. You can turn into a dragon.” *And Hazel likes you*, Annabeth thought, though she didn’t say that.

Frank didn’t look convinced. “Leo can summon fire.” He twisted the handcuffs. “Annabeth...sometime, maybe could you help me with another problem that’s not so simple? I’ve got...I guess you’d call it an Achilles’ heel.”

Annabeth felt like she’d just had a drink of Roman hot chocolate. She’d never really gotten the term *warm and fuzzy*, but Frank gave her that sensation. He was just a big teddy bear. She could see why Hazel liked him. “I’d be happy to,” she said. “Does anyone else know about this Achilles’ heel?”

“Percy and Hazel,” he said. “That’s it. Percy...he’s a really good guy. I would follow him anywhere. Thought you should know.”

Annabeth patted his arm. “Percy has a knack for picking good friends. Like you. But, Frank, you can trust anyone on this ship. Even Leo. We’re all a team. We have to trust each other.”

“I—I suppose.”

“So what’s the weakness you’re worried about?”

The dinner bell sounded, and Frank jumped.

“Maybe...maybe later,” he said. “It’s hard to talk about. But thanks, Annabeth.” He held up the Chinese handcuffs. “Keep it simple.”

XVIII

ANNABETH

THAT NIGHT, ANNABETH SLEPT without nightmares, which just made her uneasy when she woke up—like the calm before a storm.

Leo docked the ship at a pier in Charleston Harbor, right next to the seawall. Along the shore was a historical district with tall mansions, palm trees, and wrought-iron fences. Antique cannons pointed at the water.

By the time Annabeth came up on deck, Jason, Frank, and Leo had already left for the museum. According to Coach Hedge, they'd promised to be back by sunset. Piper and Hazel were ready to go, but first Annabeth turned to Percy, who was leaning on the starboard rail, gazing over the bay.

Annabeth took his hand. "What are you going to do while we're gone?"

"Jump into the harbor," he said casually, like another kid might say, *I'm going to get a snack*. "I want to try communicating with the local Nereids. Maybe they can give me some advice about how to free those captives in Atlanta. Besides, I think the sea might be good for me. Being in that aquarium made me feel...unclean."

His hair was dark and tangled as usual, but Annabeth thought about the streak of gray he used to have on one side. When the two of them were fourteen, they'd taken turns (unwillingly) holding the weight of the sky. The strain left them both

with some gray hair. Over the last year, while Percy had been missing, the gray streaks had finally disappeared from both of them, which made Annabeth sad and a little worried. She felt like she'd lost a symbolic bond with Percy.

Annabeth kissed him. "Good luck, Seaweed Brain. Just come back to me, okay?"

"I will," he promised. "You do the same."

Annabeth tried to push down her growing unease.

She turned to Piper and Hazel. "Okay, ladies. Let's find the ghost of the Battery."

Afterward, Annabeth wished she'd jumped into the harbor with Percy. She even would've preferred a museum full of ghosts.

Not that she minded hanging out with Hazel and Piper. At first, they had a pretty good time walking along the Battery. According to the signs, the seaside park was called White Point Gardens. The ocean breeze swept away the muggy heat of the summer afternoon, and it was pleasantly cool under the shade of the palmetto trees. Lining the road were old Civil War cannons and bronze statues of historical figures, which made Annabeth shudder. She thought about the statues in New York City during the Titan War, which had come to life thanks to Daedalus's command sequence twenty-three. She wondered how many other statues around the country were secretly automatons, waiting to be triggered.

Charleston Harbor glittered in the sun. To the north and south, strips of land stretched out like arms enclosing the bay, and sitting in the mouth of the harbor, about a mile out, was an island with a stone fort. Annabeth had a vague memory of that fort being important in the Civil War, but she didn't spend much time thinking about it.

Mostly she breathed in the sea air and thought about Percy. Gods forbid she ever had to break up with him. She'd never be able to visit the sea again without remembering her broken heart. She was relieved when they turned away from the seawall and explored the inland side of the gardens.

The park wasn't crowded. Annabeth imagined that most of the locals had gone on summer vacation, or were holed up at home taking a siesta. They

strolled along South Battery Street, which was lined with four-story Colonial mansions. The brick walls were blanketed with ivy. The facades had soaring white columns like Roman temples. The front gardens were bursting with rosebushes, honeysuckle, and flowering bougainvillea. It looked like Demeter had set the timer on all the plants to *grow* several decades ago, then forgotten to come back and check on them.

“Kind of reminds me of New Rome,” Hazel said. “All the big mansions and the gardens. The columns and arches.”

Annabeth nodded. She remembered reading how the American South had often compared itself to Rome back before the Civil War. In the old days their society had been all about impressive architecture, honor, and codes of chivalry. And on the evil side, it had also been about slavery. *Rome had slaves*, some Southerners had argued, *so why shouldn't we?*

Annabeth shivered. She loved the architecture here. The houses and the gardens were very beautiful, very Roman. But she wondered why beautiful things had to be wrapped up with evil history. Or was it the other way around? Maybe the evil history made it necessary to build beautiful things, to mask the darker aspects.

She shook her head. Percy would hate her getting so philosophical. If she tried to talk to him about stuff like that, his eyes glazed over.

The other girls didn't say much.

Piper kept looking around like she expected an ambush. She had said she'd seen this park in the blade of her knife, but she wouldn't elaborate. Annabeth guessed she was afraid to. After all, the last time Piper had tried to interpret a vision from her knife, Percy and Jason had almost killed each other in Kansas.

Hazel also seemed preoccupied. Maybe she was taking in their surroundings, or maybe she was worrying about her brother. In less than four days, unless they found him and freed him, Nico would be dead.

Annabeth felt that deadline weighing on her, too. She'd always had mixed feelings about Nico di Angelo. She suspected that he'd had a crush on her ever since they rescued him and his big sister Bianca from that military academy in Maine; but Annabeth had never felt any attraction to Nico. He was too young

and too moody. There was a darkness in him that made her uneasy.

Still, she felt responsible for him. Back when they had met, neither of them had known about his half sister, Hazel. At the time, Bianca had been Nico's only living family. When she had died, Nico became a homeless orphan, drifting through the world alone. Annabeth could relate to that.

She was so deep in thought, she might have kept walking around the park forever, but Piper grabbed her arm.

"There." She pointed across the harbor. A hundred yards out, a shimmering white figure floated on the water. At first, Annabeth thought it might be a buoy or a small boat reflecting the sunlight, but it was definitely glowing, and it was moving more smoothly than a boat, making a straight line toward them. As it got closer, Annabeth could tell it was the figure of a woman.

"The ghost," she said.

"That's not a ghost," Hazel said. "No kind of spirit glows that brightly."

Annabeth decided to take her word for it. She couldn't imagine being Hazel, dying at such a young age and coming back from the Underworld, knowing more about the dead than the living.

As if in a trance, Piper walked across the street toward the edge of the seawall, narrowly avoiding a horse-drawn carriage.

"Piper!" Annabeth called.

"We'd better follow her," Hazel said.

By the time Annabeth and Hazel caught up to her, the ghostly apparition was only a few yards away.

Piper glared at it like the sight offended her.

"It *is* her," she grumbled.

Annabeth squinted at the ghost, but it blazed too brightly to make out details. Then the apparition floated up the seawall and stopped in front of them. The glow faded.

Annabeth gasped. The woman was breathtakingly beautiful and strangely familiar. Her face was hard to describe. Her features seemed to shift from those of one glamorous movie star to another. Her eyes sparkled playfully—sometimes green or blue or amber. Her hair changed from long, straight blond to

dark chocolatey curls.

Annabeth was instantly jealous. She'd always wished she had dark hair. She felt like nobody took her seriously as a blonde. She had to work twice as hard to get recognition as a strategist, an architect, a senior counselor—anything that had to do with brains.

The woman was dressed like a Southern belle, just as Jason had described. Her gown had a low-cut bodice of pink silk and a three-tiered hoop skirt with white scalloped lace. She wore tall white silk gloves, and held a feathered pink-and-white fan to her chest.

Everything about her seemed calculated to make Annabeth feel inadequate: the easy grace with which she wore her dress, the perfect yet understated makeup, the way she radiated feminine charm that no man could possibly resist.

Annabeth realized that her jealousy was irrational. The woman was *making* her feel this way. She'd had this experience before. She recognized this woman, even though her face changed by the second, becoming more and more beautiful.

“Aphrodite,” she said.

“Venus?” Hazel asked in amazement.

“Mom,” Piper said, with no enthusiasm.

“Girls!” The goddess spread her arms like she wanted a group hug.

The three demigods did not oblige. Hazel backed into a palmetto tree.

“I'm so glad you're here,” Aphrodite said. “War is coming. Bloodshed is inevitable. So there's really only one thing to do.”

“Uh...and that is?” Annabeth ventured.

“Why, have tea and chat, obviously. Come with me!”

Aphrodite knew how to do tea.

She led them to the central pavilion in the gardens—a white-pillared gazebo, where a table was set with silverware, china cups, and of course a steaming pot of tea, the fragrance shifting as easily as Aphrodite's appearance—sometimes cinnamon, or jasmine, or mint. There were plates of scones, cookies, and muffins, fresh butter and jam—all of which, Annabeth figured, were incredibly fattening; unless, of course, you were the immortal goddess of love.

Aphrodite sat—or held court, rather—in a wicker peacock chair. She poured tea and served cakes without getting a speck on her clothes, her posture always perfect, her smile dazzling.

Annabeth hated her more and more the longer they sat.

“Oh, my sweet girls,” the goddess said. “I do love Charleston! The weddings I’ve attended in this gazebo—they bring tears to my eyes. And the elegant balls in the days of the Old South. Ah, they were lovely. Many of these mansions still have statues of me in their gardens, though they called me Venus.”

“Which are you?” Annabeth asked. “Venus or Aphrodite?”

The goddess sipped her tea. Her eyes sparkled mischievously. “Annabeth Chase, you’ve grown into quite a beautiful young lady. You really should do something with your hair, though. And, Hazel Levesque, your clothes—”

“My clothes?” Hazel looked down at her rumpled denim, not self-consciously, but baffled, as if she couldn’t imagine what was wrong with them.

“Mother!” Piper said. “You’re embarrassing me.”

“Well, I don’t see why,” the goddess said. “Just because *you* don’t appreciate my fashion tips, Piper, doesn’t mean the others won’t. I could do a quick makeover for Annabeth and Hazel, perhaps silk ball gowns like mine—”

“Mother!”

“Fine,” Aphrodite sighed. “To answer your question, Annabeth, I am *both* Aphrodite and Venus. Unlike many of my fellow Olympians, I changed hardly at all from one age to the other. In fact, I like to think I haven’t aged a bit!” Her fingers fluttered around her face appreciatively. “Love is love, after all, whether you’re Greek or Roman. This civil war won’t affect me as much as it will the others.”

Wonderful, Annabeth thought. Her own mother, the most levelheaded Olympian, was reduced to a raving, vicious scatterbrain in a subway station. And of all the gods who might help them, the only ones not affected by the Greek–Roman schism seemed to be Aphrodite, Nemesis, and Dionysus. Love, revenge, wine. Very helpful.

Hazel nibbled a sugar cookie. “We’re not in a war yet, my lady.”

“Oh, dear Hazel.” Aphrodite folded her fan. “Such optimism, yet you have

heartrending days ahead of you. Of *course* war is coming. Love and war always go together. They are the peaks of human emotion! Evil and good, beauty and ugliness.”

She smiled at Annabeth as if she knew what Annabeth had been thinking earlier about the Old South.

Hazel set down her sugar cookie. She had a few crumbs on her chin, and Annabeth liked the fact that Hazel either didn't know or didn't care.

“What do you mean,” Hazel asked, “heartrending days?”

The goddess laughed as if Hazel were a cute puppy. “Well, Annabeth could give you some idea. I once promised to make *her* love life interesting. And didn't I?”

Annabeth almost snapped the handle off her teacup. For years, her heart had been torn. First there was Luke Castellan, her first crush, who had seen her only as a little sister; then he'd turned evil and decided he liked her—right before he died. Next came Percy, who was infuriating but sweet, yet he had seemed to be falling for another girl named Rachel, and then *he* almost died, several times. Finally Annabeth had gotten Percy to herself, only to have him vanish for six months and lose his memory.

“Interesting,” Annabeth said, “is a mild way of putting it.”

“Well, I can't take credit for *all* your troubles,” the goddess said. “But I do love twists and turns in a love story. Oh, all of you are such excellent stories—I mean, girls. You do me proud!”

“Mother,” Piper said, “is there a reason you're here?”

“Hmm? Oh, you mean besides the tea? I often come here. I love the view, the food, the atmosphere—you can just smell the romance and heartbreak in the air, can't you? Centuries of it.”

She pointed to a nearby mansion. “Do you see that rooftop balcony? We had a party there the night the American Civil War began. The shelling of Fort Sumter.”

“That's it,” Annabeth remembered. “The island in the harbor. That's where the first fighting of the Civil War happened. The Confederates shelled the Union troops and took the fort.”

“Oh, such a party!” Aphrodite said. “A string quartet, and all the men in their elegant new officers’ uniforms. The women’s dresses—you should’ve seen them! I danced with Ares—or was he Mars? I’m afraid I was a little giddy. And the beautiful bursts of light across the harbor, the roar of the cannons giving the men an excuse to put their arms around their frightened sweethearts!”

Annabeth’s tea was cold. She hadn’t eaten anything, but she felt like she wanted to throw up. “You’re talking about the beginning of the bloodiest war in U.S. history. Over six hundred thousand people died—more Americans than in World War One and World War Two combined.”

“And the refreshments!” Aphrodite continued. “Ah, they were divine. General Beauregard himself made an appearance. He was such a scoundrel. He was on his second wife, then, but you should have seen the way he looked at Lisbeth Cooper—”

“Mother!” Piper tossed her scone to the pigeons.

“Yes, sorry,” the goddess said. “To make the story short, I’m here to help you, girls. I doubt you’ll be seeing Hera much. Your little quest has hardly made her welcome in the throne room. And the other gods are rather indisposed, as you know, torn between their Roman and Greek sides. Some more than others.” Aphrodite fixed her gaze on Annabeth. “I suppose you’ve told your friends about your falling-out with your mother?”

Heat rose to Annabeth’s cheeks. Hazel and Piper looked at her curiously.

“Falling-out?” Hazel asked.

“An argument,” Annabeth said. “It’s nothing.”

“Nothing!” the goddess said. “Well, I don’t know about that. Athena was the most Greek of all goddesses. The patron of Athens, after all. When the Romans took over...oh, they adopted Athena after a fashion. She became Minerva, the goddess of crafts and cleverness. But the Romans had *other* war gods who were more to their taste, more reliably Roman—like Bellona—”

“Reyna’s mom,” Piper muttered.

“Yes, indeed,” the goddess agreed. “I had a lovely talk with Reyna a while back, right here in the park. And the Romans had Mars, of course. And later, there was Mithras—not even properly Greek or Roman, but the legionnaires

were crazy about his cult. I always found him crass and terribly *nouveau dieu*, personally. At any rate, the Romans quite sidelined poor Athena. They took away most of her military importance. The Greeks never forgave the Romans for that insult. Neither did Athena.”

Annabeth’s ears buzzed.

“The Mark of Athena,” she said. “It leads to a statue, doesn’t it? It leads to... to *the* statue.”

Aphrodite smiled. “You are clever, like your mother. Understand, though, your siblings, the children of Athena, have been searching for centuries. None has succeeded in recovering the statue. In the meantime, they’ve been keeping alive the Greek feud with the Romans. Every civil war...so much bloodshed and heartbreak...has been orchestrated largely by Athena’s children.”

“That’s...” Annabeth wanted to say *impossible*, but she remembered Athena’s bitter words in Grand Central Station, the burning hatred in her eyes.

“Romantic?” Aphrodite offered. “Yes, I supposed it is.”

“But...” Annabeth tried to clear the fog from her brain. “The Mark of Athena, how does it work? Is it a series of clues, or a trail set by Athena—”

“Hmm.” Aphrodite looked politely bored. “I couldn’t say. I don’t believe Athena created the Mark consciously. If she knew where her statue was, she’d simply tell you where to find it. No...I’d guess the Mark is more like a spiritual trail of bread crumbs. It’s a connection between the statue and the children of the goddess. The statue *wants* to be found, you see, but it can only be freed by the most worthy.”

“And for thousands of years,” Annabeth said, “no one has managed.”

“Hold on,” Piper said. “What *statue* are we talking about?”

The goddess laughed. “Oh, I’m sure Annabeth can fill you in. At any rate, the clue you need is close by: a map of sorts, left by the children of Athena in 1861—a remembrance that will start you on your path, once you reach Rome. But as you said, Annabeth Chase, no one has ever succeeded in following the Mark of Athena to its end. There you will face your worst fear—the fear of every child of Athena. And even if you survive, how will you use your reward? For war or for peace?”

Annabeth was glad for the tablecloth, because under the table, her legs were trembling. “This map,” she said, “where is it?”

“Guys!” Hazel pointed to the sky.

Circling above the palmetto trees were two large eagles. Higher up, descending rapidly, was a flying chariot pulled by pegasi. Apparently Leo’s diversion with Buford the end table hadn’t worked—at least not for long.

Aphrodite spread butter on a muffin as if she had all the time in the world. “Oh, the map is at Fort Sumter, of course.” She pointed her butter knife toward the island across the harbor. “It looks like the Romans have arrived to cut you off. I’d get back to your ship in a hurry if I were you. Would you care for some tea cakes to go?”

ANNABETH

THEY DIDN'T MAKE IT TO THE SHIP.

Halfway across the dock, three giant eagles descended in front of them. Each deposited a Roman commando in purple and denim with glittering gold armor, sword, and shield. The eagles flew away, and the Roman in the middle, who was scrawnier than the others, raised his visor.

“Surrender to Rome!” Octavian shrieked.

Hazel drew her cavalry sword and grumbled, “Fat chance, Octavian.”

Annabeth cursed under her breath. By himself, the skinny augur wouldn't have bothered her, but the two other guys looked like seasoned warriors—a lot bigger and stronger than Annabeth wanted to deal with, especially since Piper and she were armed only with daggers.

Piper raised her hands in a placating gesture. “Octavian, what happened at camp was a setup. We can explain.”

“Can't hear you!” Octavian yelled. “Wax in our ears—standard procedure when battling evil sirens. Now, throw down your weapons and turn around slowly so I can bind your hands.”

“Let me skewer him,” Hazel muttered. “Please.”

The ship was only fifty feet away, but Annabeth saw no sign of Coach Hedge

on deck. He was probably below, watching his stupid martial arts programs. Jason's group wasn't due back until sunset, and Percy would be underwater, unaware of the invasion. If Annabeth could get on board, she could use the ballistae; but there was no way to get around these three Romans.

She was running out of time. The eagles circled overhead, crying out as if to alert their brethren: *Hey, some tasty Greek demigods over here!* Annabeth couldn't see the flying chariot anymore, but she assumed it was close by. She had to figure out something before more Romans arrived.

She needed help...some kind of distress signal to Coach Hedge, or even better—Percy.

“Well?” Octavian demanded. His two friends brandished their swords.

Very slowly, using only two fingers, Annabeth drew her dagger. Instead of dropping it, she tossed it as far as she could into the water.

Octavian made a squeaking sound. “What was that for? I didn't say *toss* it! That could've been evidence. Or spoils of war!”

Annabeth tried for a dumb-blonde smile, like: *Oh, silly me.* Nobody who knew her would have been fooled. But Octavian seemed to buy it. He huffed in exasperation.

“You other two...” He pointed his blade at Hazel and Piper. “Put your weapons on the dock. No funny bus—”

All around the Romans, Charleston Harbor erupted like a Las Vegas fountain putting on a show. When the wall of seawater subsided, the three Romans were in the bay, spluttering and frantically trying to stay afloat in their armor. Percy stood on the dock, holding Annabeth's dagger.

“You dropped this,” he said, totally poker-faced.

Annabeth threw her arms around him. “I love you!”

“Guys,” Hazel interrupted. She had a little smile on her face. “We need to hurry.”

Down in the water, Octavian yelled, “Get me out of here! I'll kill you!”

“Tempting,” Percy called down.

“What?” Octavian shouted. He was holding on to one of his guards, who was having trouble keeping them both afloat.

“Nothing!” Percy shouted back. “Let’s go, guys.”

Hazel frowned. “We can’t let them drown, can we?”

“They won’t,” Percy promised. “I’ve got the water circulating around their feet. As soon as we’re out of range, I’ll spit them ashore.”

Piper grinned. “Nice.”

They climbed aboard the *Argo II*, and Annabeth ran to the helm. “Piper, get below. Use the sink in the galley for an Iris-message. Warn Jason to get back here!”

Piper nodded and raced off.

“Hazel, go find Coach Hedge and tell him to get his furry hindquarters on deck!”

“Right!”

“And Percy—you and I need to get this ship to Fort Sumter.”

Percy nodded and ran to the mast. Annabeth took the helm. Her hands flew across the controls. She’d just have to hope she knew enough to operate them.

Annabeth had seen Percy control full-sized sailing ships before with only his willpower. This time, he didn’t disappoint. Ropes flew on their own—releasing the dock ties, weighing the anchor. The sails unfurled and caught the wind. Meanwhile Annabeth fired the engine. The oars extended with a sound like machine-gun fire, and the *Argo II* turned from the dock, heading for the island in the distance.

The three eagles still circled overhead, but they made no attempt to land on the ship, probably because Festus the figurehead blew fire whenever they got close. More eagles were flying in formation toward Fort Sumter—at least a dozen. If each of them carried a Roman demigod...that was a lot of enemies.

Coach Hedge came pounding up the stairs with Hazel at his hooves.

“Where are they?” he demanded. “Who do I kill?”

“No killing!” Annabeth ordered. “Just defend the ship!”

“But they interrupted a Chuck Norris movie!”

Piper emerged from below. “Got a message through to Jason. Kind of fuzzy, but he’s already on his way. He should be—oh! There!”

Soaring over the city, heading in their direction, was a giant bald eagle,

unlike the golden Roman birds.

“Frank!” Hazel said.

Leo was holding on to the eagle’s feet, and even from the ship, Annabeth could hear him screaming and cursing.

Behind them flew Jason, riding the wind.

“Never seen Jason fly before,” Percy grumbled. “He looks like a blond Superman.”

“This isn’t the time!” Piper scolded him. “Look, they’re in trouble!”

Sure enough, the Roman flying chariot had descended from a cloud and was diving straight toward them. Jason and Frank veered out of the way, pulling up to avoid getting trampled by the pegasi. The charioteers fired their bows. Arrows whistled under Leo’s feet, which led to more screaming and cursing. Jason and Frank were forced to overshoot the *Argo II* and fly toward Fort Sumter.

“I’ll get ’em!” yelled Coach Hedge.

He spun the port ballista. Before Annabeth could yell, “Don’t be stupid!” Hedge fired. A flaming spear rocketed toward the chariot.

It exploded over the heads of the pegasi and threw them into a panic. Unfortunately it also singed Frank’s wings and sent him spiraling out of control. Leo slipped from his grasp. The chariot shot toward Fort Sumter, slamming into Jason.

Annabeth watched in horror as Jason—obviously dazed and in pain—lunged for Leo, caught him, then struggled to gain altitude. He only managed to slow their fall. They disappeared behind the ramparts of the fort. Frank tumbled after them. Then the chariot dropped somewhere inside and hit with a bone-shattering *CRACK!* One broken wheel spun into the air.

“Coach!” Piper screamed.

“What?” Hedge demanded. “That was just a warning shot!”

Annabeth gunned the engines. The hull shuddered as they picked up speed. The docks of the island were only a hundred yards away now, but a dozen more eagles were soaring overhead, each carrying a Roman demigod in its claws.

The *Argo II*’s crew would be outnumbered at least three to one.

“Percy,” Annabeth said, “we’re going to come in hard. I need you to control

the water so we don't smash into the docks. Once we're there, you're going to have to hold off the attackers. The rest of you help him guard the ship."

"But—Jason!" Piper said.

"Frank and Leo!" Hazel added.

"I'll find them," Annabeth promised. "I've got to figure out where the map is. And I'm pretty sure I'm the only one who can do that."

"The fort is crawling with Romans," Percy warned. "You'll have to fight your way through, find our friends—assuming they're okay—find this map, and get everybody back alive. All on your own?"

"Just an average day." Annabeth kissed him. "Whatever you do, don't let them take this ship!"

X X

ANNABETH

THE NEW CIVIL WAR HAD BEGUN.

Leo had somehow escaped his fall unharmed. Annabeth saw him ducking from portico to portico, blasting fire at the giant eagles swooping down on him. Roman demigods tried to chase him, tripping over piles of cannonballs and dodging tourists, who screamed and ran in circles.

Tour guides kept yelling, “It’s just a reenactment!” Though they didn’t sound sure. The Mist could only do so much to change what mortals saw.

In the middle of the courtyard, a full-grown elephant—could that be Frank?—rampaged around the flagpoles, scattering Roman warriors. Jason stood about fifty yards away, sword-fighting with a stocky centurion whose lips were stained cherry red, like blood. A wannabe vampire, or maybe a Kool-Aid freak?

As Annabeth watched, Jason yelled, “Sorry about this, Dakota!”

He vaulted straight over the centurion’s head like an acrobat and slammed the hilt of his *gladius* into the back of the Roman’s head. Dakota crumpled.

“Jason!” Annabeth called.

He scanned the battlefield until he saw her.

She pointed to where the *Argo II* was docked. “Get the others aboard! Retreat!”

“What about you?” he called.

“Don’t wait for me!”

Annabeth bolted off before he could protest.

She had a hard time maneuvering through the mobs of tourists. Why did so many people want to see Fort Sumter on a sweltering summer day? But Annabeth quickly realized the crowds had saved their lives. Without the chaos of all these panicked mortals, the Romans would have already surrounded their outnumbered crew.

Annabeth dodged into a small room that must have been part of the garrison. She tried to steady her breathing. She imagined what it would have been like to be a Union soldier on this island in 1861. Surrounded by enemies. Dwindling food and supplies, no reinforcements coming.

Some of the Union defenders had been children of Athena. They’d hidden an important map here—something they didn’t want falling into enemy hands. If Annabeth had been one of those demigods, where would she have put it?

Suddenly the walls glistened. The air became warm. Annabeth wondered if she was hallucinating. She was about to run for the exit when the door slammed shut. The mortar between the stones blistered. The bubbles popped, and thousands of tiny black spiders swelled forth.

Annabeth couldn’t move. Her heart seemed to have stopped. The spiders blanketed the walls, crawling over one another, spreading across the floor and gradually surrounding her. It was impossible. This couldn’t be *real*.

Terror plunged her into memories. She was seven years old again, alone in her bedroom in Richmond, Virginia. The spiders came at night. They crawled in waves from her closet and waited in the shadows. She yelled for her father, but her father was away for work. He *always* seemed to be away for work.

Her stepmother came instead.

I don’t mind being the bad cop, she had once told Annabeth’s father, when she didn’t think Annabeth could hear.

It’s only your imagination, her stepmother said about the spiders. *You’re scaring your baby brothers*.

They’re not my brothers, Annabeth argued, which made her stepmother’s

expression harden. Her eyes were almost as scary as the spiders.

Go to sleep now, her stepmother insisted. *No more screaming.*

The spiders came back as soon as her stepmother had left the room. Annabeth tried to hide under the covers, but it was no good. Eventually she fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. She woke up in the morning, freckled with bites, cobwebs covering her eyes, her mouth, and nose.

The bites faded before she even got dressed, so she had nothing to show her stepmother except cobwebs, which her stepmother thought was some sort of clever trick.

No more talk of spiders, her stepmother said firmly. *You're a big girl now.*

The second night, the spiders came again. Her stepmother continued to be the bad cop. Annabeth wasn't allowed to call her father and bother him with this nonsense. No, he would *not* come home early.

The third night, Annabeth ran away from home.

Later, at Camp Half-Blood, she learned that all children of Athena feared spiders. Long ago, Athena had taught the mortal weaver Arachne a hard lesson—cursing her for her pride by turning her into the first spider. Ever since, spiders had hated the children of Athena.

But that didn't make her fear easier to deal with. Once, she'd almost killed Connor Stoll at camp for putting a tarantula in her bunk. Years later, she'd had a panic attack at a water park in Denver, when Percy and she were assaulted by mechanical spiders. And the past few weeks, Annabeth had dreamed of spiders almost every night—crawling over her, suffocating her, wrapping her in webs.

Now, standing in the barracks at Fort Sumter, she was surrounded. Her nightmares had come true.

A sleepy voice murmured in her head: *Soon, my dear. You will meet the weaver soon.*

"Gaea?" Annabeth murmured. She feared the answer, but she asked: "Who—who is the weaver?"

The spiders became excited, swarming over the walls, swirling around Annabeth's feet like a glistening black whirlpool. Only the hope that it might be an illusion kept Annabeth from passing out from fear.

I hope you survive, child, the woman's voice said. *I would prefer you as my sacrifice. But we must let the weaver take her revenge...*

Gaea's voice faded. On the far wall, in the center of the spider swarm, a red symbol blazed to life: the figure of an owl like the one on the silver drachma, staring straight at Annabeth. Then, just as in her nightmares, the Mark of Athena burned across the walls, incinerating the spiders until the room was empty except for the smell of sickly sweet ashes.

Go, said a new voice—Annabeth's mother. *Avenge me. Follow the Mark.*

The blazing symbol of the owl faded. The garrison door burst open. Annabeth stood stunned in the middle of the room, unsure whether she'd seen something real, or just a vision.

An explosion shook the building. Annabeth remembered that her friends were in danger. She'd stayed here much too long.

She forced herself to move. Still trembling, she stumbled outside. The ocean air helped clear her mind. She gazed across the courtyard—past the panicked tourists and fighting demigods—to the edge of the battlements, where a large mortar pointed out to sea.

It might have been Annabeth's imagination, but the old artillery piece seemed to be glowing red. She dashed toward it. An eagle swooped at her, but she ducked and kept running. Nothing could possibly scare her as much as those spiders.

Roman demigods had formed ranks and were advancing toward the *Argo II*, but a miniature storm had gathered over their heads. Though the day was clear all around them, thunder rumbled, and lightning flashed above the Romans. Rain and wind pushed them back.

Annabeth didn't stop to think about it.

She reached the mortar and put her hand on the muzzle. On the plug that blocked the opening, the Mark of Athena began to glow—the red outline of an owl.

“In the mortar,” she said. “Of course.”

She pried at the plug with her fingers. No luck. Cursing, she drew her dagger. As soon as the Celestial bronze touched the plug, the plug shrank and loosened.

Annabeth pulled it off and stuck her hand inside the cannon.

Her fingers touched something cold, smooth, and metal. She pulled out a small disk of bronze the size of a tea saucer, etched with delicate letters and illustrations. She decided to examine it later. She thrust it in her pack and turned.

“Rushing off?” Reyna asked.

The praetor stood ten feet away, in full battle armor, holding a golden javelin. Her two metal greyhounds growled at her side.

Annabeth scanned the area. They were more or less alone. Most of the combat had moved toward the docks. Hopefully her friends had all made it on board, but they’d have to set sail immediately or risk being overrun. Annabeth had to hurry.

“Reyna,” she said, “what happened at Camp Jupiter was Gaea’s fault. Eidolons, possessing spirits—”

“Save your explanations,” Reyna said. “You’ll need them for the trial.”

The dogs snarled and inched forward. This time, it didn’t seem to matter to them that Annabeth was telling the truth. She tried to think of an escape plan. She doubted she could take Reyna in one-on-one combat. With those metal dogs, she stood no chance at all.

“If you let Gaea drive our camps apart,” Annabeth said, “the giants have already won. They’ll destroy the Romans, the Greeks, the gods, the whole mortal world.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Reyna’s voice was as hard as iron. “What choice have you left me? Octavian smells blood. He’s whipped the legion into a frenzy, and I can’t stop it. Surrender to me. I’ll bring you back to New Rome for trial. It won’t be fair. You’ll be painfully executed. But it *may* be enough to stop further violence. Octavian won’t be satisfied, of course, but I think I can convince the others to stand down.”

“It wasn’t me!”

“It doesn’t *matter*!” Reyna snapped. “Someone must pay for what happened. Let it be you. It’s the better option.”

Annabeth’s skin crawled. “Better than what?”

“Use that wisdom of yours,” Reyna said. “If you escape today, we won’t

follow. I told you—not even a madman would cross the sea to the ancient lands. If Octavian can't have vengeance on your ship, he'll turn his attention to Camp Half-Blood. The legion will march on your territory. We will raze it and salt the earth."

Kill the Romans, she heard her mother urging. *They can never be your allies.*

Annabeth wanted to sob. Camp Half-Blood was the only real home she'd ever known, and in a bid for friendship, she had told Reyna exactly where to find it. She couldn't leave it at the mercy of the Romans and travel halfway around the world.

But their quest, and everything she'd suffered to get Percy back...if she didn't go to the ancient lands, it would all mean nothing. Besides, the Mark of Athena didn't have to lead to revenge.

If I could find the route, her mother had said, *the way home...*

How will you use your reward? Aphrodite had asked. *For war or peace?*

There *was* an answer. The Mark of Athena could lead her there—if she survived.

"I'm going," she told Reyna. "I'm following the Mark of Athena to Rome."

The praetor shook her head. "You have no idea what awaits you."

"Yes, I do," Annabeth said. "This grudge between our camps...I can fix it."

"Our grudge is thousands of years old. How can one person fix it?"

Annabeth wished she could give a convincing answer, show Reyna a 3-D diagram or a brilliant schematic, but she couldn't. She just knew she had to try. She remembered that lost look on her mother's face: *I must return home.*

"The quest has to succeed," she said. "You can try to stop me, in which case we'll have to fight to the death. Or you can let me go, and I'll try to save both our camps. If you must march on Camp Half-Blood, at least try to delay. Slow Octavian down."

Reyna's eyes narrowed. "One daughter of a war goddess to another, I respect your boldness. But if you leave now, you doom your camp to destruction."

"Don't underestimate Camp Half-Blood," Annabeth warned.

"You've never seen the legion at war," Reyna countered.

Over by the docks, a familiar voice shrieked over the wind: "Kill them! Kill

them all!”

Octavian had survived his swim in the harbor. He crouched behind his guards, screaming encouragement at the other Roman demigods as they struggled toward the ship, holding up their shields as if that would deflect the storm raging all around them.

On the deck of the *Argo II*, Percy and Jason stood together, their swords crossed. Annabeth got a tingle down her spine as she realized the boys were working as one, summoning the sky and the sea to do their bidding. Water and wind churned together. Waves heaved against the ramparts and lightning flashed. Giant eagles were knocked out of the sky. Wreckage of the flying chariot burned in the water, and Coach Hedge swung a mounted crossbow, taking potshots at the Roman birds as they flew overhead.

“You see?” Reyna said bitterly. “The spear is thrown. Our people are at war.”

“Not if I succeed,” Annabeth said.

Reyna’s expression looked the same as it had at Camp Jupiter when she realized Jason had found another girl. The praetor was too alone, too bitter and betrayed to believe anything could go right for her ever again. Annabeth waited for her to attack.

Instead, Reyna flicked her hand. The metal dogs backed away. “Annabeth Chase,” she said, “when we meet again, we will be enemies on the field of battle.”

The praetor turned and walked across the ramparts, her greyhounds behind her.

Annabeth feared it might be some sort of trick, but she had no time to wonder. She ran for the ship.

The winds that battered the Romans didn’t seem to affect her.

Annabeth sprinted through their lines. Octavian yelled, “Stop her!”

A spear flew past her ear. The *Argo II* was already pulling away from the dock. Piper was at the gangplank, her hand outstretched.

Annabeth leaped and grabbed Piper’s hand. The gangplank fell into the sea, and the two girls tumbled onto the deck.

“Go!” Annabeth screamed. “Go, go, go!”

The engines rumbled beneath her. The oars churned. Jason changed the course of the wind, and Percy called up a massive wave, which lifted the ship higher than the fort's walls and pushed it out to sea. By the time the *Argo II* reached top speed, Fort Sumter was only a blot in the distance, and they were racing across the waves toward the ancient lands.

LEO

AFTER RAIDING A MUSEUM FULL OF Confederate ghosts, Leo didn't think his day could get any worse. He was wrong.

They hadn't found anything in the Civil War sub or elsewhere in the museum; just a few elderly tourists, a dozing security guard, and—when they tried to inspect the artifacts—a whole battalion of glowing zombie dudes in gray uniforms.

The idea that Frank should be able to control the spirits? Yeah...that pretty much failed. By the time Piper sent her Iris-message warning them about the Roman attack, they were already halfway back to the ship, having been chased through downtown Charleston by a pack of angry dead Confederates.

Then—oh, boy!—Leo got to hitch a ride with Frank the Friendly Eagle so they could fight a bunch of Romans. Rumor must've gotten around that Leo was the one who had fired on their little city, because those Romans seemed especially anxious to kill him.

But wait! There was more! Coach Hedge shot them out of the sky; Frank dropped him (that was no accident); and they crash-landed in Fort Sumter.

Now, as the *Argo II* raced across the waves, Leo had to use all his skill just to keep the ship in one piece. Percy and Jason were a little *too* good at cooking up

massive storms.

At one point, Annabeth stood next to him, yelling against the roar of the wind: “Percy says he talked to a Nereid in Charleston Harbor!”

“Good for him!” Leo yelled back.

“The Nereid said we should seek help from Chiron’s brothers.”

“What does that mean? The Party Ponies?” Leo had never met Chiron’s crazy centaur relatives, but he’d heard rumors of Nerf sword-fights, root beer-chugging contests, and Super Soakers filled with pressurized whipped cream.

“Not sure,” Annabeth said. “But I’ve got coordinates. Can you input latitude and longitude in this thing?”

“I can input star charts and order you a smoothie, if you want. Of *course* I can do latitude and longitude!”

Annabeth rattled off the numbers. Leo somehow managed to punch them in while holding the wheel with one hand. A red dot popped up on the bronze display screen.

“That location is in the middle of the Atlantic,” he said. “Do the Party Ponies have a yacht?”

Annabeth shrugged helplessly. “Just hold the ship together until we get farther from Charleston. Jason and Percy will keep up the winds!”

“Happy fun time!”

It seemed like forever, but finally the sea calmed and the winds died.

“Valdez,” said Coach Hedge, with surprising gentleness. “Let me take the wheel. You’ve been steering for two hours.”

“Two hours?”

“Yeah. Give me the wheel.”

“Coach?”

“Yeah, kid?”

“I can’t unclench my hands.”

It was true. Leo’s fingers felt like they had turned to stone. His eyes burned from staring at the horizon. His knees were marshmallows. Coach Hedge managed to pry him from the wheel.

Leo took one last look at the console, listening to Festus chatter and whir a

status report. Leo felt like he was forgetting something. He stared at the controls, trying to think, but it was no good. His eyes could hardly focus. “Just watch for monsters,” he told the coach. “And be careful with the damaged stabilizer. And —”

“I’ve got it covered,” Coach Hedge promised. “Now, go away!”

Leo nodded wearily. He staggered across the deck toward his friends.

Percy and Jason sat with their backs against the mast, their heads slumped in exhaustion. Annabeth and Piper were trying to get them to drink some water.

Hazel and Frank stood just out of earshot, having an argument that involved lots of arm waving and head shaking. Leo should not have felt pleased about that, but part of him did. The other part of him felt bad that he felt pleased.

The argument stopped abruptly when Hazel saw Leo. Everybody gathered at the mast.

Frank scowled like he was trying hard to turn into a bulldog. “No sign of pursuit,” he said.

“Or land,” Hazel added. She looked a little green, though Leo wasn’t sure if that was from the rocking of the boat or from arguing.

Leo scanned the horizon. Nothing but ocean in every direction. That shouldn’t have surprised him. He’d spent six months building a ship that he knew would cross the Atlantic. But until today, their embarking on a journey to the ancient lands hadn’t seemed real. Leo had never been outside the U.S. before—except for a quick dragon flight up to Quebec. Now they were in the middle of the open sea, completely on their own, sailing to the Mare Nostrum, where all the scary monsters and nasty giants had come from. The Romans might not follow them, but they couldn’t count on any help from Camp Half-Blood, either.

Leo patted his waist to make sure his tool belt was still there. Unfortunately that just reminded him of Nemesis’s fortune cookie, tucked inside one of the pockets.

You will always be an outsider. The goddess’s voice still wriggled around in his head. *The seventh wheel.*

Forget her, Leo told himself. Concentrate on the stuff you can fix.

He turned to Annabeth. “Did you find the map you wanted?”

She nodded, though she looked pale. Leo wondered what she'd seen at Fort Sumter that could have shaken her up so badly.

"I'll have to study it," she said, as if that was the end of the subject. "How far are we from those coordinates?"

"At top rowing speed, about an hour," Leo said. "Any idea what we're looking for?"

"No," she admitted. "Percy?"

Percy raised his head. His green eyes were bloodshot and droopy. "The Nereid said Chiron's brothers were there, and they'd want to hear about that aquarium in Atlanta. I don't know what she meant, but..." He paused, like he'd used up all his energy saying that much. "She also warned me to be careful. Keto, the goddess at the aquarium: she's the mother of sea monsters. She might be stuck in Atlanta, but she can still send her children after us. The Nereid said we should expect an attack."

"Wonderful," Frank muttered.

Jason tried to stand, which wasn't a good idea. Piper grabbed him to keep him from falling over, and he slid back down the mast.

"Can we get the ship aloft?" he asked. "If we could fly—"

"That'd be great," Leo said. "Except Festus tells me the port aerial stabilizer got pulverized when the ship raked against the dock at Fort Sumter."

"We were in a hurry," Annabeth said. "Trying to save you."

"And saving me is a very noble cause," Leo agreed. "I'm just saying, it'll take some time to fix. Until then, we're not flying anywhere."

Percy flexed his shoulders and winced. "Fine with me. The sea is good."

"Speak for yourself." Hazel glanced at the evening sun, which was almost to the horizon. "We need to go fast. We've burned another day, and Nico only has three more left."

"We can do it," Leo promised. He hoped Hazel had forgiven him for not trusting her brother (hey, it had seemed like a reasonable suspicion to Leo), but he didn't want to reopen that wound. "We can make it to Rome in three days—assuming, you know, nothing unexpected happens."

Frank grunted. He looked like he was still working on that bulldog

transformation. “Is there any *good* news?”

“Actually, yes,” Leo said. “According to Festus, our flying table, Buford, made it back safely while we were in Charleston, so those eagles didn’t get him. Unfortunately, he lost the laundry bag with your pants.”

“Dang it!” Frank barked, which Leo figured was probably severe profanity for him.

No doubt Frank would’ve cursed some more—busting out the *golly geees* and the *gosh darns*—but Percy interrupted by doubling over and groaning.

“Did the world just turn upside down?” he asked.

Jason pressed his hands to his head. “Yeah, and it’s spinning. Everything is yellow. Is it supposed to be yellow?”

Annabeth and Piper exchanged concerned looks.

“Summoning that storm really sapped your strength,” Piper told the boys. “You’ve got to rest.”

Annabeth nodded agreement. “Frank, can you help us get the guys belowdecks?”

Frank glanced at Leo, no doubt reluctant to leave him alone with Hazel.

“It’s fine, man,” Leo said. “Just try not to drop them on the way down the stairs.”

Once the others were below, Hazel and Leo faced each other awkwardly. They were alone except for Coach Hedge, who was back on the quarterdeck singing the *Pokémon* theme song. The coach had changed the words to: *Gotta Kill ’Em All*, and Leo really didn’t want to know why.

The song didn’t seem to help Hazel’s nausea.

“Ugh...” She leaned over and hugged her sides. She had nice hair—frizzy and golden brown like curls of cinnamon. Her hair reminded Leo of a place in Houston that made excellent *churros*. The thought made him hungry.

“Don’t lean over,” he advised. “Don’t close your eyes. It makes the queasiness worse.”

“It does? Do you get seasick too?”

“Not seasick. But cars make me nauseous, and...”

He stopped himself. He wanted to say *talking to girls*, but he decided to keep

that to himself.

“Cars?” Hazel straightened with difficulty. “You can sail a ship or fly a dragon, but cars make you sick?”

“I know, right?” Leo shrugged. “I’m special that way. Look, keep your eyes on the horizon. That’s a fixed point. It’ll help.”

Hazel took a deep breath and stared into the distance. Her eyes were lustrous gold, like the copper and bronze disks inside Festus’s mechanical head.

“Any better?” he asked.

“Maybe a little.” She sounded like she was just being polite. She kept her eyes on the horizon, but Leo got the feeling she was gauging his mood, considering what to say.

“Frank didn’t drop you on purpose,” she said. “He’s not like that. He’s just a little clumsy sometimes.”

“Oops,” Leo said, in his best Frank Zhang voice. “*Dropped Leo into a squad of enemy soldiers. Dang it!*”

Hazel tried to suppress a smile. Leo figured smiling was better than throwing up.

“Go easy on him,” Hazel said. “You and your fireballs make Frank nervous.”

“The guy can turn into an elephant, and *I* make *him* nervous?”

Hazel kept her eyes on the horizon. She didn’t look quite so queasy, despite the fact that Coach Hedge was still singing his *Pokémon* song at the helm.

“Leo,” she said, “about what happened at the Great Salt Lake...”

Here it comes, Leo thought.

He remembered their meeting with the revenge goddess Nemesis. The fortune cookie in his tool belt started to feel heavier. Last night, as they flew from Atlanta, Leo had lain in his cabin and thought about how angry he’d made Hazel. He had thought about ways he could make it right.

Soon you will face a problem you cannot solve, Nemesis had said, though I could help you...for a price.

Leo had taken the fortune cookie out of his tool belt and turned it in his fingers, wondering what price he would have to pay if he broke it open.

Maybe now was the moment.

“I’d be willing,” he told Hazel. “I could use the fortune cookie to find your brother.”

Hazel looked stunned. “What? No! I mean...I’d never ask you to do that. Not after what Nemesis said about the horrible cost. We barely *know* each other!”

The *barely know each other* comment kind of hurt, though Leo knew it was true.

“So...that’s not what you wanted to talk about?” he asked. “Uh, did you want to talk about the holding-hands-on-the-boulder moment? Because—”

“No!” she said quickly, fanning her face in that cute way she did when she was flustered. “No, I was just thinking about the way you tricked Narcissus and those nymphs...”

“Oh, right.” Leo glanced self-consciously at his arm. The HOT STUFF tattoo hadn’t completely faded. “Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“You were amazing,” Hazel said. “I’ve been mulling it over, how much you reminded me of—”

“Sammy,” Leo guessed. “I wish you’d tell me who he is.”

“Who he *was*,” Hazel corrected. The evening air was warm, but she shivered. “I’ve been thinking...I might be able to show you.”

“You mean like a photo?”

“No. There’s a sort of flashback that happens to me. I haven’t had one in a long time, and I’ve never tried to make one happen on purpose. But I shared one with Frank once, so I thought...”

Hazel locked eyes with him. Leo started to feel jittery, like he’d been injected with coffee. If this flashback was something Frank had shared with Hazel...well, either Leo didn’t want any part of it, or he *definitely* wanted to try it. He wasn’t sure which.

“When you say flashback...” He swallowed. “What exactly are we talking about? Is it safe?”

Hazel held out her hand. “I wouldn’t ask you to do this, but I’m sure it’s important. It *can’t* be a coincidence we met. If this works, maybe we can finally understand how we’re connected.”

Leo glanced back at the helm. He still had a nagging suspicion he’d forgotten

something, but Coach Hedge seemed to be doing fine. The sky ahead was clear. There was no sign of trouble.

Besides, a flashback sounded like a pretty brief thing. It couldn't hurt to let the coach be in charge for a few more minutes, could it?

“Okay,” he relented. “Show me.”

He took Hazel's hand, and the world dissolved.

L E O

THEY STOOD IN THE COURTYARD of an old compound, like a monastery. Red brick walls were overgrown with vines. Big magnolia trees had cracked the pavement. The sun beat down, and the humidity was about two hundred percent, even stickier than in Houston. Somewhere nearby, Leo smelled fish frying. Overhead, the cloud cover was low and gray, striped like a tiger's pelt.

The courtyard was about the size of a basketball court. An old deflated football sat in one corner, at the base of a Virgin Mary statue.

Along the sides of the buildings, windows were open. Leo could see flickers of movement inside, but it was eerily quiet. He saw no sign of air conditioning, which meant it must have been a thousand degrees in there.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"My old school," Hazel said next to him. "St. Agnes Academy for Colored Children and Indians."

"What kind of name—?"

He turned toward Hazel and yelped. She was a ghost—just a vaporous silhouette in the steamy air. Leo looked down and realized his own body had turned to mist too.

Everything around him seemed solid and real, but he was a spirit. After

having been possessed by an eidolon three days ago, he didn't appreciate the feeling.

Before he could ask questions, a bell rang inside: not a modern electronic sound, but the old-fashioned buzz of a hammer on metal.

"This is a memory," Hazel said, "so no one will see us. Look, here we come."

"We?"

From every door, dozens of children spilled into the courtyard, yelling and jostling each other. They were mostly African American, with a sprinkling of Hispanic-looking kids, as young as kindergartners and as old as high schoolers. Leo could tell this was in the past, because all the girls wore dresses and buckled leather shoes. The boys wore white collared shirts and pants held up by suspenders. Many wore caps like horse jockeys wear. Some kids carried lunches. Many didn't. Their clothes were clean, but worn and faded. Some had holes in the knees of their trousers, or shoes with the heels coming apart.

A few of the girls began playing jump rope with an old piece of clothesline. The older guys tossed a ratty baseball back and forth. Kids with lunches sat together and ate and chatted.

No one paid Ghost Hazel or Leo any attention.

Then Hazel—Hazel from the *past*—stepped into the courtyard. Leo recognized her with no problem, though she looked about two years younger than now. Her hair was pinned back in a bun. Her gold eyes darted around the courtyard uneasily. She wore a dark dress, unlike the other girls in their white cotton or pastel flowery prints, so she stood out like a mourner at a wedding.

She gripped a canvas lunch bag and moved along the wall, as if trying hard not to be noticed.

It didn't work. A boy called out, "Witch girl!" He lumbered toward her, backing her into a corner. The boy could have been fourteen or nineteen. It was hard to tell because he was so big and tall, easily the largest guy on the playground. Leo figured he'd been held back a few times. He wore a dirty shirt the color of grease rags, threadbare wool trousers (in this heat, they couldn't have been comfortable), and no shoes at all. Maybe the teachers were too terrified to insist that this kid wear shoes, or maybe he just didn't have any.

“That’s Rufus,” said Ghost Hazel with distaste.

“Seriously? No way his name is Rufus,” Leo said.

“Come on,” said Ghost Hazel. She drifted toward the confrontation. Leo followed. He wasn’t used to drifting, but he’d ridden a Segway once and it was kind of like that. He simply leaned in the direction he wanted to go and glided along.

The big kid Rufus had flat features, as if he spent most of his time face-planting on the sidewalk. His hair was cut just as flat on top, so miniature airplanes could’ve used it for a landing strip.

Rufus thrust out his hand. “Lunch.”

Hazel from the past didn’t protest. She handed over her canvas bag like this was an everyday occurrence.

A few older girls drifted over to watch the fun. One giggled at Rufus. “You don’t want to eat that,” she warned. “It’s probably poison.”

“You’re right,” Rufus said. “Did your witch mom make this, Levesque?”

“She’s not a witch,” Hazel muttered.

Rufus dropped the bag and stepped on it, smashing the contents under his bare heel. “You can have it back. I want a diamond, though. I hear your momma can make those out of thin air. Gimme a diamond.”

“I don’t have diamonds,” Hazel said. “Go away.”

Rufus balled his fists. Leo had been in enough rough schools and foster homes to sense when things were about to turn ugly. He wanted to step in and help Hazel, but he was a ghost. Besides, all this had happened decades ago.

Then another kid stumbled outside into the sunlight.

Leo sucked in his breath. The boy looked exactly like him.

“You see?” asked Ghost Hazel.

Fake Leo was the same height as Regular Leo—meaning he was short. He had the same nervous energy—tapping his fingers against his trousers, brushing at his white cotton shirt, adjusting the jockey cap on his curly brown hair. (Really, Leo thought, short people should not wear jockey caps unless they were jockeys.) Fake Leo had the same devilish smile that greeted Regular Leo whenever he looked in a mirror—an expression that made teachers immediately

shout, “Don’t even think about it!” and plop him in the front row.

Apparently, Fake Leo had just been scolded by a teacher. He was holding a dunce cap—an honest-to-goodness cardboard cone that said DUNCE. Leo thought those were something you only saw in cartoons.

He could understand why Fake Leo wasn’t wearing it. Bad enough to look like a jockey. With that cone on his head, he would’ve looked like a gnome.

Some kids backed up when Fake Leo burst onto the scene. Others nudged each other and ran toward him like they were expecting a show.

Meanwhile, Flathead Rufus was still trying to punk Hazel out of a diamond, oblivious to Fake Leo’s arrival.

“Come on, girl.” Rufus loomed over Hazel with his fists clenched. “Give it!”

Hazel pressed herself against the wall. Suddenly the ground at her feet went *snap*, like a twig breaking. A perfect diamond the size of a pistachio glittered between her feet.

“Ha!” Rufus barked when he saw it. He started to lean down, but Hazel yelped, “No, please!” as if she was genuinely concerned for the big goon.

That’s when Fake Leo strolled over.

Here it comes, Leo thought. Fake Leo is gonna bust out some Coach Hedge–style jujitsu and save the day.

Instead, Fake Leo put the top of the dunce cap to his mouth like a megaphone and yelled, “CUT!”

He said it with such authority all the other kids momentarily froze. Even Rufus straightened and backed away in confusion.

One of the little boys snickered under his breath: “Hammy Sammy.”

Sammy... Leo shivered. *Who the heck was this kid?*

Sammy/Fake Leo stormed up to Rufus with his dunce cap in his hand, looking angry. “No, no, no!” he announced, waving his free hand wildly at the other kids, who were gathering to watch the entertainment.

Sammy turned to Hazel. “Miss Lamarr, your line is...” Sammy looked around in exasperation. “Script! What is Hedy Lamarr’s line?”

“*No, please, you villain!*” one of the boys called out.

“Thank you!” Sammy said. “Miss Lamarr, you’re supposed to say, *No,*

please, you villain! And you, Clark Gable—”

The whole courtyard burst into laughter. Leo vaguely knew Clark Gable was an old-timey actor, but he didn’t know much else. Apparently, though, the idea that Flathead Rufus could be Clark Gable was hilarious to the kids.

“Mr. Gable—”

“No!” one of the girls cried. “Make him Gary Cooper.”

More laughter. Rufus looked as if he were about to blow a valve. He balled his fists like he wanted to hit somebody, but he couldn’t attack the entire school. He clearly hated being laughed at, but his slow little mind couldn’t quite work out what Sammy was up to.

Leo nodded in appreciation. Sammy *was* like him. Leo had done the same kind of stuff to bullies for years.

“Right!” Sammy yelled imperiously. “Mr. Cooper, you say, *Oh, but the diamond is mine, my treacherous darling!* And then you scoop up the diamond like this!”

“Sammy, no!” Hazel protested, but Sammy snatched up the stone and slipped it into his pocket in one smooth move.

He wheeled on Rufus. “I want emotion! I want the ladies in the audience swooning! Ladies, did Mr. Cooper make you swoon just now?”

“No,” several of them called back.

“There, you see?” Sammy cried. “Now, from the top!” he yelled into his dunce cap. “Action!”

Rufus was just starting to get over his confusion. He stepped toward Sammy and said, “Valdez, I’m gonna—”

The bell rang. Kids swarmed the doors. Sammy pulled Hazel out of the way as the little ones—who acted like they were on Sammy’s payroll—herded Rufus along with them so he was carried inside on a tide of kindergartners.

Soon Sammy and Hazel were alone except for the ghosts.

Sammy scooped up Hazel’s smashed lunch, made a show of dusting off the canvas bag, and presented it to her with a deep bow, as if it were her crown. “Miss Lamarr.”

Hazel from the past took her ruined lunch. She looked like she was about to

cry, but Leo couldn't tell if that was from relief or misery or admiration. "Sammy...Rufus is going to kill you."

"Ah, he knows better than to tangle with me." Sammy plopped the dunce cap on top of his jockey cap. He stood up straight and stuck out his scrawny chest. The dunce cap fell off.

Hazel laughed. "You are ridiculous."

"Why, thank you, Miss Lamarr."

"You're welcome, *my treacherous darling*."

Sammy's smile wavered. The air became uncomfortably charged. Hazel stared at the ground. "You shouldn't have touched that diamond. It's dangerous."

"Ah, come on," Sammy said. "Not for me!"

Hazel studied him warily, like she wanted to believe it. "Bad things might happen. You shouldn't—"

"I won't sell it," Sammy said. "I promise! I'll just keep it as a token of your flavor."

Hazel forced a smile. "I think you mean *token of my favor*."

"There you are! We should get going. It's time for our next scene: *Hedy Lamarr nearly dies of boredom in English class*."

Sammy held out his elbow like a gentleman, but Hazel pushed him away playfully. "Thanks for being there, Sammy."

"Miss Lamarr, I will *always* be there for you!" he said brightly. The two of them raced back into the schoolhouse.

Leo felt more like a ghost than ever. Maybe he had actually been an eidolon his whole life, because this kid he'd just seen should have been the *real* Leo. He was smarter, cooler, and funnier. He flirted so well with Hazel that he had obviously stolen her heart.

No wonder Hazel had looked at Leo so strangely when they first met. No wonder she had said *Sammy* with so much feeling. But Leo wasn't Sammy, any more than Flathead Rufus was Clark Gable.

"Hazel," he said. "I—I don't—"

The schoolyard dissolved into a different scene.

Hazel and Leo were still ghosts, but now they stood in front of a rundown house next to a drainage ditch overgrown with weeds. A clump of banana trees drooped in the yard. Perched on the steps, an old-fashioned radio played *conjunto* music, and on the shaded porch, sitting in a rocking chair, a skinny old man gazed at the horizon.

“Where *are* we?” Hazel asked. She was still only vapor, but her voice was full of alarm. “This isn’t from my life!”

Leo felt as if his ghostly self was thickening, becoming more real. This place seemed strangely familiar.

“It’s Houston,” he realized. “I know this view. That drainage ditch...This is my mom’s old neighborhood, where she grew up. Hobby Airport is over that way.”

“This is *your* life?” Hazel said. “I don’t understand! How—?”

“You’re asking me?” Leo demanded.

Suddenly the old man murmured, “Ah, Hazel...”

A shock went up Leo’s spine. The old man’s eyes were still fixed on the horizon. How did he know they were here?

“I guess we ran out of time,” the old man continued dreamily. “Well...”

He didn’t finish the thought.

Hazel and Leo stayed very still. The old man made no further sign that he saw them or heard them. It dawned on Leo that the guy had been talking to himself. But then why had he said Hazel’s name?

He had leathery skin, curly white hair, and gnarled hands, like he’d spent a lifetime working in a machine shop. He wore a pale yellow shirt, spotless and clean, with gray slacks and suspenders and polished black shoes.

Despite his age, his eyes were sharp and clear. He sat with a kind of quiet dignity. He looked at peace—amused, even, like he was thinking, *Dang, I lived this long? Cool!*

Leo was pretty sure he had never seen this man before. So why did he seem familiar? Then he realized the man was tapping his fingers on the arm of his chair, but the tapping wasn’t random. He was using Morse code, just like Leo’s mother used to do with him...and the old man was tapping the same message: *I*

love you.

The screen door opened. A young woman came out. She wore jeans and a turquoise blouse. Her hair was cut in a short black wedge. She was pretty, but not delicate. She had well-muscled arms and calloused hands. Like the old man's, her brown eyes glinted with amusement. In her arms was a baby, wrapped in a blue blanket.

“Look, *mijo*,” she said to the baby. “This is your *bisabuelo*. *Bisabuelo*, you want to hold him?”

When Leo heard her voice, he sobbed.

It was his mother—younger than he remembered her, but very much alive. That meant the baby in her arms...

The old man broke into a huge grin. He had perfect teeth, as white as his hair. His face crinkled with smile lines. “A boy! *Mi bebito*, Leo!”

“Leo?” Hazel whispered. “That—that’s you? What is *bisabuelo*?”

Leo couldn’t find his voice. *Great-grandfather*, he wanted to say.

The old man took baby Leo in his arms, chuckling with appreciation and tickling the baby’s chin—and Ghost Leo finally realized what he was seeing.

Somehow, Hazel’s power to revisit the past had found the one event that connected both of their lives—where Leo’s time line touched Hazel’s.

This old man...

“Oh...” Hazel seemed to realize who he was at the same moment. Her voice became very small, on the verge of tears. “Oh, Sammy, no...”

“Ah, little Leo,” said Sammy Valdez, aged well into his seventies. “You’ll have to be my stunt double, eh? That’s what they call it, I think. Tell her for me. I hoped I would be alive, but, *ay*, the curse won’t have it!”

Hazel sobbed. “Gaea...Gaea told me that he died of a heart attack, in the 1960s. But this isn’t—this can’t be...”

Sammy Valdez kept talking to the baby, while Leo’s mother, Esperanza, looked on with a pained smile—perhaps a little worried that Leo’s *bisabuelo* was rambling, a little sad that he was speaking nonsense.

“That lady, Doña Callida, she warned me.” Sammy shook his head sadly. “She said Hazel’s great danger would not happen in my lifetime. But I promised

I would be there for her. You will have to tell her I'm sorry, Leo. Help her if you can."

"*Bisabeulo*," Esperanza said, "you must be tired."

She extended her arms to take the baby, but the old man cuddled him a moment longer. Baby Leo seemed perfectly fine with it.

"Tell her I'm sorry I sold the diamond, eh?" Sammy said. "I broke my promise. When she disappeared in Alaska...ah, so long ago, I finally used that diamond, moved to Texas as I always dreamed. I started my machine shop. Started my family! It was a good life, but Hazel was right. The diamond came with a curse. I never saw her again."

"Oh, Sammy," Hazel said. "No, a curse didn't keep me away. I *wanted* to come back. I died!"

The old man didn't seem to hear. He smiled down at the baby, and kissed him on the head. "I give you my blessing, Leo. First male great-grandchild! I have a feeling you are special, like Hazel was. You are more than a regular baby, eh? You will carry on for me. You will see her someday. Tell her hello for me."

"*Bisabuelo*," Esperanza said, a little more insistently.

"Yes, yes." Sammy chuckled. "*El viejo loco* rambles on. I am tired, Esperanza. You are right. But I'll rest soon. It's been a good life. Raise him well, *nieta*."

The scene faded.

Leo was standing on the deck of the *Argo II*, holding Hazel's hand. The sun had gone down, and the ship was lit only by bronze lanterns. Hazel's eyes were puffy from crying.

What they'd seen was too much. The whole ocean heaved under them, and now for the first time Leo felt as if they were totally adrift.

"Hello, Hazel Levesque," he said, his voice gravelly.

Her chin trembled. She turned away and opened her mouth to speak, but before she could, the ship lurched to one side.

"Leo!" Coach Hedge yelled.

Festus whirred in alarm and blew flames into the night sky. The ship's bell rang.

“Those monsters you were worried about?” Hedge shouted. “One of ’em found us!”

XXIII

LEO

LEO DESERVED A DUNCE CAP.

If he'd been thinking straight, he would've switched the ship's detection system from radar to sonar as soon as they left Charleston Harbor. *That's* what he had forgotten. He'd designed the hull to resonate every few seconds, sending waves through the Mist and alerting Festus to any nearby monsters, but it only worked in one mode at a time: water or air.

He'd been so rattled by the Romans, then the storm, then Hazel, that he had completely forgotten. Now, a monster was right underneath them.

The ship tilted to starboard. Hazel gripped the rigging. Hedge yelled, "Valdez, which button blows up monsters? Take the helm!"

Leo climbed the tilting deck and managed to grab the port rail. He started clambering sideways toward the helm, but when he saw the monster surface, he forgot how to move.

The thing was the length of their ship. In the moonlight, it looked like a cross between a giant shrimp and a cockroach, with a pink chitinous shell, a flat crayfish tail, and millipede-type legs undulating hypnotically as the monster scraped against the hull of the *Argo II*.

Its head surfaced last—the slimy pink face of an enormous catfish with glassy

dead eyes, a gaping toothless maw, and a forest of tentacles sprouting from each nostril, making the bushiest nose beard Leo had ever had the displeasure to behold.

Leo remembered special Friday night dinners he and his mom used to share at a local seafood restaurant in Houston. They would eat shrimp and catfish. The idea now made him want to throw up.

“Come on, Valdez!” Hedge yelled. “Take the wheel so I can get my baseball bat!”

“A bat’s not going to help,” Leo said, but he made his way toward the helm. Behind him, the rest of his friends stumbled up the stairs.

Percy yelled, “What’s going— Gah! Shrimpzilla!”

Frank ran to Hazel’s side. She was clutching the rigging, still dazed from her flashback, but she gestured that she was all right.

The monster rammed the ship again. The hull groaned. Annabeth, Piper, and Jason tumbled to starboard and almost rolled overboard.

Leo reached the helm. His hands flew across the controls. Over the intercom, Festus clacked and clicked about leaks belowdecks, but the ship didn’t seem to be in danger of sinking—at least not yet.

Leo toggled the oars. They could convert into spears, which should be enough to drive the creature away. Unfortunately, they were jammed. Shrimpzilla must have knocked them out of alignment, and the monster was in spitting distance, which meant that Leo couldn’t use the ballistae without setting the *Argo II* on fire as well.

“How did it get so close?” Annabeth shouted, pulling herself up on one of the rail shields.

“I don’t know!” Hedge snarled. He looked around for his bat, which had rolled across the quarterdeck.

“I’m stupid!” Leo scolded himself. “Stupid, stupid! I forgot the sonar!”

The ship tilted farther to starboard. Either the monster was trying to give them a hug, or it was about to capsize them.

“Sonar?” Hedge demanded. “Pan’s pipes, Valdez! Maybe if you hadn’t been staring into Hazel’s eyes, holding hands for so long—”

“*What?*” Frank yelled.

“It wasn’t like that!” Hazel protested.

“It doesn’t matter!” Piper said. “Jason, can you call some lightning?”

Jason struggled to his feet. “I—” He only managed to shake his head. Summoning the storm earlier had taken too much out of him. Leo doubted the poor guy could pop a spark plug in the shape he was in.

“Percy!” Annabeth said. “Can you *talk* to that thing? Do you know what it is?”

The son of the sea god shook his head, clearly mystified. “Maybe it’s just curious about the ship. Maybe—”

The monster’s tendrils lashed across the deck so fast, Leo didn’t even have time to yell, *Look out!*

One slammed Percy in the chest and sent him crashing down the steps. Another wrapped around Piper’s legs and dragged her, screaming, toward the rail. Dozens more tendrils curled around the masts, encircling the crossbows and ripping down the rigging.

“Nose-hair attack!” Hedge snatched up his bat and leaped into action; but his hits just bounced harmlessly off the tendrils.

Jason drew his sword. He tried to free Piper, but he was still weak. His gold blade cut through the tendrils with no problem, but faster than he could sever them, more took their place.

Annabeth unsheathed her dagger. She ran through the forest of tentacles, dodging and stabbing at whatever target she could find. Frank pulled out his bow. He fired over the side at the creature’s body, lodging arrows in the chinks of its shell; but that only seemed to annoy the monster. It bellowed, and rocked the ship. The mast creaked like it might snap off.

They needed more firepower, but they couldn’t use ballistae. They needed to deliver a blast that wouldn’t destroy the ship. But how... ?

Leo’s eyes fixed on a supply crate next to Hazel’s feet.

“Hazel!” he yelled. “That box! Open it!”

She hesitated, then saw the box he meant. The label read WARNING. DO NOT OPEN.

“Open it!” Leo yelled again. “Coach, take the wheel! Turn us toward the monster, or we’ll capsize.”

Hedge danced through the tentacles with his nimble goat hooves, smashing away with gusto. He bounded toward the helm and took the controls.

“Hope you got a plan!” he shouted.

“A bad one.” Leo raced toward the mast.

The monster pushed against the *Argo II*. The deck lurched to forty-five degrees. Despite everyone’s efforts, the tentacles were just too numerous to fight. They seemed able to elongate as much as they wanted. Soon they’d have the *Argo II* completely entangled. Percy hadn’t appeared from below. The others were fighting for their lives against nose hair.

“Frank!” Leo called as he ran toward Hazel. “Buy us some time! Can you turn into a shark or something?”

Frank glanced over, scowling; and in that moment a tentacle slammed into the big guy, knocking him overboard.

Hazel screamed. She’d opened the supply box and almost dropped the two glass vials she was holding.

Leo caught them. Each was the size of an apple, and the liquid inside glowed poisonous green. The glass was warm to the touch. Leo’s chest felt like it might implode from guilt. He’d just distracted Frank and possibly gotten him killed, but he couldn’t think about it. He had to save the ship.

“Come on!” He handed Hazel one of the vials. “We can kill the monster—and save Frank!”

He hoped he wasn’t lying. Getting to the port rail was more like rock climbing than walking, but finally they made it.

“What is this stuff?” Hazel gasped, cradling her glass vial.

“Greek fire!”

Her eyes widened. “Are you *crazy*? If these break, we’ll burn the whole ship!”

“Its mouth!” Leo said. “Just chuck it down its—”

Suddenly Leo was crushed against Hazel, and the world turned sideways. As they were lifted into the air, he realized they’d been wrapped together in a

tentacle. Leo's arms were free, but it was all he could do to keep hold of his Greek fire vial. Hazel struggled. Her arms were pinned, which meant at any moment the vial trapped between them might break...and that would be extremely bad for their health.

They rose ten feet, twenty feet, thirty feet above the monster. Leo caught a glimpse of his friends in a losing battle, yelling and slashing at the monster's nose hairs. He saw Coach Hedge struggling to keep the ship from capsizing. The sea was dark, but in the moonlight he thought he saw a glistening object floating near the monster—maybe the unconscious body of Frank Zhang.

“Leo,” Hazel gasped, “I can't—my arms—”

“Hazel,” he said. “Do you trust me?”

“No!”

“Me neither,” Leo admitted. “When this thing drops us, hold your breath. Whatever you do, try to chuck your vial as far *away* from the ship as possible.”

“Why—why would it drop us?”

Leo stared down at the monster's head. This would be a tough shot, but he had no choice. He raised the vial in his left hand. He pressed his right hand against the tentacle and summoned fire to his palm—a narrowly focused, white-hot burst.

That got the creature's attention. A tremble went all the way down the tentacle as its flesh blistered under Leo's touch. The monster raised its maw, bellowing in pain, and Leo threw his Greek fire straight down its throat.

After that, things got fuzzy. Leo felt the tentacle release them. They fell. He heard a muffled explosion and saw a green flash of light inside the giant pink lampshade of the monster's body. The water hit Leo's face like a brick wrapped in sandpaper, and he sank into darkness. He clamped his mouth shut, trying not to breathe, but he could feel himself losing consciousness.

Through the sting of the salt water, he thought he saw the hazy silhouette of the ship's hull above—a dark oval surrounded by a green fiery corona, but he couldn't tell if the ship was actually on fire.

Killed by a giant shrimp, Leo thought bitterly. *At least let the Argo II survive. Let my friends be okay.*

His vision began to dim. His lungs burned.

Just as he was about to give up, a strange face hovered over him—a man who looked like Chiron, their trainer back at Camp Half-Blood. He had the same curly hair, shaggy beard, and intelligent eyes—a look somewhere between wild hippie and fatherly professor, except this man’s skin was the color of a lima bean. The man silently held up a dagger. His expression was grim and reproachful, as if to say: *Now, hold still, or I can’t kill you properly.*

Leo blacked out.

When Leo woke, he wondered if he was a ghost in another flashback, because he was floating weightlessly. His eyes slowly adjusted to the dim light.

“About time.” Frank’s voice had too much reverb, like he was speaking through several layers of plastic wrap.

Leo sat up...or rather he drifted upright. He was underwater, in a cave about the size of a two-car garage. Phosphorescent moss covered the ceiling, bathing the room in a blue-and-green glow. The floor was a carpet of sea urchins, which would have been uncomfortable to walk on, so Leo was glad he was floating. He didn’t understand how he could be breathing with no air.

Frank levitated nearby in meditation position. With his chubby face and his grumpy expression, he looked like a Buddha who’d achieved enlightenment and wasn’t thrilled about it.

The only exit to the cave was blocked by a massive abalone shell—its surface glistening in pearl and rose and turquoise. If this cave was a prison, at least it had an awesome door.

“Where are we?” Leo asked. “Where is everyone else?”

“*Everyone?*” Frank grumbled. “I don’t know. As far as I can tell, it’s just you and me and Hazel down here. The fish-horse guys took Hazel about an hour ago, leaving me with you.”

Frank’s tone made it obvious he didn’t approve of those arrangements. He didn’t look injured, but Leo realized that he no longer had his bow or quiver. In a panic, Leo patted his waist. His tool belt was gone.

“They searched us,” Frank said. “Took anything that could be a weapon.”

“Who?” Leo demanded. “Who are these fish-horse—?”

“Fish-horse guys,” Frank clarified, which wasn’t very clear. “They must have grabbed us when we fell in the ocean and dragged us...wherever this is.”

Leo remembered the last thing he’d seen before he passed out—the lima-bean-colored face of the bearded man with the dagger. “The shrimp monster. The *Argo II*—is the ship okay?”

“I don’t know,” Frank said darkly. “The others might be in trouble or hurt, or—or worse. But I guess you care more about your ship than your friends.”

Leo felt like his face had just hit the water again. “What kind of stupid thing—?”

Then he realized why Frank was so angry: the flashback. Things had happened so fast with the monster attack, Leo had almost forgotten. Coach Hedge had made that stupid comment about Leo and Hazel holding hands and gazing into each other’s eyes. It probably hadn’t helped that Leo had gotten Frank knocked overboard right after that.

Suddenly Leo found it hard to meet Frank’s gaze.

“Look, man...I’m sorry I got us into this mess. I totally jacked things up.” He took a deep breath, which felt surprisingly normal, considering he was underwater. “Me and Hazel holding hands...it’s not what you think. She was showing me this flashback from her past, trying to figure out my connection with Sammy.”

Frank’s angry expression started to unknot, replaced by curiosity. “Did she... did you figure it out?”

“Yeah,” Leo said. “Well, sort of. We didn’t get a chance to talk about it afterward because of Shrimpzilla, but Sammy was my great-grandfather.”

He told Frank what they’d seen. The weirdness hadn’t fully registered yet, but now, trying to explain it aloud, Leo could hardly believe it. Hazel had been sweet on his *bisabuelo*, a guy who had died when Leo was a baby. Leo hadn’t made the connection before, but he had a vague memory of older family members calling his grandfather Sam Junior. Which meant Sam Senior was Sammy, Leo’s *bisabuelo*. At some point, Tía Callida—Hera herself—had talked with Sammy, consoling him and giving him a glimpse into the future, which

meant that Hera had been shaping Leo's life generations before he was even born. If Hazel had stayed in the 1940s, if she'd married Sammy, Leo might've been her great-grandson.

"Oh, man," Leo said when he had finished the story. "I don't feel so good. But I swear on the Styx, that's what we saw."

Frank had the same expression as the monster catfish head—wide glassy eyes and an open mouth. "Hazel...Hazel liked your *great-grandfather*? That's why she likes you?"

"Frank, I know this is weird. *Believe* me. But I don't like Hazel—not *that* way. I'm not moving in on your girl."

Frank knit his eyebrows. "No?"

Leo hoped he wasn't blushing. Truthfully, he had no idea how he felt about Hazel. She was awesome and cute, and Leo had a weakness for awesome cute girls. But the flashback had complicated his feelings *a lot*.

Besides, his ship was in trouble.

I guess you care more about your ship than your friends, Frank had said.

That wasn't true, was it? Leo's dad, Hephaestus, had admitted once that he wasn't good with organic life forms. And, yes, Leo had always been more comfortable with machines than people. But he *did* care about his friends. Piper and Jason...he'd known them the longest, but the others were important to him too. Even Frank. They were like family.

The problem was, it had been so long since Leo had *had* a family, he couldn't even remember how it felt. Sure, last winter he'd become senior counselor of Hephaestus cabin; but most of his time had been spent building the ship. He liked his cabin mates. He knew how to work with them—but did he really know them?

If Leo had a family, it was the demigods on the *Argo II*—and maybe Coach Hedge, which Leo would never admit aloud.

You will always be the outsider, warned Nemesis's voice; but Leo tried to push that thought aside.

"Right, so..." He looked around him. "We need to make a plan. How are we breathing? If we're under the ocean, shouldn't we be crushed by the water

pressure?”

Frank shrugged. “Fish-horse magic, I guess. I remember the green guy touching my head with the point of a dagger. Then I could breathe.”

Leo studied the abalone door. “Can you bust us out? Turn into a hammerhead shark or something?”

Frank shook his head glumly. “My shape-shifting doesn’t work. I don’t know why. Maybe they cursed me, or maybe I’m too messed up to focus.”

“Hazel could be in trouble,” Leo said. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

He swam to the door and ran his fingers along the abalone. He couldn’t feel any kind of latch or other mechanism. Either the door could only be opened by magic or sheer force was required—neither of which was Leo’s specialty.

“I’ve already tried,” Frank said. “Even if we get out, we have no weapons.”

“Hmm...” Leo held up his hand. “I wonder.”

He concentrated, and fire flickered over his fingers. For a split second, Leo was excited, because he hadn’t expected it to work underwater. Then his plan started working a little too well. Fire raced up his arm and over his body until he was completely shrouded in a thin veil of flame. He tried to breathe, but he was inhaling pure heat.

“Leo!” Frank flailed backward like he was falling off a bar stool. Instead of racing to Leo’s aid, he hugged the wall to get as far away as possible.

Leo forced himself to stay calm. He understood what was going on. The fire itself couldn’t hurt him. He willed the flames to die and counted to five. He took a shallow breath. He had oxygen again.

Frank stopped trying to merge with the cave wall. “You’re...you’re okay?”

“Yeah,” Leo grumbled. “Thanks for the assist.”

“I—I’m sorry.” Frank looked so horrified and ashamed it was hard for Leo to stay mad at him. “I just...what happened?”

“Clever magic,” Leo said. “There’s a thin layer of oxygen around us, like an extra skin. Must be self-regenerating. That’s how we’re breathing and staying dry. The oxygen gave the fire fuel—except the fire also suffocated me.”

“I really don’t...” Frank gulped. “I don’t like that fire summoning you do.” He started getting cozy with the wall again.

Leo didn't mean to, but he couldn't help laughing. "Man, I'm not going to attack you."

"Fire," Frank repeated, like that one word explained everything.

Leo remembered what Hazel had said—that his fire made Frank nervous. He'd seen the discomfort in Frank's face before, but Leo hadn't taken it seriously. Frank seemed *way* more powerful and scary than Leo was.

Now it occurred to him that Frank might have had a bad experience with fire. Leo's own mom had died in a machine shop blaze. Leo had been blamed for it. He'd grown up being called a freak, an arsonist, because whenever he got angry, things burned.

"Sorry I laughed," he said, and he meant it. "My mom died in a fire. I understand being afraid of it. Did, uh...did something like that happen with you?"

Frank seemed to be weighing how much to say. "My house...my grandmother's place. It burned down. But it's more than that..." He stared at the sea urchins on the floor. "Annabeth said I could trust the crew. Even you."

"Even me, huh?" Leo wondered how *that* had come up in conversation. "Wow, high praise."

"My weakness..." Frank started, like the words cut his mouth. "There's this piece of firewood—"

The abalone door rolled open.

Leo turned and found himself face-to-face with Lima Bean Man, who wasn't actually a man at all. Now that Leo could see him clearly, the guy was by far the weirdest creature he'd ever met, and that was saying a lot.

From the waist up, he was more or less human—a thin, bare-chested dude with a dagger in his belt and a band of seashells strapped across his chest like a bandolier. His skin was green, his beard scraggly brown, and his longish hair was tied back in a seaweed bandana. A pair of lobster claws stuck up from his head like horns, turning and snapping at random.

Leo decided he didn't look so much like Chiron. He looked more like the poster Leo's mom used to keep in her workspace—that old Mexican bandit Pancho Villa, except with seashells and lobster horns.

From the waist down, the guy was more complicated. He had the forelegs of a blue-green horse, sort of like a centaur, but toward the back, his horse body morphed into a long fishy tail about ten feet long, with a rainbow-colored, V-shaped tail fin.

Now Leo understood what Frank meant about fish-horse guys.

“I am Bythos,” said the green man. “I will interrogate Frank Zhang.”

His voice was calm and firm, leaving no room for debate.

“Why did you capture us?” Leo demanded. “Where’s Hazel?”

Bythos narrowed his eyes. His expression seemed to say: *Did this tiny creature just talk to me?* “You, Leo Valdez, will go with my brother.”

“Your brother?”

Leo realized that a much larger figure was looming behind Bythos, with a shadow so wide, it filled the entire cave entrance.

“Yes,” Bythos said with a dry smile. “Try not to make Aphros mad.”

XXIV

LEO

APHROS LOOKED LIKE HIS BROTHER, except he was blue instead of green and much, much bigger. He had Arnold-as-Terminator abs and arms, and a square, brutish head. A huge Conan-approved sword was strapped across his back. Even his hair was bigger—a massive globe of blue-black frizz so thick that his lobster-claw horns appeared to be drowning as they tried to swim their way to the surface.

“Is that why they named you Aphros?” Leo asked as they glided down the path from the cave. “Because of the Afro?”

Aphros scowled. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” Leo said quickly. At least he would never have trouble remembering which fish dude was which. “So what *are* you guys, exactly?”

“Ichthyocentaurs,” Aphros said, like it was a question he was tired of answering.

“Uh, icky what?”

“Fish centaurs. We are the half brothers of Chiron.”

“Oh, he’s a friend of mine!”

Aphros narrowed his eyes. “The one called Hazel told us this, but we will determine the truth. Come.”

Leo didn't like the sound of *determine the truth*. It made him think of torture racks and red-hot poker.

He followed the fish centaur through a massive forest of kelp. Leo could've darted to one side and gotten lost in the plants pretty easily, but he didn't try. For one thing, he figured Aphros could travel much faster in the water, and the guy might be able to shut off the magic that let Leo move and breathe. Inside or outside the cave, Leo was just as much a captive.

Also, Leo had no clue where he was.

They drifted between rows of kelp as tall as apartment buildings. The green-and-yellow plants swayed weightlessly, like columns of helium balloons. High above, Leo saw a smudge of white that might have been the sun.

He guessed that meant they'd been here overnight. Was the *Argo II* all right? Had it sailed on without them, or were their friends still searching?

Leo couldn't even be sure how deep they were. Plants could grow here—so not *too* deep, right? Still, he knew he couldn't just swim for the surface. He'd heard about people who ascended too quickly and developed nitrogen bubbles in their blood. Leo wanted to avoid carbonated blood.

They drifted along for maybe half a mile. Leo was tempted to ask where Aphros was taking him, but the big sword strapped to the centaur's back sort of discouraged conversation.

Finally the kelp forest opened up. Leo gasped. They were standing (swimming, whatever) at the summit of a high underwater hill. Below them stretched an entire town of Greek-style buildings on the seafloor.

The roofs were tiled with mother-of-pearl. The gardens were filled with coral and sea anemones. Hippocampi grazed in a field of seaweed. A team of Cyclopes was placing the domed roof on a new temple, using a blue whale as a crane. And swimming through the streets, hanging out in the courtyards, practicing combat with tridents and swords in the arena were dozens of mermen and mermaids—honest-to-goodness fish-people.

Leo had seen a lot of crazy stuff, but he had always thought merpeople were silly fictional creatures, like Smurfs or Muppets.

There was nothing silly or cute about these merpeople, though. Even from a

distance, they looked fierce and not at all human. Their eyes glowed yellow. They had sharklike teeth and leathery skin in colors ranging from coral red to ink black.

“It’s a training camp,” Leo realized. He looked at Aphros in awe. “You train heroes, the same way Chiron does?”

Aphros nodded, a glint of pride in his eyes. “We have trained all the famous mer-heroes! Name a mer-hero, and we have trained him or her!”

“Oh, sure,” Leo said. “Like...um, the Little Mermaid?”

Aphros frowned. “Who? No! Like Triton, Glaucus, Weissmuller, and Bill!”

“Oh.” Leo had no idea who any of those people were. “You trained Bill? Impressive.”

“Indeed!” Aphros pounded his chest. “I trained Bill myself. A great merman.”

“You teach combat, I guess.”

Aphros threw up his hands in exasperation. “Why does everyone assume that?”

Leo glanced at the massive sword on the fish-guy’s back. “Uh, I don’t know.”

“I teach music and poetry!” Aphros said. “Life skills! Homemaking! These are important for heroes.”

“Absolutely.” Leo tried to keep a straight face. “Sewing? Cookie baking?”

“Yes. I’m glad you understand. Perhaps later, if I don’t have to kill you, I will share my brownie recipe.” Aphros gestured behind him contemptuously. “My brother Bythos—*he* teaches combat.”

Leo wasn’t sure whether he felt relieved or insulted that the combat trainer was interrogating Frank, while Leo got the home economics teacher. “So, great. This is Camp...what do you call it? Camp Fish-Blood?”

Aphros frowned. “I hope that was a joke. This is Camp _____.” He made a sound that was a series of sonar pings and hisses.

“Silly me,” Leo said. “And, you know, I could really go for some of those brownies! So what do we have to do to get to the *not killing me* stage?”

“Tell me your story,” Aphros said.

Leo hesitated, but not for long. Somehow he sensed that he should tell the

truth. He started at the beginning—how Hera had been his babysitter and placed him in the flames; how his mother had died because of Gaea, who had identified Leo as a future enemy. He talked about how he had spent his childhood bouncing around in foster homes, until he and Jason and Piper had been taken to Camp Half-Blood. He explained the Prophecy of Seven, the building of the *Argo II*, and their quest to reach Greece and defeat the giants before Gaea woke.

As he talked, Aphros drew some wicked-looking metal spikes from his belt. Leo was afraid he had said something wrong, but Aphros pulled some seaweed yarn from his pouch and started knitting. “Go on,” he urged. “Don’t stop.”

By the time Leo had explained the eidolons, the problem with the Romans, and all the troubles the *Argo II* had encountered crossing the United States and embarking from Charleston, Aphros had knitted a complete baby bonnet.

Leo waited while the fish centaur put away his supplies. Aphros’s lobster-claw horns kept swimming around in his thick hair, and Leo had to resist the urge to try to rescue them.

“Very well,” Aphros said. “I believe you.”

“As simple as that?”

“I am quite good at discerning lies. I hear none from you. Your story also fits with what Hazel Levesque told us.”

“Is she—?”

“Of course,” Aphros said. “She’s fine.” He put his fingers to his mouth and whistled, which sounded strange underwater—like a dolphin screaming. “My people will bring her here shortly. You must understand...our location is a carefully guarded secret. You and your friends showed up in a warship, pursued by one of Keto’s sea monsters. We did not know whose side you were on.”

“Is the ship all right?”

“Damaged,” Aphros said, “but not terribly. The skolopendra withdrew after it got a mouthful of fire. Nice touch.”

“Thank you. Skolopendra? Never heard of it.”

“Consider yourself lucky. They are nasty creatures. Keto must really hate you. At any rate, we rescued you and the other two from the creature’s tentacles as it retreated into the deep. Your friends are still above, searching for you; but

we have obscured their vision. We had to be sure you were not a threat. Otherwise, we would have had to...take measures.”

Leo gulped. He was pretty sure *taking measures* did not mean baking extra brownies. And if these guys were so powerful that they could keep their camp hidden from Percy, who had all those Poseidonish water powers, they were not fish dudes to mess with. “So...we can go?”

“Soon,” Aphros promised. “I must check with Bythos. When he is done talking with your friend Gank—”

“Frank.”

“Frank. When they are done, we will send you back to your ship. And we may have some warnings for you.”

“Warnings?”

“Ah.” Aphros pointed. Hazel emerged from the kelp forest, escorted by two vicious-looking mermaids, who were baring their fangs and hissing. Leo thought Hazel might be in danger. Then he saw she was completely at ease, grinning and talking with her escorts, and Leo realized that the mermaids were laughing.

“Leo!” Hazel paddled toward him. “Isn’t this place amazing?”

They were left alone at the ridge, which must have meant Aphros really did trust them. While the centaur and the mermaids went off to fetch Frank, Leo and Hazel floated above the hill and gazed down at the underwater camp.

Hazel told him how the mermaids had warmed up to her right away. Aphros and Bythos had been fascinated by her story, as they had never met a child of Pluto before. On top of that, they had heard many legends about the horse Arion, and they were amazed that Hazel had befriended him.

Hazel had promised to visit again with Arion. The mermaids had written their phone numbers in waterproof ink on Hazel’s arm so that she could keep in touch. Leo didn’t even want to ask how mermaids got cell-phone coverage in the middle of the Atlantic.

As Hazel talked, her hair floated around her face in a cloud—like brown earth and gold dust in a miner’s pan. She looked very sure of herself and very beautiful—not at all like the shy, nervous girl in that New Orleans schoolyard

with her smashed canvas lunch bag at her feet.

“We didn’t get to talk,” Leo said. He was reluctant to bring up the subject, but he knew this might be their only chance to be alone. “I mean about Sammy.”

Her smile faded. “I know...I just need some time to let it sink in. It’s strange to think that you and he...”

She didn’t need to finish the thought. Leo knew exactly how strange it was.

“I’m not sure I can explain this to Frank,” she added. “About you and me holding hands.”

She wouldn’t meet Leo’s eyes. Down in the valley, the Cyclopes work crew cheered as the temple roof was set in place.

“I talked to him,” Leo said. “I told him I wasn’t trying to...you know. Make trouble between you two.”

“Oh. Good.”

Did she sound disappointed? Leo wasn’t sure, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“Frank, um, seemed pretty freaked out when I summoned fire.” Leo explained what had happened in the cave.

Hazel looked stunned. “Oh, no. That *would* terrify him.”

Her hand went to her denim jacket, like she was checking for something in the inside pocket. She always wore that jacket, or some sort of overshirt, even when it was hot outside. Leo had assumed that she did it out of modesty, or because it was better for horseback riding, like a motorcycle jacket. Now he began to wonder.

His brain shifted into high gear. He remembered what Frank had said about his weakness...a piece of firewood. He thought about why this kid would have a fear of fire, and why Hazel would be so attuned to those feelings. Leo thought about some of the stories he’d heard at Camp Half-Blood. For obvious reasons, he tended to pay attention to legends about fire. Now he remembered one he hadn’t thought about in months.

“There was an old legend about a hero,” he recalled. “His lifeline was tied to a stick in a fireplace, and when that piece of wood burned up...”

Hazel’s expression turned dark. Leo knew he’d struck on the truth.

“Frank has that problem,” he guessed. “And the piece of firewood...” He pointed at Hazel’s jacket. “He gave it to you for safekeeping?”

“Leo, please don’t...I can’t talk about it.”

Leo’s instincts as a mechanic kicked in. He started thinking about the properties of wood and the corrosiveness of salt water. “Is the firewood okay in the ocean like this? Does the layer of air around you protect it?”

“It’s fine,” Hazel said. “The wood didn’t even get wet. Besides, it’s wrapped up in several layers of cloth and plastic and—” She bit her lip in frustration. “And I’m not supposed to *talk* about it! Leo, the point is if Frank seems afraid of you, or uneasy, you’ve got to understand...”

Leo was glad he was floating, because he probably would’ve been too dizzy to stand. He imagined being in Frank’s position, his life so fragile, it literally could burn up at any time. He imagined how much trust it would take to give his lifeline—his entire fate—to another person.

Frank had chosen Hazel, obviously. So when he had seen Leo—a guy who could summon fire at will—moving in on his girl...

Leo shuddered. No wonder Frank didn’t like him. And suddenly Frank’s ability to turn into a bunch of different animals didn’t seem so awesome—not if it came with a big catch like that.

Leo thought about his least favorite line in the Prophecy of Seven: *To storm or fire the world must fall*. For a long time, he’d figured that Jason or Percy stood for storm—maybe both of them together. Leo was the fire guy. Nobody said that, but it was pretty clear. Leo was one of the wild cards. If he did the wrong thing, the world could fall. No...it *must* fall. Leo wondered if Frank and his firewood had something to do with that line. Leo had already made some epic mistakes. It would be so easy for him to accidentally send Frank Zhang up in flames.

“There you are!” Bythos’s voice made Leo flinch.

Bythos and Aphros floated over with Frank between them, looking pale but okay. Frank studied Hazel and Leo carefully, as if trying to read what they’d been talking about.

“You are free to go,” Bythos said. He opened his saddlebags and returned

their confiscated supplies. Leo had never been so glad to fit his tool belt around his waist.

“Tell Percy Jackson not to worry,” Aphros said. “We have understood your story about the imprisoned sea creatures in Atlanta. Keto and Phorcys must be stopped. We will send a quest of mer-heroes to defeat them and free their captives. Perhaps Cyrus?”

“Or Bill,” Bythos offered.

“Yes! Bill would be perfect,” Aphros agreed. “At any rate, we are grateful that Percy brought this to our attention.”

“You should talk to him in person,” Leo suggested. “I mean, son of Poseidon, and all.”

Both fish-centaurs shook their heads solemnly. “Sometimes it is best not to interact with Poseidon’s brood,” Aphros said. “We are friendly with the sea god, of course; but the politics of undersea deities is...complicated. And we value our independence. Nevertheless, tell Percy thank you. We will do what we can to speed you safely across the Atlantic without further interference from Keto’s monsters, but be warned: in the ancient sea, the Mare Nostrum, more dangers await.”

Frank sighed. “Naturally.”

Bythos clapped the big guy on the shoulder. “You will be fine, Frank Zhang. Keep practicing those sea life transformations. The koi fish is good, but try for a Portuguese man-of-war. Remember what I showed you. It’s all in the breathing.”

Frank looked mortally embarrassed. Leo bit his lip, determined not to smile.

“And you, Hazel,” Aphros said, “come visit again, and bring that horse of yours! I know you are concerned about the time you lost, spending the night in our realm. You are worried about your brother, Nico....”

Hazel gripped her cavalry sword. “Is he—do you know where he is?”

Aphros shook his head. “Not exactly. But when you get closer, you should be able to sense his presence. Never fear! You must reach Rome the day after tomorrow if you are to save him, but there is still time. And you *must* save him.”

“Yes,” Bythos agreed. “He will be essential for your journey. I am not sure how, but I sense it is true.”

Aphros planted his hand on Leo's shoulder. "As for you, Leo Valdez, stay close to Hazel and Frank when you reach Rome. I sense they will face...ah, *mechanical* difficulties that only you can overcome."

"Mechanical difficulties?" Leo asked.

Aphros smiled as if that was great news. "And I have gifts for you, the brave navigator of the *Argo II*!"

"I like to think of myself as captain," Leo said. "Or supreme commander."

"Brownies!" Aphros said proudly, shoving an old-fashioned picnic basket into Leo's arms. It was surrounded by a bubble of air, which Leo hoped would keep the brownies from turning into saltwater fudge sludge. "In this basket you will also find the recipe. Not too much butter! That's the trick. And I've given you a letter of introduction to Tiberinus, the god of the Tiber River. Once you reach Rome, your friend the daughter of Athena will need this."

"Annabeth..." Leo said. "Okay, but why?"

Bythos laughed. "She follows the Mark of Athena, doesn't she? Tiberinus can guide her in this quest. He's an ancient, proud god who can be...difficult; but letters of introduction are everything to Roman spirits. This will convince Tiberinus to help her. Hopefully."

"Hopefully," Leo repeated.

Bythos produced three small pink pearls from his saddlebags. "And now, off with you, demigods! Good sailing!"

He threw a pearl at each of them in turn, and three shimmering pink bubbles of energy formed around them.

They began to rise through the water. Leo just had time to think: *A hamster ball elevator?* Then he gained speed and rocketed toward the distant glow of the sun above.

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PIPER

PIPER HAD A NEW ENTRY in her top-ten list of *Times Piper Felt Useless*.

Fighting Shrimpzilla with a dagger and a pretty voice? Not so effective. Then the monster had sunk into the deep and disappeared along with three of her friends, and she'd been powerless to help them.

Afterward, Annabeth, Coach Hedge, and Buford the table rushed around repairing things so that the ship wouldn't sink. Percy, despite being exhausted, searched the ocean for their missing friends. Jason, also exhausted, flew around the rigging like a blond Peter Pan, putting out fires from the second green explosion that had lit up the sky just above the mainmast.

As for Piper, all she could do was stare at her knife Katoptris, trying to locate Leo, Hazel, and Frank. The only images that came to her were ones she didn't want to see: three black SUVs driving north from Charleston, packed with Roman demigods, Reyna sitting at the wheel of the lead car. Giant eagles escorted them from above. Every so often, glowing purple spirits in ghostly chariots appeared out of the countryside and fell in behind them, thundering up I-95 toward New York and Camp Half-Blood.

Piper concentrated harder. She saw the nightmarish images she had seen before: the human-headed bull rising from the water, then the dark well-shaped

room filling with black water as Jason, Percy, and she struggled to stay afloat.

She sheathed Katoptris, wondering how Helen of Troy had stayed sane during the Trojan War, if this blade had been her only source of news. Then she remembered that everyone around Helen had been slaughtered by the invading Greek army. Maybe she *hadn't* stayed sane.

By the time the sun rose, none of them had slept. Percy had scoured the seafloor and found nothing. The *Argo II* was no longer in danger of sinking, though without Leo, they couldn't do full repairs. The ship was capable of sailing, but no one suggested leaving the area—not without their missing friends.

Piper and Annabeth sent a dream vision to Camp Half-Blood, warning Chiron of what had happened with the Romans at Fort Sumter. Annabeth explained her exchange of words with Reyna. Piper relayed the vision from her knife about the SUVs racing north. The kindly centaur's face seemed to age thirty years during the course of their conversation, but he assured them he would see to the defenses of the camp. Tyson, Mrs. O'Leary, and Ella had arrived safely. If necessary, Tyson could summon an army of Cyclopes to the camp's defense, and Ella and Rachel Dare were already comparing prophecies, trying to learn more about what the future held. The job of the seven demigods aboard the *Argo II*, Chiron reminded them, was to finish the quest and come back safely.

After the Iris-message, the demigods paced the deck in silence, staring at the water and hoping for a miracle.

When it finally came—three giant pink bubbles bursting at the surface off the starboard bow and ejecting Frank, Hazel, and Leo—Piper went a little crazy. She cried out with relief and dove straight into the water.

What was she thinking? She didn't take a rope or a life vest or anything. But at the moment, she was just so happy that she paddled over to Leo and kissed him on the cheek, which kind of surprised him.

“Miss me?” Leo laughed.

Piper was suddenly furious. “Where *were* you? How are you guys alive?”

“Long story,” he said. A picnic basket bobbed to the surface next to him. “Want a brownie?”

Once they got on board and changed into dry clothes (poor Frank had to

borrow a pair of too-small pants from Jason) the crew all gathered on the quarterdeck for a celebratory breakfast—except for Coach Hedge, who grumbled that the atmosphere was getting too cuddly for his tastes and went below to hammer out some dents in the hull. While Leo fussed over his helm controls, Hazel and Frank related the story of the fish-centaurs and their training camp.

“Incredible,” Jason said. “These are *really* good brownies.”

“That’s your only comment?” Piper demanded.

He looked surprised. “What? I heard the story. Fish-centaurs. Merpeople. Letter of intro to the Tiber River god. Got it. But these brownies—”

“I know,” Frank said, his mouth full. “Try them with Esther’s peach preserves.”

“That,” Hazel said, “is *incredibly* disgusting.”

“Pass me the jar, man,” Jason said.

Hazel and Piper exchanged a look of total exasperation. *Boys.*

Percy, for his part, wanted to hear every detail about the aquatic camp. He kept coming back to one point: “They didn’t want to meet me?”

“It wasn’t that,” Hazel said. “Just...undersea politics, I guess. The merpeople are territorial. The good news is they’re taking care of that aquarium in Atlanta. And they’ll help protect the *Argo II* as we cross the Atlantic.”

Percy nodded absently. “But they didn’t want to meet me?”

Annabeth swatted his arm. “Come on, Seaweed Brain! We’ve got other things to worry about.”

“She’s right,” Hazel said. “After today, Nico has less than two days. The fish-centaurs said we *have* to rescue him. He’s essential to the quest somehow.”

She looked around defensively, as if waiting for someone to argue. No one did. Piper tried to imagine what Nico di Angelo was feeling, stuck in a jar with only two pomegranate seeds left to sustain him, and no idea whether he would be rescued. It made Piper anxious to reach Rome, even though she had a horrible feeling she was sailing toward her own sort of prison—a dark room filled with water.

“Nico must have information about the Doors of Death,” Piper said. “We’ll save him, Hazel. We can make it in time. Right, Leo?”

“What?” Leo tore his eyes away from the controls. “Oh, yeah. We should reach the Mediterranean tomorrow morning. Then spend the rest of that day sailing to Rome, or *flying*, if I can get the stabilizer fixed by then....”

Jason suddenly looked as though his brownie with peach preserves didn’t taste so good. “Which will put us in Rome on the last possible day for Nico. Twenty-four hours to find him—at most.”

Percy crossed his legs. “And that’s only part of the problem. There’s the Mark of Athena, too.”

Annabeth didn’t seem happy with the change of topic. She rested her hand on her backpack, which, since they’d left Charleston, she always seemed to have with her.

She opened the bag and brought out a thin bronze disk the diameter of a donut. “This is the map that I found at Fort Sumter. It’s...”

She stopped abruptly, staring at the smooth bronze surface. “It’s blank!”

Percy took it and examined both sides. “It wasn’t like this earlier?”

“No! I was looking at it in my cabin and...” Annabeth muttered under her breath. “It must be like the Mark of Athena. I can only see it when I’m alone. It won’t show itself to other demigods.”

Frank scooted back like the disk might explode. He had an orange-juice mustache and a brownie-crumb beard that made Piper want to hand him a napkin.

“What did it have on it?” Frank asked nervously. “And what *is* the Mark of Athena? I still don’t get it.”

Annabeth took the disk from Percy. She turned it in the sunlight, but it remained blank. “The map was hard to read, but it showed a spot on the Tiber River in Rome. I think that’s where my quest starts...the path I’ve got to take to follow the Mark.”

“Maybe that’s where you meet the river god Tiberinus,” Piper said. “But what *is* the Mark?”

“The coin,” Annabeth murmured.

Percy frowned. “What coin?”

Annabeth dug into her pocket and brought out a silver drachma. “I’ve been

carrying this ever since I saw my mom at Grand Central. It's an Athenian coin."

She passed it around. While each demigod looked at it, Piper had a ridiculous memory of show-and-tell in elementary school.

"An owl," Leo noted. "Well, that makes sense. I guess the branch is an olive branch? But what's this inscription, AΘE—Area Of Effect?"

"It's alpha, theta, epsilon," Annabeth said. "In Greek it stands for *Of The Athenians*...or you could read it as *the children of Athena*. It's sort of the Athenian motto."

"Like SPQR for the Romans," Piper guessed.

Annabeth nodded. "Anyway, the Mark of Athena is an owl, just like that one. It appears in fiery red. I've seen it in my dreams. Then twice at Fort Sumter."

She described what had happened at the fort—the voice of Gaea, the spiders in the garrison, the Mark burning them away. Piper could tell it wasn't easy for her to talk about.

Percy took Annabeth's hand. "I should have been there for you."

"But that's the point," Annabeth said. "*No one* can be there for me. When I get to Rome, I'll have to strike out on my own. Otherwise, the Mark won't appear. I'll have to follow it to...to the source."

Frank took the coin from Leo. He stared at the owl. "*The giants' bane stands gold and pale, Won with pain from a woven jail.*" He looked up at Annabeth. "What is it...this thing at the source?"

Before Annabeth could answer, Jason spoke up.

"A statue," he said. "A statue of Athena. At least...that's my guess."

Piper frowned. "You said you didn't know."

"I *don't*. But the more I think about it...there's only one artifact that could fit the legend." He turned to Annabeth. "I'm sorry. I should have told you everything I've heard, much earlier. But honestly, I was scared. If this legend is true—"

"I know," Annabeth said. "I figured it out, Jason. I don't blame you. But if we manage to save the statue, Greek and Romans together...Don't you see? It could heal the rift."

"Hold on." Percy made a *time-out* gesture. "What statue?"

Annabeth took back the silver coin and slipped it into her pocket. “The Athena Parthenos,” she said. “The most famous Greek statue of all time. It was forty feet tall, covered in ivory and gold. It stood in the middle of the Parthenon in Athens.”

The ship went silent, except for the waves lapping against the hull.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” Leo said at last. “What happened to it?”

“It disappeared,” Annabeth said.

Leo frowned. “How does a forty-foot-tall statue in the middle of the Parthenon just *disappear*?”

“That’s a good question,” Annabeth said. “It’s one of the biggest mysteries in history. Some people thought the statue was melted down for its gold, or destroyed by invaders. Athens was sacked a number of times. Some thought the statue was carried off—”

“By Romans,” Jason finished. “At least, that’s one theory, and it fits the legend I heard at Camp Jupiter. To break the Greeks’ spirit, the Romans carted off the Athena Parthenos when they took over the city of Athens. They hid it in an underground shrine in Rome. The Roman demigods swore it would never see the light of day. They literally *stole* Athena, so she could no longer be the symbol of Greek military power. She became Minerva, a much tamer goddess.”

“And the children of Athena have been searching for the statue ever since,” Annabeth said. “Most don’t know about the legend, but in each generation, a few are chosen by the goddess. They’re given a coin like mine. They follow the Mark of Athena...a kind of magical trail that links them to the statue...hoping to find the resting place of the Athena Parthenos and get the statue back.”

Piper watched the two of them—Annabeth and Jason—with quiet amazement. They spoke like a team, without any hostility or blame. The two of them had never really trusted each other. Piper was close enough to both of them to know that. But now...if they could discuss such a huge problem so calmly—the ultimate source of Greek/Roman hatred—maybe there was hope for the two camps, after all.

Percy seemed to be having similar thoughts, judging from his surprised expression. “So if we—I mean *you*—find the statue...what would we do with it?”

Could we even *move* it?”

“I’m not sure,” Annabeth admitted. “But if we could save it somehow, it could unite the two camps. It could heal my mother of this hatred she’s got, tearing her two aspects apart. And maybe...maybe the statue has some sort of power that could help us against the giants.”

Piper stared at Annabeth with awe, just starting to appreciate the huge responsibility her friend had taken on. And Annabeth meant to do it alone.

“This could change everything,” Piper said. “It could end thousands of years of hostility. It might be the key to defeating Gaea. But if we can’t help you...”

She didn’t finish, but the question seemed to hang in the air: *Was saving the statue even possible?*

Annabeth squared her shoulders. Piper knew she must be terrified inside, but she did a good job hiding it.

“I have to succeed,” Annabeth said simply. “The risk is worth it.”

Hazel twirled her hair pensively. “I don’t like the idea of you risking your life alone, but you’re right. We saw what recovering the golden eagle standard did for the Roman legion. If this statue is the most powerful symbol of Athena ever created—”

“It could kick some serious booty,” Leo offered.

Hazel frowned. “That wasn’t the way *I’d* put it, but yes.”

“Except...” Percy took Annabeth’s hand again. “No child of Athena has *ever* found it. Annabeth, what’s *down* there? What’s guarding it? If it’s got to do with spiders—?”

“*Won through pain from a woven jail*,” Frank recalled. “Woven, like webs?”

Annabeth’s face turned as white as printer paper. Piper suspected that Annabeth knew what awaited her...or at least that she had a very good idea. She was trying to hold down a wave of panic and terror.

“We’ll deal with that when we get to Rome,” Piper suggested, putting a little charmspeak in her voice to soothe her friend’s nerves. “It’s going to work out. Annabeth is going to kick some serious booty, too. You’ll see.”

“Yeah,” Percy said. “I learned a long time ago: *Never* bet against Annabeth.”

Annabeth looked at them both gratefully.

Judging from their half-eaten breakfasts, the others still felt uneasy; but Leo managed to shake them out of it. He pushed a button, and a loud blast of steam exploded from Festus's mouth, making everyone jump.

"Well!" he said. "Good pep rally, but there's still a ton of things to fix on this ship before we get to the Mediterranean. Please report to Supreme Commander Leo for your superfun list of chores!"

Piper and Jason took charge of cleaning the lower deck, which had been thrown into chaos during the monster attack. Reorganizing sickbay and battening down the storage area took them most of the day, but Piper didn't mind. For one thing, she got to spend time with Jason. For another, last night's explosions had given Piper a healthy respect for Greek fire. She didn't want any loose vials of that stuff rolling through the corridors in the middle of the night.

As they were fixing up the stables, Piper thought about the night Annabeth and Percy had spent down here accidentally. Piper wished that she could talk with Jason all night—just curl up on the stable floor and enjoy being with him. Why didn't *they* get to break the rules?

But Jason wasn't like that. He was hardwired to be a leader and set a good example. Breaking the rules didn't come naturally to him.

No doubt Reyna admired that about him. Piper did too...mostly.

The one time she'd convinced him to be a rebel was back at the Wilderness School, when they had sneaked onto the roof at night to watch a meteor shower. That's where they'd had their first kiss.

Unfortunately, that memory was a trick of the Mist, a magical lie implanted in her head by Hera. Piper and Jason were together *now*, in real life, but their relationship had been founded on an illusion. If Piper tried to get the *real* Jason to sneak out at night, would he do it?

She swept the hay into piles. Jason fixed a broken door on one of the stables. The glass floor hatch glowed from the ocean below—a green expanse of light and shadow that seemed to go down forever. Piper kept glancing over, afraid she'd see a monster's face peeping in, or the water cannibals from her grandfather's old stories; but all she saw was an occasional school of herring.

As she watched Jason work, she admired how easily he did each task, whether it was fixing a door or oiling saddles. It wasn't just his strong arms and his skillful hands, though Piper liked those just fine, but the way he acted so upbeat and confident. He did what needed to be done without complaint. He kept his sense of humor, despite the fact that the guy had to be dead on his feet after not having slept the night before. Piper couldn't blame Reyna for having a crush on him. When it came to work and duty, Jason was Roman to the core.

Piper thought about her mother's tea party in Charleston. She wondered what the goddess had told Reyna a year ago, and why it had changed the way Reyna treated Jason. Had Aphrodite encouraged or discouraged her to like Jason?

Piper wasn't sure, but she wished her mom hadn't appeared in Charleston. Regular mothers were embarrassing enough. Godly glamour moms who invited your friends over for tea and guy talk—that was just mortifying.

Aphrodite had paid so much attention to Annabeth and Hazel, it had made Piper uneasy. When her mom got interested in somebody's love life, usually that was a bad sign. It meant trouble was coming. Or as Aphrodite would say, *twists and turns*.

But also, Piper was secretly hurt not to have her mother to herself. Aphrodite had barely looked at her. She hadn't said a word about Jason. She hadn't bothered explaining her conversation with Reyna at all.

It was almost as if Aphrodite no longer found Piper interesting. Piper had gotten her guy. Now it was up to her to make things work, and Aphrodite had moved on to newer gossip as easily as she might toss out an old copy of a tabloid magazine.

All of you are such excellent stories, Aphrodite had said. *I mean, girls*.

Piper hadn't appreciated that, but part of her had thought: *Fine. I don't want to be a story. I want a nice steady life with a nice steady boyfriend.*

If only she knew more about making relationships work. She was supposed to be an expert, being the head counselor for Aphrodite cabin. Other campers at Camp Half-Blood came to her for advice all the time. Piper had tried to do her best, but with her own boyfriend, she was clueless. She was constantly second-guessing herself, reading too much into Jason's expressions, his moods, his

offhand comments. Why did it have to be so hard? Why couldn't there be a happily-ever-after ride-into-the-sunset feeling all the time?

"What are you thinking?" Jason asked.

Piper realized she'd been making a sour face. In the reflection of the glass bay doors, she looked like she'd swallowed a teaspoon of salt.

"Nothing," she said. "I mean...a lot of things. Kind of all at once."

Jason laughed. The scar on his lip almost disappeared when he smiled. Considering all the stuff he'd been through, it was amazing that he could be in such a good mood.

"It's going to work out," he promised. "You said so yourself."

"Yeah," Piper agreed. "Except I was just saying that to make Annabeth feel better."

Jason shrugged. "Still, it's true. We're almost to the ancient lands. We've left the Romans behind."

"And now they're on their way to Camp Half-Blood to attack our friends."

Jason hesitated, as if it was hard for him to put a positive spin on that. "Chiron will find a way to stall them. The Romans might take weeks to actually find the camp and plan their attack. Besides, Reyna will do what she can to slow things down. She's still on our side. I know she is."

"You trust her." Piper's voice sounded hollow, even to herself.

"Look, Pipes. I told you, you've got nothing to be jealous about."

"She's beautiful. She's powerful. She's so...Roman."

Jason put down his hammer. He took her hand, which sent a tingle up her arm. Piper's dad had once taken her to the Aquarium of the Pacific and shown her an electric eel. He told her that the eel sent out pulses that shocked and paralyzed its prey. Every time Jason looked at her or touched her hand, Piper felt like that.

"*You're* beautiful and powerful," he said. "And I don't want you to be Roman. I want you to be Piper. Besides, we're a team, you and me."

She wanted to believe him. They'd been together, really, for months now. Still, she couldn't get rid of her doubts, any more than Jason could get rid of the SPQR tattoo burned on his forearm.

Above them, the ship's bell rang for dinner.

Jason smirked. "We'd better get up there. We don't want Coach Hedge tying bells around our necks."

Piper shuddered. Coach Hedge had threatened to do that after the Percy/Annabeth scandal, so he'd know if anyone sneaked out at night.

"Yeah," she said regretfully, looking at the glass doors below their feet. "I guess we need dinner...and a good night's sleep."

PIPER

THE NEXT MORNING PIPER WOKE to a different ship's horn—a blast so loud it literally shook her out of bed.

She wondered if Leo was pulling another joke. Then the horn boomed again. It sounded like it was coming from several hundred yards away—from another vessel.

She rushed to get dressed. By the time she got up on deck, the others had already gathered—all hastily dressed except for Coach Hedge, who had pulled the night watch.

Frank's Vancouver Winter Olympics shirt was inside out. Percy wore pajama pants and a bronze breastplate, which was an interesting fashion statement. Hazel's hair was all blown to one side, as though she'd walked through a cyclone; and Leo had accidentally set himself on fire. His T-shirt was in charred tatters. His arms were smoking.

About a hundred yards to port, a massive cruise ship glided past. Tourists waved at them from fifteen or sixteen rows of balconies. Some smiled and took pictures. None of them looked surprised to see an Ancient Greek trireme. Maybe the Mist made it look like a fishing boat, or perhaps the cruisers thought the *Argo II* was a tourist attraction.

The cruise ship blew its horn again, and the *Argo II* had a shaking fit.

Coach Hedge plugged his ears. “Do they have to be so loud?”

“They’re just saying hi,” Frank speculated.

“WHAT?” Hedge yelled back.

The ship edged past them, heading out to sea. The tourists kept waving. If they found it strange that the *Argo II* was populated by half-asleep kids in armor and pajamas and a man with goat legs, they didn’t let on.

“Bye!” Leo called, raising his smoking hand.

“Can I man the ballistae?” Hedge asked.

“No,” Leo said through a forced smile.

Hazel rubbed her eyes and looked across the glittering green water. “Where are—oh...Wow.”

Piper followed her gaze and gasped. Without the cruise ship blocking their view, she saw a mountain jutting from the sea less than half a mile to the north. Piper had seen impressive cliffs before. She’d driven Highway 1 along the California coast. She’d even fallen down the Grand Canyon with Jason and flown back up. But neither was as amazing as this massive fist of blinding white rock thrust into the sky. On one side, the limestone cliffs were almost completely sheer, dropping into the sea over a thousand feet below, as near as Piper could figure. On the other side, the mountain sloped in tiers, covered in green forest, so that the whole thing reminded Piper of a colossal sphinx, worn down over the millennia, with a massive white head and chest, and a green cloak over its back.

“The Rock of Gibraltar,” Annabeth said in awe. “At the tip of Spain. And over there—” She pointed south, to a more distant stretch of red and ochre hills. “That must be Africa. We’re at the mouth of the Mediterranean.”

The morning was warm, but Piper shivered. Despite the wide stretch of sea in front of them, she felt like she was standing at an impassable barrier. Once in the Mediterranean—the *Mare Nostrum*—they would be in the ancient lands. If the legends were true, their quest would become ten times more dangerous.

“What now?” she asked. “Do we just sail in?”

“Why not?” Leo said. “It’s a big shipping channel. Boats go in and out all the time.”

Not triremes full of demigods, Piper thought.

Annabeth gazed at the Rock of Gibraltar. Piper recognized that brooding expression on her friend's face. It almost always meant that she anticipated trouble.

"In the old days," Annabeth said, "they called this area the pillars of Hercules. The Rock was supposed to be one pillar. The other was one of the African mountains. Nobody is sure which one."

"Hercules, huh?" Percy frowned. "That guy was like the Starbucks of Ancient Greece. Everywhere you turn—there he is."

A thunderous *boom* shook the *Argo II*, though Piper wasn't sure where it came from this time. She didn't see any other ships, and the skies were clear.

Her mouth suddenly felt dry. "So...these Pillars of Hercules. Are they dangerous?"

Annabeth stayed focused on the white cliffs, as if waiting for the Mark of Athena to blaze to life. "For Greeks, the pillars marked the end of the known world. The Romans said the pillars were inscribed with a Latin warning—"

"*Non plus ultra*," Percy said.

Annabeth looked stunned. "Yeah. *Nothing Further Beyond*. How did you know?"

Percy pointed. "Because I'm looking at it."

Directly ahead of them, in the middle of the straits, an island had shimmered into existence. Piper was positive no island had been there before. It was a small hilly mass of land, covered in forests and ringed with white beaches. Not very impressive compared to Gibraltar, but in front of the island, jutting from waves about a hundred yards offshore, were two white Grecian columns as tall as the *Argo's* masts. Between the columns, huge silver words glittered underwater—maybe an illusion, or maybe inlaid in the sand: *NON PLUS ULTRA*.

"Guys, do I turn around?" Leo asked nervously. "Or..."

No one answered—maybe because, like Piper, they had noticed the figure standing on the beach. As the ship approached the columns, she saw a dark-haired man in purple robes, his arms crossed, staring intently at their ship as if he were expecting them. Piper couldn't tell much else about him from this distance,

but judging from his posture, he wasn't happy.

Frank inhaled sharply. "Could that be—?"

"Hercules," Jason said. "The most powerful demigod of all time."

The *Argo II* was only a few hundred yards from the columns now.

"Need an answer," Leo said urgently. "I can turn, or we can take off. The stabilizers are working again. But I need to know quick—"

"We have to keep going," Annabeth said. "I think he's guarding these straits. If that's really Hercules, sailing or flying away wouldn't do any good. He'll want to talk to us."

Piper resisted the urge to use charmspeak. She wanted to yell at Leo: *Fly! Get us out of here!* Unfortunately, she had a feeling that Annabeth was right. If they wanted to pass into the Mediterranean, they couldn't avoid this meeting.

"Won't Hercules be on our side?" she asked hopefully. "I mean...he's one of us, right?"

Jason grunted. "He was a son of Zeus, but when he died, he became a god. You can never be sure with gods."

Piper remembered their meeting with Bacchus in Kansas—another god who used to be a demigod. He hadn't been exactly helpful.

"Great," Percy said. "Seven of us against Hercules."

"And a satyr!" Hedge added. "We can take him."

"I've got a better idea," Annabeth said. "We send ambassadors ashore. A small group—one or two at most. Try to talk with him."

"I'll go," Jason said. "He's a son of Zeus. I'm the son of Jupiter. Maybe he'll be friendly to me."

"Or maybe he'll hate you," Percy suggested. "Half brothers don't always get along."

Jason scowled. "Thank you, Mr. Optimism."

"It's worth a shot," Annabeth said. "At least Jason and Hercules have something in common. And we need our best diplomat. Somebody who's good with words."

All eyes turned to Piper.

She tried to avoid screaming and jumping over the side. A bad premonition

gnawed at her gut. But if Jason was going ashore, she wanted to be with him. Maybe this hugely powerful god would turn out to be helpful. They had to have good luck once in a while, didn't they?

"Fine," she said. "Just let me change my clothes."

Once Leo had anchored the *Argo II* between the pillars, Jason summoned the wind to carry him and Piper ashore.

The man in purple was waiting for them.

Piper had heard tons of stories about Hercules. She'd seen several cheesy movies and cartoons. Before today, if she had thought about him at all, she'd just roll her eyes and imagine some stupid hairy dude in his thirties with a barrel chest and a gross hippie beard, with a lion skin over his head and a big club, like a caveman. She imagined he would smell bad, belch, and scratch himself a lot, and speak mostly in grunts.

She was not expecting *this*.

His feet were bare, covered in white sand. His robes made him look like a priest, though Piper couldn't remember which rank of priest wore purple. Was that cardinals? Bishops? And did the purple color mean he was the Roman version of Hercules rather than the Greek? His beard was fashionably scruffy, like Piper's dad and his actor friends wore theirs—the sort of *I just happened not to shave for two days and I still look awesome* look.

He was well built, but not too stocky. His ebony hair was close-cropped, Roman style. He had startling blue eyes like Jason's, but his skin was coppery, as if he'd spent his entire life on a tanning bed. The most surprising thing: he looked about twenty. Definitely no older. He was handsome in a rugged but not-at-all-caveman way.

He did in fact have a club, which lay in the sand next to him, but it was more like an oversized baseball bat—a five-foot-long polished cylinder of mahogany with a leather handgrip studded in bronze. Coach Hedge would have been jealous.

Jason and Piper landed at the edge of the surf. They approached slowly, careful not to make any threatening moves. Hercules watched them with no

particular emotion, as if they were some form of seabird he had never noticed before.

“Hello,” Piper said. Always a good start.

“What’s up?” Hercules said. His voice was deep but casual, very modern. He could’ve been greeting them in the high school locker room.

“Uh, not much.” Piper winced. “Well, actually, a lot. I’m Piper. This is Jason. We—”

“Where’s your lion skin?” Jason interrupted.

Piper wanted to elbow him, but Hercules looked more amused than annoyed.

“It’s ninety degrees out here,” he said. “Why would I wear my lion skin? Do you wear a fur coat to the beach?”

“I guess that makes sense.” Jason sounded disappointed. “It’s just that the pictures always show you with a lion skin.”

Hercules glared at the sky accusingly, like he wanted to have words with his father, Zeus. “Don’t believe everything you hear about me. Being famous isn’t as fun as you might think.”

“Tell me about it,” Piper sighed.

Hercules fixed those brilliant blue eyes on her. “Are you famous?”

“My dad...he’s in the movies.”

Hercules snarled. “Don’t get me started with the movies. Gods of Olympus, they never get *anything* right. Have you seen one movie about me where I look like me?”

Piper had to admit he had a point. “I’m surprised you’re so young.”

“Ha! Being immortal helps. But, yes, I wasn’t so old when I died. Not by modern standards. I did a lot during my years as a hero...too much, really.” His eyes drifted to Jason. “Son of Zeus, eh?”

“Jupiter,” Jason said.

“Not much difference,” Hercules grumbled. “Dad’s annoying in either form. Me? I was called Heracles. Then the Romans came along and named me Hercules. I didn’t really change that much, though lately just thinking about it gives me splitting headaches...”

The left side of his face twitched. His robes shimmered, momentarily turning

white, then back to purple.

“At any rate,” Hercules said, “if you’re Jupiter’s son, you might understand. It’s a lot of pressure. Enough is never enough. Eventually it can make a guy snap.”

He turned to Piper. She felt like a thousand ants were crawling up her back. There was a mixture of sadness and darkness in his eyes that seemed not quite sane, and definitely not safe.

“As for you, my dear,” Hercules said, “be careful. Sons of Zeus can be... well, never mind.”

Piper wasn’t sure what that meant. Suddenly she wanted to get as far from this god as possible, but she tried to maintain a calm, polite expression.

“So, Lord Hercules,” she said, “we’re on a quest. We’d like permission to pass into the Mediterranean.”

Hercules shrugged. “That’s why I’m here. After I died, Dad made me the doorkeeper of Olympus. I said, *Great! Palace duty! Party all the time!* What he didn’t mention is that I’d be guarding the doors to the ancient lands, stuck on this island for the rest of eternity. Lots of fun.”

He pointed at the pillars rising from the surf. “Stupid columns. Some people claim I created the whole Strait of Gibraltar by shoving mountains apart. Some people say the mountains *are* the pillars. What a bunch of Augean manure. The pillars are *pillars*.”

“Right,” Piper said. “Naturally. So...can we pass?”

The god scratched his fashionable beard. “Well, I have to give you the standard warning about how dangerous the ancient lands are. Not just any demigod can survive the Mare Nostrum. Because of that, I have to give you a quest to complete. Prove your worth, blah, blah, blah. Honestly, I don’t make a big deal of it. Usually I give demigods something simple like a shopping trip, singing a funny song, that sort of thing. After all those labors I had to complete for my evil cousin Eurystheus, well...I don’t want to be *that guy*, you know?”

“Appreciate it,” Jason said.

“Hey, no problem.” Hercules sounded relaxed and easygoing, but he still made Piper nervous. That dark glint in his eyes reminded her of charcoal soaked

in kerosene, ready to go up at a moment's notice.

"So anyway," Hercules said, "what's your quest?"

"Giants," Jason said. "We're off to Greece to stop them from awakening Gaea."

"Giants," Hercules muttered. "I hate those guys. Back when I was a demigod hero...ah, but never mind. So which god put you up to this—Dad? Athena? Maybe Aphrodite?" He raised an eyebrow at Piper. "As pretty as you are, I'm guessing that's your mom."

Piper should've been thinking faster, but Hercules had unsettled her. Too late, she realized the conversation had become a minefield.

"Hera sent us," Jason said. "She brought us together to—"

"Hera." Suddenly Hercules's expression was like the cliffs of Gibraltar—a solid, unforgiving sheet of stone.

"We hate her too," Piper said quickly. Gods, why hadn't it occurred to her? Hera had been Hercules's mortal enemy. "We didn't want to help her. She didn't give us much choice, but—"

"But here you are," Hercules said, all friendliness gone. "Sorry, you two. I don't care how worthy your quest is. I don't do *anything* that Hera wants. Ever."

Jason looked mystified. "But I thought you made up with her when you became a god."

"Like I said," Hercules grumbled, "don't believe everything you hear. If you want to pass into the Mediterranean, I'm afraid I've got to give you an extra-hard quest."

"But we're like brothers," Jason protested. "Hera's messed with my life, too. I understand—"

"You understand nothing," Hercules said coldly. "My first family: dead. My life wasted on ridiculous quests. My second wife dead, after being tricked into poisoning me and leaving me to a painful demise. And my compensation? I got to become a *minor* god. Immortal, so I can never forget my pain. Stuck here as a gatekeeper, a doorman, a...a butler for the Olympians. No, you don't understand. The only god who understands me even a little bit is Dionysus. And at least *he* invented something useful. I have nothing to show except bad film

adaptations of my life.”

Piper turned on the charmspeak. “That’s horribly sad, Lord Hercules. But please go easy on us. We’re not bad people.”

She thought she’d succeeded. Hercules hesitated. Then his jaw tightened, and he shook his head. “On the opposite side of this island, over those hills, you’ll find a river. In the middle of that river lives the old god Achelous.”

Hercules waited, as if this information should send them running in terror.

“And... ?” Jason asked.

“*And*,” Hercules said, “I want you to break off his other horn and bring it to me.”

“He has horns,” Jason said. “Wait...his *other* horn? What—?”

“Figure it out,” the god snapped. “Here, this should help.”

He said the word *help* like it meant *hurt*. From under his robes, Hercules took a small book and tossed it to Piper. She barely caught it.

The book’s glossy cover showed a photographic montage of Greek temples and smiling monsters. The Minotaur was giving the thumbs-up. The title read: *The Hercules Guide to the Mare Nostrum*.

“Bring me that horn by sundown,” Hercules said. “Just the two of you. No contacting your friends. Your ship will remain where it is. If you succeed, you may pass into the Mediterranean.”

“And if we don’t?” Piper asked, pretty sure she didn’t want the answer.

“Well, Achelous will kill you, obviously,” Hercules said. “And I will break your ship in half with my bare hands and send your friends to an early grave.”

Jason shifted his feet. “Couldn’t we just sing a funny song?”

“I’d get going,” Hercules said coldly. “Sundown. Or your friends are dead.”

PIPER

THE HERCULES GUIDE TO THE MARE NOSTRUM didn't help much with snakes and mosquitoes.

"If this is a magic island," Piper grumbled, "why couldn't it be a *nice* magic island?"

They tromped up a hill and down into a heavily wooded valley, careful to avoid the black-and-red-striped snakes sunning themselves on the rocks. Mosquitoes swarmed over stagnant ponds in the lowest areas. The trees were mostly stunted olives, cypress, and pines. The chirring of the cicadas and the oppressive heat reminded Piper of the rez in Oklahoma during the summer.

So far they hadn't found any river.

"We could fly," Jason suggested again.

"We might miss something," Piper said. "Besides, I'm not sure I want to drop in on an unfriendly god. What was his name? Etch-a-Sketch?"

"Achelous." Jason was trying to read the guidebook while they walked, so he kept running into trees and stumbling over rocks. "Says here he's a *potamus*."

"He's a hippopotamus?"

"No. *Potamus*. A river god. According to this, he's the spirit of some river in Greece."

“Since we’re not in Greece, let’s assume he’s moved,” Piper said. “Doesn’t bode well for how useful that book is going to be. Anything else?”

“Says Hercules fought him one time,” Jason offered.

“Hercules fought ninety-nine percent of everything in Ancient Greece.”

“Yeah. Let’s see. Pillars of Hercules...” Jason flipped a page. “Says here this island has no hotels, no restaurants, no transportation. Attractions: Hercules and two pillars. Huh, this is interesting. Supposedly the dollar sign—you know, the S with the two lines through it?—that came from the Spanish coat of arms, which showed the Pillars of Hercules with a banner curling between them.”

Great, Piper thought. Jason finally gets along with Annabeth, and her brainiac tendencies start rubbing off on him.

“Anything helpful?” she asked.

“Wait. Here’s a tiny reference to Achelous: *This river god fought Hercules for the hand of the beautiful Deianira. During the struggle, Hercules broke off one of the river god’s horns, which became the first cornucopia.*”

“Corn of what?”

“It’s that Thanksgiving decoration,” Jason said. “The horn with all the goodies spilling out? We have some in the mess hall at Camp Jupiter. I didn’t know the original one was actually some guy’s horn.”

“And we’re supposed to take his other one,” Piper said. “I’m guessing that won’t be so easy. Who was Deianira?”

“Hercules married her,” Jason said. “I think...doesn’t say here. But I think something bad happened to her.”

Piper remembered what Hercules had told them: his first family dead, his second wife dead after being tricked into poisoning him. She was liking this challenge less and less.

They trudged across a ridge between two hills, trying to stay in the shade; but Piper was already soaked with perspiration. The mosquitoes left welts on her ankles, arms, and neck, so she probably looked like a smallpox victim.

She’d finally gotten some alone time with Jason, and *this* was how they spent it.

She was irritated with Jason for having mentioned Hera, but she knew she

shouldn't blame him. Maybe she was just irritated with him in general. Ever since Camp Jupiter, she'd been carrying around a lot of worry and resentment.

She wondered what Hercules had wanted to tell her about the sons of Zeus. They couldn't be trusted? They were under too much pressure? Piper tried to imagine Jason becoming a god when he died, standing on some beach guarding the gates to an ocean long after Piper and everyone else he knew in his mortal life were dead.

She wondered if Hercules had ever been as positive as Jason—more upbeat, confident, quick to comfort. It was hard to picture.

As they hiked down into the next valley, Piper wondered what was happening back on the *Argo II*. She was tempted to send an Iris-message, but Hercules had warned them not to contact their friends. She hoped Annabeth could guess what was going on and didn't try to send another party ashore. Piper wasn't sure what Hercules would do if he were bothered further. She imagined Coach Hedge getting impatient and aiming a ballista at the man in purple, or eidolons possessing the crew and forcing them to commit suicide-by-Hercules.

Piper shuddered. She didn't know what time it was, but the sun was already starting to sink. How had the day passed so quickly? She would have welcomed sundown for the cooler temperatures, except it was also their deadline. A cool night breeze wouldn't mean much if they were dead. Besides, tomorrow was July 1, the Kalends of July. If their information was correct, it would be Nico di Angelo's last day of life, and the day Rome was destroyed.

"Stop," Jason said.

Piper wasn't sure what was wrong. Then she realized she could hear running water up ahead. They crept through the trees and found themselves on the bank of a river. It was maybe forty feet wide but only a few inches deep, a silver sheet of water racing over a smooth bed of stones. A few yards downstream, the rapids plunged into a dark blue swimming hole.

Something about the river bothered her. The cicadas in the trees had gone quiet. No birds were chirping. It was as if the water was giving a lecture and would only allow its own voice.

But the more Piper listened, the more inviting the river seemed. She wanted

to take a drink. Maybe she should take off her shoes. Her feet could really use a soak. And that swimming hole...it would be so nice to jump in with Jason and relax in the shade of the trees, floating in the nice cool water. So romantic.

Piper shook herself. These thoughts weren't hers. Something was wrong. It almost felt like the river was charmspeaking.

Jason sat on a rock and started taking off his shoes. He grinned at the swimming hole like he couldn't wait to get in.

"Cut it out!" Piper yelled at the river.

Jason looked startled. "Cut what out?"

"Not you," Piper said. "Him."

She felt silly pointing at the water, but she was certain it was working some sort of magic, swaying their feelings.

Just when she thought she had lost it and Jason would tell her so, the river spoke: *Forgive me. Singing is one of the few pleasures I have left.*

A figure emerged from the swimming hole as if rising on an elevator.

Piper's shoulders tensed. It was the creature she'd seen in her knife blade, the bull with the human face. His skin was as blue as the water. His hooves levitated on the river's surface. At the top of his bovine neck was the head of a man with short curly black hair, a beard done in ringlets Ancient Greek style, deep, mournful eyes behind bifocal glasses, and a mouth that seemed set in a permanent pout. Sprouting from the left side of his head was a single bull's horn—a curved black-and-white one like warriors might turn into drinking cups. The imbalance made his head tilt to the left, so that he looked like he was trying to get water out of his ear.

"Hello," he said sadly. "Come to kill me, I suppose."

Jason put his shoes back on and stood slowly. "Um, well—"

"No!" Piper intervened. "I'm sorry. This is embarrassing. We didn't want to bother you, but Hercules sent us."

"Hercules!" The bull-man sighed. His hooves pawed the water as if ready to charge. "To me, he'll always be Heracles. That's his Greek name, you know: *the glory of Hera.*"

"Funny name," Jason said. "Since he hates her."

“Indeed,” the bull-man said. “Perhaps that’s why he didn’t protest when the Romans renamed him Hercules. Of course, that’s the name most people know him by...his *brand*, if you will. Hercules is nothing if not image-conscious.”

The bull-man spoke with bitterness but familiarity, as if Hercules was an old friend who had lost his way.

“You’re Achelous?” Piper asked.

The bull-man bent his front legs and lowered his head in a bow, which Piper found both sweet and a little sad. “At your service. River god extraordinaire. Once the spirit of the mightiest river in Greece. Now sentenced to dwell here, on the opposite side of the island from my old enemy. Oh, the gods are cruel! But whether they put us so close together to punish me or Hercules, I have never been sure.”

Piper wasn’t sure what he meant, but the background noise of the river was invading her mind again—reminding her how hot and thirsty she felt, how pleasant a nice swim would be. She tried to focus.

“I’m Piper,” she said. “This is Jason. We don’t want to fight. It’s just that Heracles—Hercules—whoever he is, got mad at us and sent us here.”

She explained about their quest to the ancient lands to stop the giants from waking Gaea. She described how their team of Greeks and Romans had come together, and how Hercules had thrown a temper tantrum when he found out Hera was behind it.

Achelous kept tipping his head to the left, so Piper wasn’t sure if he was dozing off or dealing with one-horn fatigue.

When she was done, Achelous regarded her as if she were developing a regrettable skin rash. “Ah, my dear...the legends are true, you know. The spirits, the water cannibals.”

Piper had to fight back a whimper. She hadn’t told Achelous *anything* about that. “H-how—?”

“River gods know many things,” he said. “Alas, you are focusing on the wrong story. If you had made it to Rome, the story of the flood would have served you better.”

“Piper?” Jason asked. “What’s he talking about?”

Her thoughts were suddenly as jumbled as kaleidoscope glass. *The story of the flood...If you had made it to Rome.*

“I—I’m not sure,” she said, though the mention of a flood story rang a distant bell. “Achelous, I don’t understand—”

“No, you don’t,” the river god sympathized. “Poor thing. Another girl stuck with a son of Zeus.”

“Wait a minute,” Jason said. “It’s Jupiter, actually. And how does that make her a *poor thing*?”

Achelous ignored him. “My girl, do you know the cause of my fight with Hercules?”

“It was over a woman,” Piper recalled. “Deianira?”

“Yes.” Achelous heaved a sigh. “And do you know what happened to her?”

“Uh...” Piper glanced at Jason.

He took out his guidebook and began flipping through pages. “It doesn’t really—”

Achelous snorted indignantly. “What is *that*?”

Jason blinked. “Just...*The Hercules Guide to Mare Nostrum*. He gave us the guidebook so—”

“That is *not* a book,” Achelous insisted. “He gave you that just to get under my skin, didn’t he? He knows I hate those things.”

“You hate...books?” Piper asked.

“Bah!” Achelous’s face flushed, turning his blue skin eggplant purple. “That’s *not* a book.”

He pawed the water. A scroll shot from the river like a miniature rocket and landed in front of him. He nudged it open with his hooves. The weathered yellow parchment unfurled, covered with faded Latin script and elaborate hand-drawn pictures.

“*This* is a book!” Achelous said. “Oh, the smell of sheepskin! The elegant feel of the scroll unrolling beneath my hooves. You simply can’t duplicate it in something like *that*.”

He nodded indignantly at the guidebook in Jason’s hand. “You young folks today and your newfangled gadgets. Bound pages. Little compact squares of text

that are not hoof-friendly. That's a *bound* book, a b-book, if you must. But it's not a traditional book. It'll never replace the good old-fashioned scroll!"

"Um, I'll just put this away now." Jason slipped the guidebook in his back pocket the way he might holster a dangerous weapon.

Achelous seemed to calm down a little, which was a relief to Piper. She didn't need to get run over by a one-horned bull with a scroll obsession.

"Now," Achelous said, tapping a picture on his scroll. "This is Deianira."

Piper knelt down to look. The hand-painted portrait was small, but she could tell the woman had been very beautiful, with long dark hair, dark eyes, and a playful smile that probably drove guys crazy.

"Princess of Calydon," the river god said mournfully. "She was promised to me, until Hercules butted in. He insisted on combat."

"And he broke off your horn?" Jason guessed.

"Yes," Achelous said. "I could never forgive him for that. Horribly uncomfortable, having only one horn. But the situation was worse for poor Deianira. She could have had a long, happy life married to me."

"A man-headed bull," Piper said, "who lives in a river."

"Exactly," Achelous agreed. "It seems impossible she would refuse, eh? Instead, she went off with Hercules. She picked the handsome, flashy hero over the good, faithful husband who would have treated her well. What happened next? Well, she should have known. Hercules was much too wrapped up in his own problems to be a good husband. He had already murdered one wife, you know. Hera cursed him, so he flew into a rage and killed his entire family. Horrible business. That's why he had to do those twelve labors as penance."

Piper felt appalled. "Wait...Hera *made* him crazy, and *Hercules* had to do the penance?"

Achelous shrugged. "The Olympians never seem to pay for their crimes. And Hera has always hated the sons of Zeus...or Jupiter." He glanced distrustfully at Jason. "At any rate, my poor Deianira had a tragic end. She became jealous of Hercules's many affairs. He gallivanted all over the world, you see, just like his father Zeus, flirting with every woman he met. Finally Deianira got so desperate she listened to bad advice. A crafty centaur named Nessus told her that if she

wanted Hercules to be faithful forever, she should spread some centaur blood on the inside of Hercules's favorite shirt. Unfortunately Nessus was lying because he wanted revenge on Hercules. Deianira followed his instructions, but instead of making Hercules a faithful husband—"

"Centaur blood is like acid," Jason said.

"Yes," Achelous said. "Hercules died a painful death. When Deianira realized what she'd done, she..." The river god drew a line across his neck.

"That's awful," Piper said.

"And the moral, my dear?" Achelous said. "Beware the sons of Zeus."

Piper couldn't look at her boyfriend. She wasn't sure she could mask the uneasiness in her eyes. Jason would never be like Hercules. But the story played into all her fears. Hera had manipulated their relationship, just as she had manipulated Hercules. Piper wanted to believe that Jason could never go into a murderous frenzy like Hercules had. Then again, only four days ago he had been controlled by an eidolon and almost killed Percy Jackson.

"Hercules is a god now," Achelous said. "He married Hebe, the youth goddess, but still he is rarely at home. He dwells here on this island, guarding those silly pillars. He says Zeus *makes* him do this, but I think he prefers being here to Mount Olympus, nursing his bitterness and mourning his mortal life. My presence reminds him of his failures—especially the woman who finally killed him. And *his* presence reminds me of poor Deianira, who could have been my wife."

The bull-man tapped the scroll, which rolled itself up and sank into the water.

"Hercules wants my other horn in order to humiliate me," Achelous said. "Perhaps it would make him feel better about himself, knowing that I'm miserable too. Besides, the horn would become a cornucopia. Good food and drink would flow from it, just as my power causes the river to flow. No doubt Hercules would keep the cornucopia for himself. It would be a tragedy and a waste."

Piper suspected the noise of the river and the drowsy sound of Achelous's voice were still affecting her thoughts, but she couldn't help agreeing with the river god. She was starting to hate Hercules. This poor bull-man seemed so sad

and lonely.

Jason stirred. "I'm sorry, Achelous. Honestly, you've gotten a bum deal. But maybe...well, without the other horn, you might not be so lopsided. It might feel better."

"Jason!" Piper protested.

Jason held up his hands. "Just a thought. Besides, I don't see that we have many choices. If Hercules doesn't get that horn, he'll kill us and our friends."

"He's right," Achelous said. "You have no choice. Which is why I hope you'll forgive me."

Piper frowned. The river god sounded so heartbroken, she wanted to pat his head. "Forgive you for what?"

"I have no choice either," Achelous said. "I have to stop you."

The river exploded, and a wall of water crashed over Piper.

XXVIII

PIPER

THE CURRENT GRABBED HER LIKE A FIST and pulled her into the deep. Struggling was useless. She clamped her mouth shut, forcing herself not to inhale, but she could barely keep from panicking. She couldn't see anything but a torrent of bubbles. She could only hear her own thrashing and the dull roar of the rapids.

She'd just about decided this was how she would die: drowning in a swimming hole on an island that didn't exist. Then, as suddenly as she'd been pulled under, she was thrust to the surface. She found herself at the center of a whirlpool, able to breathe but unable to break free.

A few yards away, Jason broke the surface and gasped, his sword in one hand. He swung wildly, but there was nothing to attack.

Twenty feet to Piper's right, Achelous rose from the water. "I'm really sorry about this," he said.

Jason lunged toward him, summoning the winds to lift him out of the river, but Achelous was quicker and more powerful. A curl of water slammed into Jason and sent him under once more.

"Stop it!" Piper screamed.

Using charmspeak wasn't easy when she was floundering in a whirlpool, but she got Achelous's attention.

“I’m afraid I can’t stop,” said the river god. “I can’t let Hercules have my other horn. It would be mortifying.”

“There’s another way!” Piper said. “You don’t have to kill us!”

Jason clawed his way to the surface again. A miniature storm cloud formed over his head. Thunder boomed.

“None of that, son of Jupiter,” Achelous chided. “If you call lightning, you’ll just electrocute your girlfriend.”

The water pulled Jason under again.

“Let him go!” Piper charged her voice with all the persuasiveness she could muster. “I promise I won’t let Hercules get the horn!”

Achelous hesitated. He cantered over to her, his head tilting to the left. “I believe you mean that.”

“I do!” Piper promised. “Hercules is despicable. But, please, first let my friend go.”

The water churned where Jason had gone under. Piper wanted to scream. How much longer could he hold his breath?

Achelous looked down at her through his bifocals. His expression softened. “I see. You would be my Deianira. You would be my bride to compensate for my loss.”

“What?” Piper wasn’t sure if she’d heard him right. The whirlpool was literally making her head spin. “Uh, actually I was thinking—”

“Oh, I understand,” Achelous said. “You were too modest to suggest this in front of your boyfriend. You are right, of course. I would treat you much better than a son of Zeus would. I could make things right after all these centuries. I could not save Deianira, but I could save you.”

Had it been thirty seconds now? A minute? Jason couldn’t hold out much longer.

“You would have to let your friends die,” Achelous continued. “Hercules would be angry, but I can protect you from him. We could be quite happy together. Let’s start by letting that Jason fellow drown, eh?”

Piper could barely hold it together, but she *had* to concentrate. She masked her fear and her anger. She was a child of Aphrodite. She had to use the tools she

was given.

She smiled as sweetly as she could and raised her arms. “Lift me up, please.”

Achelous’s face brightened. He grabbed Piper’s hands and pulled her out of the whirlpool.

She’d never ridden a bull before, but she’d practiced bareback pegasus riding at Camp Half-Blood, and she remembered what to do. She used her momentum, swinging one leg over Achelous’s back. Then she locked her ankles around his neck, wrapped one arm around his throat, and drew her knife with the other. She pressed the blade under the river god’s chin.

“Let—Jason—go.” She put all her force into the command. “Now!”

Piper realized there were many flaws in her plan. The river god might simply dissolve into water. Or he could pull her under and wait for her to drown. But apparently her charmspeak worked. Or maybe Achelous was just too surprised to think straight. He probably wasn’t used to pretty girls threatening to cut his throat.

Jason shot out of the water like a human cannonball. He broke through the branches of an olive tree and tumbled onto the grass. That couldn’t have felt good, but he struggled to his feet, gasping and coughing. He raised his sword, and the dark clouds thickened over the river.

Piper shot him a warning look: *Not yet*. She still had to get out of this river without drowning or getting electrocuted.

Achelous arched his back as if contemplating a trick. Piper pressed the knife harder against his throat.

“Be a good bull,” she warned.

“You promised,” Achelous said through gritted teeth. “You promised Hercules wouldn’t get my horn.”

“And he won’t,” Piper said. “But I will.”

She raised her knife and slashed off the god’s horn. The Celestial bronze cut through the base like it was wet clay. Achelous bellowed in rage. Before he could recover, Piper stood up on his back. With the horn in one hand and her dagger in the other, she leaped for the shore.

“Jason!” she yelled.

Thank the gods, he understood. A gust of wind caught her and carried her safely over the bank. Piper hit the ground rolling as the hairs on her neck stood up. A metallic smell filled the air. She turned toward the river in time to be blinded.

BOOM! Lightning stirred the water into a boiling cauldron, steaming and hissing with electricity. Piper blinked the yellow spots out of her eyes as the god Achelous wailed and dissolved beneath the surface. His horrified expression seemed to be asking: *How could you?*

“Jason, run!” She was still dizzy and sick with fear, but she and Jason crashed through the woods.

As she climbed the hill, claspng the bull’s horn to her chest, Piper realized she was sobbing—though she wasn’t sure if it was from fear, or relief, or shame for what she’d done to the old river god.

They didn’t slow down until they reached the crest of the hill.

Piper felt silly, but she kept breaking down and crying as she told Jason what had happened while he was struggling underwater.

“Piper, you had no choice.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “You saved my life.”

She wiped her eyes and tried to control herself. The sun was nearing the horizon. They had to get back to Hercules quickly, or their friends would die.

“Achelous forced your hand,” Jason continued. “Besides, I doubt that lightning bolt killed him. He’s an ancient god. You’d have to destroy his river to destroy him. And he can live without a horn. If you had to lie about not giving it to Hercules, well—”

“I wasn’t lying.”

Jason stared at her. “Piper...we don’t have a choice. Hercules will kill—”

“Hercules doesn’t deserve this.” Piper wasn’t sure where this rage was coming from, but she had never felt more certain of anything in her life.

Hercules was a bitter, selfish jerk. He’d hurt too many people, and he wanted to keep on hurting them. Maybe he’d had some bad breaks. Maybe the gods had kicked him around. But that didn’t excuse it. A hero couldn’t control the gods,

but he should be able to control himself.

Jason would never be like that. He would never blame others for his problems or make a grudge more important than doing the right thing.

Piper was not going to repeat Deianira's story. She wasn't going to go along with what Hercules wanted just because he was handsome and strong and scary. He couldn't get his way this time—not after threatening their lives and sending them to make Achelous miserable for the sake of spiting Hera. Hercules didn't deserve a horn of plenty. Piper was going to put him in his place.

"I have a plan," she said.

She told Jason what to do. She didn't even realize she was using charmspeak until his eyes glazed over.

"Whatever you say," he promised. Then he blinked a few times. "We're going to die, but I'm in."

Hercules was waiting right where they'd left him. He was staring at the *Argo II*, docked between the pillars as the sun set behind it. The ship looked okay, but Piper's plan had started to feel insane to her.

Too late to reconsider. She'd already sent an Iris-message to Leo. Jason was prepared. And, seeing Hercules again, she felt more certain than ever she couldn't give him what he wanted.

Hercules didn't exactly brighten when he saw Piper carrying the bull's horn, but his scowl lines lessened.

"Good," he said. "You got it. In that case, you are free to go."

Piper glanced at Jason. "You heard him. He gave us permission." She turned back to the god. "That means our ship will be able to pass into the Mediterranean?"

"Yes, yes." Hercules snapped his fingers. "Now, the horn."

"No," Piper said.

The god frowned. "Excuse me?"

She raised the cornucopia. Since she'd cut it from Achelous's head, the horn had hollowed out, becoming smooth and dark on the inside. It didn't appear magical, but Piper was counting on its power.

“Achelous was right,” she said. “You’re *his* curse as much as he is yours. You’re a sorry excuse for a hero.”

Hercules stared at her as if she were speaking in Japanese. “You realize I could kill you with a flick of my finger,” he said. “I could throw my club at your ship and cut straight through its hull. I could—”

“You could shut up,” Jason said. He drew his sword. “Maybe Zeus is different from Jupiter. Because I wouldn’t put up with any brother who acts like you.”

The veins on Hercules’s neck turned as purple as his robes. “You would not be the first demigod I’ve killed.”

“Jason is better than you,” Piper said. “But don’t worry. We’re not going to fight you. We’re going to leave this island with the horn. You don’t deserve it as a prize. I’m going to keep it, to remind me of what *not* to be like as a demigod, and to remind me of poor Achelous and Deianira.”

The god’s nostrils flared. “Do *not* mention that name! You can’t seriously think I’m worried about your puny boyfriend. No one is stronger than me.”

“I didn’t say stronger,” Piper corrected. “I said he’s *better*.”

Piper pointed the mouth of the horn at Hercules. She let go of the resentment and doubt and anger she’d been harboring since Camp Jupiter. She concentrated on all the good things she’d shared with Jason Grace: soaring upward in the Grand Canyon, walking on the beach at Camp Half-Blood, holding hands at the sing-along and watching the stars, sitting by the strawberry fields together on lazy afternoons and listening to the satyrs play their pipes.

She thought about a future when the giants had been defeated, Gaea was asleep, and they would live happily together—no jealousy, no monsters left to battle. She filled her heart with those thoughts, and she felt the cornucopia grow warm.

The horn blasted forth a flood of food as powerful as Achelous’s river. A torrent of fresh fruit, baked goods, and smoked hams completely buried Hercules. Piper didn’t understand how all that stuff could fit through the entrance of the horn, but she thought the hams were especially appropriate.

When it had spewed out enough goodies to fill a house, the horn shut itself

off. Piper heard Hercules shrieking and struggling somewhere underneath. Apparently even the strongest god in the world could be caught off guard when buried under fresh produce.

“Go!” she told Jason, who’d forgotten his part of the plan and was staring in amazement at the fruit pile. “Go!”

He grabbed Piper’s waist and summoned the wind. They shot away from the island so quickly, Piper almost got whiplash; but it wasn’t a second too soon.

As the island retreated from view, Hercules’s head broke above the mound of goodies. Half a coconut was stuck on his noggin like a war helmet. “Kill!” he bellowed, like he’d had a lot of practice saying it.

Jason touched down on the deck of the *Argo II*. Thankfully, Leo had done his part. The ship’s oars were already in aerial mode. The anchor was up. Jason summoned a gale so strong, it pushed them into the sky, while Percy sent a ten-foot-tall wave against the shore, knocking Hercules down a second time, in a cascade of seawater and pineapples.

By the time the god regained his feet and started lobbing coconuts at them from far below, the *Argo II* was already sailing through the clouds above the Mediterranean.

PERCY

PERCY WAS NOT FEELING THE LOVE.

Bad enough he'd been run out of Atlanta by evil sea gods. Then he had failed to stop a giant shrimp attack on the *Argo II*. Then the ichthyocentaurs, Chiron's brothers, hadn't even wanted to meet him.

After all that, they had arrived at the Pillars of Hercules, and Percy had to stay aboard ship while Jason the Big Shot visited his half brother. Hercules, the most famous demigod of all time, and Percy didn't get to meet him either.

Okay, sure, from what Piper said afterward, Hercules was a jerk, but still... Percy was getting kind of tired of staying aboard ship and pacing the deck.

The open sea was supposed to be *his* territory. Percy was supposed to step up, take charge, and keep everybody safe. Instead, all the way across the Atlantic, he'd done pretty much nothing except make small talk with sharks and listen to Coach Hedge sing TV theme songs.

To make matters worse, Annabeth had been distant ever since they had left Charleston. She spent most of her time in her cabin, studying the bronze map she'd retrieved from Fort Sumter, or looking up information on Daedalus's laptop.

Whenever Percy stopped by to see her, she was so lost in thought that the

conversation went something like this:

Percy: “Hey, how’s it going?”

Annabeth: “Uh, no thanks.”

Percy: “Okay...have you eaten anything today?”

Annabeth: “I think Leo is on duty. Ask him.”

Percy: “So, my hair is on fire.”

Annabeth: “Okay. In a while.”

She got like this sometimes. It was one of the challenges of dating an Athena girl. Still, Percy wondered what he had to do to get her attention. He was worried about her after her encounter with the spiders at Fort Sumter, and he didn’t know how to help her, especially if she shut him out.

After leaving the Pillars of Hercules—unscathed except for a few coconuts lodged in the hull’s bronze plating—the ship traveled by air for a few hundred miles.

Percy hoped the ancient lands wouldn’t be as bad as they’d heard. But it was almost like a commercial: *You’ll notice the difference immediately!*

Several times an hour, something attacked the ship. A flock of flesh-eating Stymphalian birds swooped out of the night sky, and Festus torched them. Storm spirits swirled around the mast, and Jason blasted them with lightning. While Coach Hedge was having dinner on the foredeck, a wild pegasus appeared from nowhere, stampeded over the coach’s enchiladas, and flew off again, leaving cheesy hoof prints all across the deck.

“What was *that* for?” the coach demanded.

The sight of the pegasus made Percy wish Blackjack were here. He hadn’t seen his friend in days. Tempest and Arion also hadn’t shown themselves. Maybe they didn’t want to venture into the Mediterranean. If so, Percy couldn’t blame them.

Finally around midnight, after the ninth or tenth aerial attack, Jason turned to him. “How about you get some sleep? I’ll keep blasting stuff out of the sky as long as I can. Then we can go by sea for a while, and you can take point.”

Percy wasn’t sure that he’d be able to sleep with the boat rocking through the clouds as it was shaken by angry wind spirits, but Jason’s idea made sense. He

went belowdecks and crashed on his bunk.

His nightmares, of course, were anything but restful.

He dreamed he was in a dark cavern. He could only see a few feet in front of him, but the space must have been vast. Water dripped from somewhere nearby, and the sound echoed off distant walls. The way the air moved made Percy suspect the cave's ceiling was far, far above.

He heard heavy footsteps, and the twin giants Ephialtes and Otis shuffled out of the gloom. Percy could distinguish them only by their hair—Ephialtes had the green locks braided with silver and gold coins; Otis had the purple ponytail braided with...were those firecrackers?

Otherwise they were dressed identically, and their outfits definitely belonged in a nightmare. They wore matching white slacks and gold buccaneer shirts with V-necks that showed way too much chest hair. A dozen sheathed daggers lined their rhinestone belts. Their shoes were open-toed sandals, proving that—yes, indeed—they had snakes for feet. The straps wrapped around the serpents' necks. Their heads curled up where the toes should be. The snakes flicked their tongues excitedly and turned their gold eyes in every direction, like dogs looking out the window of a car. Maybe it had been a long time since they'd had shoes with a view.

The giants stood in front of Percy, but they paid him no attention. Instead, they gazed up into the darkness.

“We’re here,” Ephialtes announced. Despite his booming voice, his words dissipated in the cavern, echoing until they sounded small and insignificant.

Far above, something answered, “Yes. I can see that. Those outfits are hard to miss.”

The voice made Percy's stomach drop about six inches. It sounded vaguely female, but not at all human. Each word was a garbled hiss in multiple tones, as if a swarm of African killer bees had learned to speak English in unison.

It wasn't Gaea. Percy was sure of that. But whatever it was, the twin giants became nervous. They shifted on their snakes and bobbed their heads respectfully.

“Of course, Your Ladyship,” Ephialtes said. “We bring news of—”

“Why are you dressed like that?” asked the thing in the dark. She didn’t seem to be coming any closer, which was fine with Percy.

Ephialtes shot his brother an irritated look. “My brother was supposed to wear something different. Unfortunately—”

“You said *I* was the knife thrower today,” Otis protested.

“I said *I* was the knife thrower! You were supposed to be the magician! Ah, forgive me, Your Ladyship. You don’t want to hear us arguing. We came as you requested, to bring you news. The ship is approaching.”

Her Ladyship, whatever she was, made a series of violent hisses like a tire being slashed repeatedly. With a shudder, Percy realized she was laughing.

“How long?” she asked.

“They should land in Rome shortly after daybreak, I think,” Ephialtes said. “Of course, they’ll have to get past the golden boy.”

He sneered, as if the *golden boy* was not his favorite person.

“I hope they arrive safely,” Her Ladyship said. “It would spoil our fun to have them captured too soon. Are your preparations made?”

“Yes, Your Ladyship.” Otis stepped forward, and the cavern trembled. A crack appeared under Otis’s left snake.

“Careful, you dolt!” Her Ladyship snarled. “Do you want to return to Tartarus the hard way?”

Otis scrambled back, his face slack with terror. Percy realized that the floor, which looked like solid stone, was more like the glacier he’d walked on in Alaska—in some places solid, in other places...not so much. He was glad he weighed nothing in his dreams.

“There is little left holding this place together,” Her Ladyship cautioned. “Except, of course, my own skill. Centuries of Athena’s rage can only be contained so well, and the great Earth Mother churns below us in her sleep. Between those two forces, well...my nest has quite eroded. We must hope this child of Athena proves to be a worthy victim. She may be my last plaything.”

Ephialtes gulped. He kept his eyes on the crack in the floor. “Soon it will not matter, Your Ladyship. Gaea will rise, and we all will be rewarded. You will no

longer have to guard this place, or keep your works hidden.”

“Perhaps,” said the voice in the dark. “But I will miss the sweetness of my revenge. We have worked well together over the centuries, have we not?”

The twins bowed. The coins glittered in Ephialtes’s hair, and Percy realized with nauseating certainty that some of them were silver drachma, exactly like the one Annabeth had gotten from her mom.

Annabeth had told him that in each generation, a few children of Athena were sent on the quest to recover the missing Parthenon statue. None had ever succeeded.

We have worked well together over the centuries...

The giant Ephialtes had centuries’ worth of coins in his braids—hundreds of trophies. Percy pictured Annabeth standing in this dark place alone. He imagined the giant taking that coin she carried and adding it to his collection. Percy wanted to draw his sword and give the giant a haircut starting at the neck, but he was powerless to act. He could only watch.

“Uh, Your Ladyship,” Ephialtes said nervously. “I would remind you that Gaea wishes the girl to be taken alive. You can torment her. Drive her insane. Whatever you wish, of course. But her blood must be spilt on the ancient stones.”

Her Ladyship hissed. “Others could be used for that purpose.”

“Y-yes,” Ephialtes said. “But *this* girl is preferred. And the boy—the son of Poseidon. You can see why those two would be most suited for the task.”

Percy wasn’t sure what that meant, but he wanted to crack the floor and send these stupid gold-shirted twins down to oblivion. He’d never let Gaea spill his blood for any task—and there was *no way* he’d let anyone hurt Annabeth.

“We will see,” Her Ladyship grumbled. “Leave me now. Tend to your own preparations. You will have your spectacle. And I...I will work in darkness.”

The dream dissolved, and Percy woke with a start.

Jason was knocking at his open doorway.

“We’ve set down in the water,” he said, looking utterly exhausted. “Your turn.”

Percy didn't want to, but he woke Annabeth. He figured even Coach Hedge wouldn't mind their talking after curfew if it meant giving her information that might save her life.

They stood on deck, alone except for Leo, who was still manning the helm. The guy must have been shattered, but he refused to go to sleep.

"I don't want any more Shrimpzilla surprises," he insisted.

They'd all tried to convince Leo that the skolopendra attack hadn't been entirely his fault, but he wouldn't listen. Percy knew how he felt. Not forgiving himself for mistakes was one of Percy's biggest talents.

It was about four in the morning. The weather was miserable. The fog was so thick, Percy couldn't see Festus at the end of the prow, and warm drizzle hung in the air like a bead curtain. As they sailed into twenty-foot swells, the sea heaving underneath them, Percy could hear poor Hazel down in her cabin...also heaving.

Despite all that, Percy was grateful to be back on the water. He preferred it to flying through storm clouds and being attacked by man-eating birds and enchilada-trampling pegasi.

He stood with Annabeth at the forward rail while he told her about his dream.

Percy wasn't sure how she'd take the news. Her reaction was even more troubling than he anticipated: she didn't seem surprised.

She peered into the fog. "Percy, you have to promise me something. Don't tell the others about this dream."

"Don't *what*? Annabeth—"

"What you saw was about the Mark of Athena," she said. "It won't help the others to know. It'll only make them worry, and it'll make it harder for me to go off on my own."

"Annabeth, you can't be serious. That thing in the dark, the big chamber with the crumbling floor—"

"I know." Her face looked unnaturally pale, and Percy suspected it wasn't just the fog. "But I have to do this alone."

Percy swallowed back his anger. He wasn't sure if he was mad at Annabeth, or his dream, or the entire Greek/Roman world that had endured and shaped human history for five thousand years with one goal in mind: to make Percy

Jackson's life suck as much as possible.

"You know what's in that cavern," he guessed. "Does it have to do with spiders?"

"Yes," she said in a small voice.

"Then how can you even...?" He made himself stop.

Once Annabeth had made up her mind, arguing with her wouldn't do any good. He remembered the night three and a half years ago, when they'd saved Nico and Bianca di Angelo in Maine. Annabeth had been captured by the Titan Atlas. For a while, Percy wasn't sure if she was alive or dead. He'd traveled across the country to save her from the Titan. It had been the hardest few days of his life—not just the monsters and the fighting, but the worry.

How could he *intentionally* let her go now, knowing she was heading into something even more dangerous?

Then it dawned on him: the way he had felt back then, for a few days, was probably how Annabeth had felt for the six months he had been missing with amnesia.

That made him feel guilty, and a little bit selfish, to be standing here arguing with her. She *had* to go on this quest. The fate of the world might depend on it. But part of him wanted to say: *Forget the world*. He didn't want to be without her.

Percy stared into the fog. He couldn't see anything around them, but he had perfect bearings at sea. He knew their exact latitude and longitude. He knew the depth of the ocean and which way the currents were flowing. He knew the ship's speed, and could sense no rocks, sandbars, or other natural dangers in their path. Still, being blind was unsettling.

They hadn't been attacked since they had touched the water, but the sea seemed different. Percy had been in the Atlantic, the Pacific, even the Gulf of Alaska, but this sea felt more ancient and powerful. Percy could sense its layers swirling below him. Every Greek or Roman hero had sailed these waters—from Hercules to Aeneas. Monsters still dwelt in the depths, so deeply wrapped in the Mist that they slept most of the time; but Percy could feel them stirring, responding to the Celestial bronze hull of a Greek trireme and the presence of

demigod blood.

They are back, the monsters seemed to say. *Finally, fresh blood.*

“We’re not far from the Italian coast,” Percy said, mostly to break the silence. “Maybe a hundred nautical miles to the mouth of the Tiber.”

“Good,” Annabeth said. “By daybreak, we should—”

“Stop.” Percy’s skin felt washed with ice. “We have to stop.”

“Why?” Annabeth asked.

“Leo, stop!” he yelled.

Too late. The other boat appeared out of the fog and rammed them head-on. In that split second, Percy registered random details: another trireme; black sails painted with a gorgon’s head; hulking warriors, not quite human, crowded at the front of the boat in Greek armor, swords and spears ready; and a bronze ram at water level, slamming against the hull of the *Argo II*.

Annabeth and Percy were almost thrown overboard.

Festus blew fire, sending a dozen very surprised warriors screaming and diving into the sea, but more swarmed aboard the *Argo II*. Grappling lines wrapped around the rails and the mast, digging iron claws into the hull’s planks.

By the time Percy had recovered his wits, the enemy was everywhere. He couldn’t see well through the fog and the dark, but the invaders seemed to be humanlike dolphins, or dolphinlike humans. Some had gray snouts. Others held their swords in stunted flippers. Some waddled on legs partially fused together, while others had flippers for feet, which reminded Percy of clown shoes.

Leo sounded the alarm bell. He made a dash for the nearest ballista but went down under a pile of chattering dolphin warriors.

Annabeth and Percy stood back-to-back, as they’d done many times before, their weapons drawn. Percy tried to summon the waves, hoping he could push the ships apart or even capsize the enemy vessel, but nothing happened. It almost felt like something was pushing against his will, wresting the sea from his control.

He raised Riptide, ready to fight, but they were hopelessly outnumbered. Several dozen warriors lowered their spears and made a ring around them, wisely keeping out of striking distance of Percy’s sword. The dolphin-men

opened their snouts and made whistling, popping noises. Percy had never considered just how vicious dolphin teeth looked.

He tried to think. Maybe he could break out of the circle and destroy a few invaders, but not without the others skewering him and Annabeth.

At least the warriors didn't seem interested in killing them immediately. They kept Percy and Annabeth contained while more of their comrades flooded belowdecks and secured the hull. Percy could hear them breaking down the cabin doors, scuffling with his friends. Even if the other demigods hadn't been fast asleep, they wouldn't have stood a chance against so many.

Leo was dragged across the deck, half-conscious and groaning, and dumped on a pile of ropes. Below, the sounds of fighting tapered off. Either the others had been subdued or...or Percy refused to think about it.

On one side of the ring of spears, the dolphin warriors parted to let someone through. He appeared to be fully human, but from the way the dolphins fell back before him, he was clearly the leader. He was dressed in Greek combat armor—sandals, kilt, and greaves, a breastplate decorated with elaborate sea monster designs—and everything he wore was gold. Even his sword, a Greek blade like Riptide, was gold instead of bronze.

The golden boy, Percy thought, remembering his dream. *They'll have to get past the golden boy.*

What really made Percy nervous was the guy's helmet. His visor was a full face mask fashioned like a gorgon's head—curved tusks, horrible features pinched into a snarl, and golden snake hair curling around the face. Percy had met gorgons before. The likeness was good—a little too good for his taste.

Annabeth turned so she was shoulder to shoulder with Percy. He wanted to put his arm around her protectively, but he doubted she'd appreciate the gesture, and he didn't want to give this golden guy any indication that Annabeth was his girlfriend. No sense giving the enemy more leverage than they already had.

"Who are you?" Percy demanded. "What do you want?"

The golden warrior chuckled. With a flick of his blade, faster than Percy could follow, he smacked Riptide out of Percy's hand and sent it flying into the sea.

He might as well have thrown Percy's lungs into the sea, because suddenly Percy couldn't breathe. He'd never been disarmed so easily.

"Hello, brother." The golden warrior's voice was rich and velvety, with an exotic accent—Middle Eastern, maybe—that seemed vaguely familiar. "Always happy to rob a fellow son of Poseidon. I am Chrysaor, the Golden Sword. As for what I want..." He turned his metal mask toward Annabeth. "Well, that's easy. I want everything you have."

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PERCY

PERCY'S HEART DID JUMPING JACKS while Chrysaor walked back and forth, inspecting them like prized cattle. A dozen of his dolphin-man warriors stayed in a ring around them, spears leveled at Percy's chest, while dozens more ransacked the ship, banging and crashing around belowdecks. One carried a box of ambrosia up the stairs. Another carried an armful of ballista bolts and a crate of Greek fire.

"Careful with that!" Annabeth warned. "It'll blow up both our ships."

"Ha!" Chrysaor said. "We know all about Greek fire, girl. Don't worry. We've been looting and pillaging ships on the Mare Nostrum for eons."

"Your accent sounds familiar," Percy said. "Have we met?"

"I haven't had the pleasure." Chrysaor's golden gorgon mask snarled at him, though it was impossible to tell what his real expression might be underneath. "But I've heard all about you, Percy Jackson. Oh, yes, the young man who saved Olympus. And his faithful sidekick, Annabeth Chase."

"I'm nobody's sidekick," Annabeth growled. "And, Percy, his accent sounds familiar because he sounds like his mother. We killed her in New Jersey."

Percy frowned. "I'm pretty sure that accent isn't New Jersey. Who's his—? Oh."

It all fell into place. Aunty Em's Garden Gnome Emporium—the lair of Medusa. She'd talked with that same accent, at least until Percy had cut off her head.

“*Medusa* is your mom?” he asked. “Dude, that sucks for you.”

Judging from the sound in Chrysaor's throat, he was now snarling under the mask, too.

“You are as arrogant as the *first* Perseus,” Chrysaor said. “But, yes, Percy Jackson. Poseidon was my father. Medusa was my mother. After Medusa was changed into a monster by that so-called goddess of wisdom...” The golden mask turned on Annabeth. “That would be *your* mother, I believe...Medusa's two children were trapped inside her, unable to be born. When the original Perseus cut off Medusa's head—”

“Two children sprang out,” Annabeth remembered. “Pegasus and you.”

Percy blinked. “So your brother is a winged horse. But you're also my half brother, which means all the flying horses in the world are my...You know what? Let's forget it.”

He'd learned years ago it was better not to dwell too much on who was related to whom on the godly side of things. After Tyson the Cyclops adopted him as a brother, Percy decided that that was about as far as he wanted to extend the family.

“But if you're Medusa's kid,” he said, “why haven't I ever heard of you?”

Chrysaor sighed in exasperation. “When your brother is Pegasus, you get used to being forgotten. Oh, look, a winged horse! Does anyone care about me? No!” He raised the tip of his blade to Percy's eyes. “But don't underestimate me. My name means the Golden Sword for a reason.”

“Imperial gold?” Percy guessed.

“Bah! *Enchanted* gold, yes. Later on, the Romans called it Imperial gold, but I was the first to ever wield such a blade. I should have been the most famous hero of all time! Since the legend-tellers decided to ignore me, I became a villain instead. I resolved to put my heritage to use. As the son of Medusa, I would inspire terror. As the son of Poseidon, I would rule the seas!”

“You became a pirate,” Annabeth summed up.

Chrysaor spread his arms, which was fine with Percy since it got the sword point away from his eyes.

“The *best* pirate,” Chrysaor said. “I’ve sailed these waters for centuries, waylaying any demigods foolish enough to explore the Mare Nostrum. This is my territory now. And all you have is mine.”

One of the dolphin warriors dragged Coach Hedge up from below.

“Let me go, you tuna fish!” Hedge bellowed. He tried to kick the warrior, but his hoof clanged off his captor’s armor. Judging from the hoof-shaped prints in the dolphin’s breastplate and helmet, the coach had already made several attempts.

“Ah, a satyr,” Chrysaor mused. “A little old and stringy, but Cyclopes will pay well for a morsel like him. Chain him up.”

“I’m nobody’s goat meat!” Hedge protested.

“Gag him as well,” Chrysaor decided.

“Why you gilded little—” Hedge’s insult was cut short when the dolphin put a greasy wad of canvas in his mouth. Soon the coach was trussed like a rodeo calf and dumped with the other loot—crates of food, extra weapons, even the magical ice chest from the mess hall.

“You can’t do this!” Annabeth shouted.

Chrysaor’s laughter reverberated inside his gold face mask. Percy wondered if he was horribly disfigured under there, or if his gaze could petrify people the way his mother’s could.

“I can do anything I want,” Chrysaor said. “My warriors have been trained to perfection. They are vicious, cutthroat—”

“Dolphins,” Percy noted.

Chrysaor shrugged. “Yes. So? They had some bad luck a few millennia ago, kidnapped the wrong person. Some of their crew got turned *completely* into dolphins. Others went mad. But these...these survived as hybrid creatures. When I found them under the sea and offered them a new life, they became my loyal crew. They fear nothing!”

One of the warriors chattered at him nervously.

“Yes, yes,” Chrysaor growled. “They fear *one* thing, but it hardly matters.

He's not here."

An idea began tickling at the base of Percy's skull. Before he could pursue it, more dolphin warriors climbed the stairs, hauling up the rest of his friends. Jason was unconscious. Judging from the new bruises on his face, he'd tried to fight. Hazel and Piper were bound hand and foot. Piper had a gag in her mouth, so apparently the dolphins had discovered she could charmspeak. Frank was the only one missing, though two of the dolphins had bee stings covering their faces.

Could Frank actually turn into a swarm of bees? Percy hoped so. If he was free aboard the ship somewhere, that could be an advantage, assuming Percy could figure out how to communicate with him.

"Excellent!" Chrysaor gloated. He directed his warriors to dump Jason by the crossbows. Then he examined the girls like they were Christmas presents, which made Percy grit his teeth.

"The boy is no use to me," Chrysaor said. "But we have an understanding with the witch Circe. She will buy the women—either as slaves or trainees, depending on their skill. But not you, lovely Annabeth."

Annabeth recoiled. "You are *not* taking me anywhere."

Percy's hand crept to his pocket. His pen had appeared back in his jeans. He only needed a moment's distraction to draw his sword. Maybe if he could take down Chrysaor quickly, his crew would panic.

He wished he knew something about Chrysaor's weaknesses. Usually Annabeth provided him with information like that, but apparently Chrysaor didn't *have* any legends, so they were both in the dark.

The golden warrior tutted. "Oh, sadly, Annabeth, you will not be staying with me. I would love that. But you and your friend Percy are spoken for. A certain goddess is paying a high bounty for your capture—alive, if possible, though she didn't say you had to be unharmed."

At that moment, Piper caused the disturbance they needed. She wailed so loudly it could be heard through her gag. Then she fainted against the nearest guard, knocking him over. Hazel got the idea and crumpled to the deck, kicking her legs and thrashing like she was having a fit.

Percy drew Riptide and lashed out. The blade should have gone straight

through Chrysaor's neck, but the golden warrior was unbelievably fast. He dodged and parried as the dolphin warriors backed up, guarding the other captives while giving their captain room to battle. They chattered and squeaked, egging him on, and Percy got the sinking suspicion the crew was used to this sort of entertainment. They didn't feel their leader was in any sort of danger.

Percy hadn't crossed swords with an opponent like this since...well, since he'd battled the war god Ares. Chrysaor was *that* good. Many of Percy's powers had gotten stronger over the years, but now, too late, Percy realized that swordplay wasn't one of them.

He was rusty—at least against an adversary like Chrysaor.

They battled back and forth, thrusting and parrying. Without meaning to, Percy heard the voice of Luke Castellan, his first sword-fighting mentor at Camp Half-Blood, throwing out suggestions. But it didn't help.

The golden gorgon mask was too unnerving. The warm fog, the slick deck boards, the chattering of the warriors—none of it helped. And in the corner of his eye, Percy could see one of the dolphin-men holding a knife at Annabeth's throat in case she tried anything tricky.

He feinted and thrust at Chrysaor's gut, but Chrysaor anticipated the move. He knocked Percy's sword out of his hand again, and once more Riptide flew into the sea.

Chrysaor laughed easily. He wasn't even winded. He pressed the tip of his golden sword against Percy's sternum.

"A good try," said the pirate. "But now you'll be chained and transported to Gaea's minions. They are quite eager to spill your blood and wake the goddess."

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PERCY

NOTHING LIKE TOTAL FAILURE to generate great ideas.

As Percy stood there, disarmed and outmatched, the plan formed in his head. He was so used to Annabeth providing Greek legend information that he was kind of stunned to actually remember something useful, but he *had* to act fast. He couldn't let anything happen to his friends. He wasn't going to lose Annabeth—not again.

Chrysaor couldn't be beat. At least not in single combat. But without his crew...maybe then he could be overwhelmed if enough demigods attacked him at once.

How to deal with Chrysaor's crew? Percy put the pieces together: the pirates had been turned into dolphin-men millennia ago when they had kidnapped the wrong person. Percy *knew* that story. Heck, the wrong person in question had threatened to turn *him* into a dolphin. And when Chrysaor said the crew wasn't afraid of anything, one of the dolphins had nervously corrected him. Yes, Chrysaor said. *But he's not here.*

Percy glanced toward the stern and spotted Frank, in human form, peeking out from behind a ballista, waiting. Percy resisted the urge to smile. The big guy claimed to be clumsy and useless, but he always seemed to be in exactly the

right place when Percy needed him.

The girls...Frank...the ice chest.

It was a crazy idea. But, as usual, that's all Percy had.

"Fine!" Percy shouted, so loudly that he got everyone's attention. "Take us away, if our captain will let you."

Chrysaor turned his golden mask. "What captain? My men searched the ship. There is no one else."

Percy raised his hands dramatically. "The god appears only when he wishes. But he is our leader. He runs our camp for demigods. Doesn't he, Annabeth?"

Annabeth was quick. "Yes!" She nodded enthusiastically. "Mr. D! The great Dionysus!"

A ripple of uneasiness passed through the dolphin-men. One dropped his sword.

"Stand fast!" Chrysaor bellowed. "There is no god on this ship. They are trying to scare you."

"You should be scared!" Percy looked at the pirate crew with sympathy. "Dionysus will be severely cranky with you for having delayed our voyage. He will punish all of us. Didn't you notice the girls falling into the wine god's madness?"

Hazel and Piper had stopped the shaking fits. They were sitting on the deck, staring at Percy, but when he glared at them pointedly, they started hamming it up again, trembling and flopping around like fish. The dolphin-men fell over themselves trying to get away from their captives.

"Fakes!" Chrysaor roared. "Shut up, Percy Jackson. Your camp director is not here. He was recalled to Olympus. This is common knowledge."

"So you admit Dionysus is our director!" Percy said.

"He was," Chrysaor corrected. "Everyone knows that."

Percy gestured at the golden warrior like he'd just betrayed himself. "You see? We are doomed. If you don't believe me, let's check the ice chest!"

Percy stormed over to the magical cooler. No one tried to stop him. He knocked open the lid and rummaged through the ice. There had to be one. Please. He was rewarded with a silver-and-red can of soda. He brandished it at

the dolphin warriors as if spraying them with bug repellent.

“Behold!” Percy shouted. “The god’s chosen beverage. Tremble before the horror of Diet Coke!”

The dolphin-men began to panic. They were on the edge of retreat. Percy could feel it.

“The god will take your ship,” Percy warned. “He will finish your transformation into dolphins, or make you insane, or transform you into insane dolphins! Your only hope is to swim away now, quickly!”

“Ridiculous!” Chrysaor’s voice turned shrill. He didn’t seem sure where to level his sword—at Percy or his own crew.

“Save yourselves!” Percy warned. “It is too late for us!”

Then he gasped and pointed to the spot where Frank was hiding. “Oh, no! Frank is turning into a crazy dolphin!”

Nothing happened.

“I *said*,” Percy repeated, “Frank is turning into a crazy dolphin!”

Frank stumbled out of nowhere, making a big show of grabbing his throat. “Oh, no,” he said, like he was reading from a teleprompter. “I am turning into a crazy dolphin.”

He began to change, his nose elongating into a snout, his skin becoming sleek and gray. He fell to the deck as a dolphin, his tail thumping against the boards.

The pirate crew disbanded in terror, chattering and clicking as they dropped their weapons, forgot the captives, ignored Chrysaor’s orders, and jumped overboard. In the confusion, Annabeth moved quickly to cut the bonds on Hazel, Piper, and Coach Hedge.

Within seconds, Chrysaor was alone and surrounded. Percy and his friends had no weapons except for Annabeth’s knife and Hedge’s hooves, but the murderous looks on their faces evidently convinced the golden warrior he was doomed.

He backed to the edge of the rail.

“This isn’t over, Jackson,” Chrysaor growled. “I will have my revenge—”

His words were cut short by Frank, who had changed form again. An eight-hundred-pound grizzly bear can definitely break up a conversation. He

sideswiped Chrysaor and raked the golden mask off his helmet. Chrysaor screamed, instantly covering his face with his arms and tumbling into the water.

They ran to the rail. Chrysaor had disappeared. Percy thought about chasing him, but he didn't know these waters, and he didn't want to confront that guy alone again.

"That was brilliant!" Annabeth kissed him, which made him feel a little better.

"It was desperate," Percy corrected. "And we need to get rid of this pirate trireme."

"Burn it?" Annabeth asked.

Percy looked at the Diet Coke in his hand. "No. I've got another idea."

It took them longer than Percy wanted. As they worked, he kept glancing at the sea, waiting for Chrysaor and his pirate dolphins to return, but they didn't.

Leo got back on his feet, thanks to a little nectar. Piper tended to Jason's wounds, but he wasn't as badly hurt as he looked. Mostly he was just ashamed that he'd gotten overpowered again, which Percy could relate to.

They returned all their own supplies to the proper places and tidied up from the invasion while Coach Hedge had a field day on the enemy ship, breaking everything he could find with his baseball bat.

When he was done, Percy loaded the enemy's weapons back on the pirate ship. Their storeroom was full of treasure, but Percy insisted that they touch none of it.

"I can sense about six million dollars' worth of gold aboard," Hazel said. "Plus diamonds, rubies—"

"Six m-million?" Frank stammered. "Canadian dollars or American?"

"Leave it," Percy said. "It's part of the tribute."

"Tribute?" Hazel asked.

"Oh." Piper nodded. "Kansas."

Jason grinned. He'd been there too when they'd met the wine god. "Crazy. But I like it."

Finally Percy went aboard the pirate ship and opened the flood valves. He

asked Leo to drill a few extra holes in the bottom of the hull with his power tools, and Leo was happy to oblige.

The crew of the *Argo II* assembled at the rail and cut the grappling lines. Piper brought out her new horn of plenty and, on Percy's direction, willed it to spew Diet Coke, which came out with the strength of a fire hose, dousing the enemy deck. Percy thought it would take hours, but the ship sank remarkably fast, filling with Diet Coke and seawater.

"Dionysus," Percy called, holding up Chrysaor's golden mask. "Or Bacchus—whatever. You made this victory possible, even if you weren't here. Your enemies trembled at your name...or your Diet Coke, or something. So, yeah, thank you."

The words were hard to get out, but Percy managed not to gag. "We give this ship to you as tribute. We hope you like it."

"Six million in gold," Leo muttered. "He'd *better* like it."

"Shh," Hazel scolded. "Precious metal isn't all that great. Believe me."

Percy threw the golden mask aboard the vessel, which was now sinking even faster, brown fizzy liquid spewing out the trireme's oar slots and bubbling from the cargo hold, turning the sea frothy brown.

Percy summoned a wave, and the enemy ship was swamped. Leo steered the *Argo II* away as the pirate vessel disappeared underwater.

"Isn't that polluting?" Piper asked.

"I wouldn't worry," Jason told her. "If Bacchus likes it, the ship should vanish."

Percy didn't know if that would happen, but he felt like he'd done all he could. He had no faith that Dionysus would hear them or care, much less help them in their battle against the twin giants, but he had to try.

As the *Argo II* headed east into the fog, Percy decided at least one good thing had come out of his sword fight with Chrysaor. He was feeling humble—even humble enough to pay tribute to the wine dude.

After their bout with the pirates, they decided to fly the rest of the way to Rome. Jason insisted he was well enough to take sentry duty, along with Coach Hedge,

who was still so charged with adrenaline that every time the ship hit turbulence, he swung his bat and yelled, “Die!”

They had a couple of hours before daybreak, so Jason suggested Percy try to get a few more hours of sleep.

“It’s fine, man,” Jason said. “Give somebody else a chance to save the ship, huh?”

Percy agreed, though once in his cabin, he had trouble falling asleep.

He stared at the bronze lantern swaying from the ceiling and thought about how easily Chrysaor had beaten him at swordplay. The golden warrior could’ve killed him without breaking a sweat. He’d only kept Percy alive because someone else wanted to pay for the privilege of killing him later.

Percy felt like an arrow had slipped through a chink in his armor—as if he still had the blessing of Achilles, and someone had found his weak spot. The older he got, the longer he survived as a half-blood, the more his friends looked up to him. They depended on him and relied on his powers. Even the Romans had raised him on a shield and made him praetor, and he’d only known them for a couple of weeks.

But Percy didn’t *feel* powerful. The more heroic stuff he did, the more he realized how limited he was. He felt like a fraud. *I’m not as great as you think*, he wanted to warn his friends. His failures, like tonight, seemed to prove it. Maybe that’s why he had started to fear suffocation. It wasn’t so much drowning in the earth or the sea, but the feeling that he was sinking into too many expectations, literally getting in over his head.

Wow...when he started having thoughts like that, he *knew* he’d been spending too much time with Annabeth.

Athena had once told Percy his fatal flaw: he was supposedly too loyal to his friends. He couldn’t see the big picture. He would save a friend even if it meant destroying the world.

At the time, Percy had shrugged this off. How could loyalty be a bad thing? Besides, things worked out okay against the Titans. He’d saved his friends *and* beaten Kronos.

Now, though, he started to wonder. He would gladly throw himself at any

monster, god, or giant to keep his friends from being hurt. But what if he wasn't up to the task? What if someone *else* had to do it? That was *very* hard for him to admit. He even had trouble with simple things like letting Jason take a turn at watch. He didn't want to rely on someone else to protect him, someone who could get hurt on his account.

Percy's mom had done that for him. She'd stayed in a bad relationship with a gross mortal guy because she thought it would save Percy from monsters. Grover, his best friend, had protected Percy for almost a year before Percy even realized he was a demigod, and Grover had almost gotten killed by the Minotaur.

Percy wasn't a kid anymore. He didn't want anybody he loved taking a risk for him. He *had* to be strong enough to be the protector himself. But now he was supposed to let Annabeth go off on her own to follow the Mark of Athena, knowing she might die. If it came to a choice—save Annabeth or let the quest succeed—could Percy really choose the quest?

Exhaustion finally overtook him. He fell asleep, and in his nightmare, the rumble of thunder became the laughter of the earth goddess Gaea.

Percy dreamed he was standing on the front porch of the Big House at Camp Half-Blood. The sleeping face of Gaea appeared on the side of Half-Blood Hill—her massive features formed from the shadows on the grassy slopes. Her lips didn't move, but her voice echoed across the valley.

So this is your home, Gaea murmured. Take a last look, Percy Jackson. You should have returned here. At least then you could have died with your comrades when the Romans invade. Now your blood will be spilled far from home, on the ancient stones, and I will rise.

The ground shook. At the top of Half-Blood Hill, Thalia's pine tree burst into flames. Disruption rolled across the valley—grass turning to sand, forest crumbling to dust. The river and the canoe lake dried up. The cabins and the Big House burned to ashes. When the tremor stopped, Camp Half-Blood looked like a wasteland after an atomic blast. The only thing left was the porch where Percy stood.

Next to him, the dust swirled and solidified into the figure of a woman. Her eyes were closed, as if she were sleepwalking. Her robes were forest green,

dappled with gold and white like sunlight shifting through branches. Her hair was as black as tilled soil. Her face was beautiful, but even with a dreamy smile on her lips she seemed cold and distant. Percy got the feeling she could watch demigods die or cities burn, and that smile wouldn't waver.

"When I reclaim the earth," Gaea said, "I will leave this spot barren forever, to remind me of your kind and how utterly powerless they were to stop me. It doesn't matter *when* you fall, my sweet little pawn—to Phorcys or Chrysaor or my dear twins. You *will* fall, and I will be there to devour you. Your only choice now...will you fall alone? Come to me willingly; bring the girl. Perhaps I will spare this place you love. Otherwise..."

Gaea opened her eyes. They swirled in green and black, as deep as the crust of the earth. Gaea saw everything. Her patience was infinite. She was slow to wake, but once she arose, her power was unstoppable.

Percy's skin tingled. His hands went numb. He looked down and realized he was crumbling to dust, like all the monsters he'd ever defeated.

"Enjoy Tartarus, my little pawn," Gaea purred.

A metallic *CLANG-CLANG-CLANG* jolted Percy out of his dream. His eyes shot open. He realized he'd just heard the landing gear being lowered.

There was a knock on his door, and Jason poked his head in. The bruises on his face had faded. His blue eyes glittered with excitement.

"Hey, man," he said. "We're descending over Rome. You really should see this."

The sky was brilliant blue, as if the stormy weather had never happened. The sun rose over the distant hills, so everything below them shone and sparkled like the entire city of Rome had just come out of the car wash.

Percy had seen big cities before. He was from New York, after all. But the sheer vastness of Rome grabbed him by the throat and made it hard to breathe. The city seemed to have no regard for the limits of geography. It spread through hills and valleys, jumped over the Tiber with dozens of bridges, and just kept sprawling to the horizon. Streets and alleys zigzagged with no rhyme or reason through quilts of neighborhoods. Glass office buildings stood next to excavation

sites. A cathedral stood next to a line of Roman columns, which stood next to a modern soccer stadium. In some neighborhoods, old stucco villas with red-tiled roofs crowded the cobblestone streets, so that if Percy concentrated just on those areas, he could imagine he was back in ancient times. Everywhere he looked, there were wide piazzas and traffic-clogged streets. Parks cut across the city with a crazy collection of palm trees, pines, junipers, and olive trees, as if Rome couldn't decide what part of the world it belonged to—or maybe it just believed all the world still belonged to *Rome*.

It was as if the city knew about Percy's dream of Gaea. It knew that the earth goddess intended on razing all human civilization, and this city, which had stood for thousands of years, was saying back to her: *You wanna dissolve this city, Dirt Face? Give it a shot.*

In other words, it was the Coach Hedge of mortal cities—only taller.

“We're setting down in that park,” Leo announced, pointing to a wide green space dotted with palm trees. “Let's hope the Mist makes us look like a large pigeon or something.”

Percy wished Jason's sister Thalia were here. She'd always had a way of bending the Mist to make people see what she wanted. Percy had never been very good at that. He just kept thinking: *Don't look at me*, and hoped the Romans below would fail to notice the giant bronze trireme descending on their city in the middle of morning rush hour.

It seemed to work. Percy didn't notice any cars veering off the road or Romans pointing to the sky and screaming, “Aliens!” The *Argo II* set down in the grassy field and the oars retracted.

The noise of traffic was all around them, but the park itself was peaceful and deserted. To their left, a green lawn sloped toward a line of woods. An old villa nestled in the shade of some weird-looking pine trees with thin curvy trunks that shot up thirty or forty feet, then sprouted into puffy canopies. They reminded Percy of trees in those Dr. Seuss books his mom used to read him when he was little.

To their right, snaking along the top of a hill, was a long brick wall with notches at the top for archers—maybe a medieval defensive line, maybe Ancient

Roman. Percy wasn't sure.

To the north, about a mile away through the folds of the city, the top of the Colosseum rose above the rooftops, looking just like it did in travel photos. That's when Percy's legs started shaking. He was actually here. He'd thought his trip to Alaska had been pretty exotic, but now he was in the heart of the old Roman Empire, enemy territory for a Greek demigod. In a way, this place had shaped his life as much as New York.

Jason pointed to the base of the archers' wall, where steps led down into some kind of tunnel.

"I think I know where we are," he said. "That's the Tomb of the Scipios."

Percy frowned. "Scipio...Reyna's pegasus?"

"No," Annabeth put in. "They were a noble Roman family, and...wow, this place is amazing."

Jason nodded. "I've studied maps of Rome before. I've always wanted to come here, but..."

Nobody bothered finishing that sentence. Looking at his friends' faces, Percy could tell they were just as much in awe as he was. They'd made it. They'd landed in Rome—the Rome.

"Plans?" Hazel asked. "Nico has until sunset—at best. And this entire city is supposedly getting destroyed today."

Percy shook himself out of his daze. "You're right. Annabeth...did you zero in on that spot from your bronze map?"

Her gray eyes turned extra thunderstorm dark, which Percy could interpret just fine: *Remember what I said, buddy. Keep that dream to yourself.*

"Yes," she said carefully. "It's on the Tiber River. I think I can find it, but I should—"

"Take me along," Percy finished. "Yeah, you're right."

Annabeth glared daggers at him. "That's not—"

"Safe," he supplied. "One demigod walking through Rome alone. I'll go with you as far as the Tiber. We can use that letter of introduction, hopefully meet the river god Tiberinus. Maybe he can give you some help or advice. Then you can go on alone from there."

They had a silent staring contest, but Percy didn't back down. When he and Annabeth started dating, his mother had drummed it into his head: *It's good manners to walk your date to the door*. If that was true, it *had* to be good manners to walk her to the start of her epic solo death quest.

"Fine," Annabeth muttered. "Hazel, now that we're in Rome, do you think you can pinpoint Nico's location?"

Hazel blinked, as if coming out of a trance from watching the Percy/Annabeth Show. "Um...hopefully, if I get close enough. I'll have to walk around the city. Frank, would you come with me?"

Frank beamed. "Absolutely."

"And, uh...Leo," Hazel added. "It might be a good idea if you came along too. The fish-centaurs said we'd need your help with something mechanical."

"Yeah," Leo said, "no problem."

Frank's smile turned into something more like Chrysaor's mask.

Percy was no genius when it came to relationships, but even he could feel the tension among those three. Ever since they'd gotten knocked into the Atlantic, they hadn't acted quite the same. It wasn't just the two guys competing for Hazel. It was like the three of them were locked together, acting out some kind of murder mystery, but they hadn't yet discovered which of them was the victim.

Piper drew her knife and set it on the rail. "Jason and I can watch the ship for now. I'll see what Katoptris can show me. But, Hazel, if you guys get a fix on Nico's location, don't go in there by yourselves. Come back and get us. It'll take all of us to fight the giants."

She didn't say the obvious: even all of them together wouldn't be enough, unless they had a god on their side. Percy decided not to bring that up.

"Good idea," Percy said. "How about we plan to meet back here at...what?"

"Three this afternoon?" Jason suggested. "That's probably the latest we could rendezvous and still hope to fight the giants and save Nico. If something happens to change the plan, try to send an Iris-message."

The others nodded in agreement, but Percy noticed several of them glancing at Annabeth. Another thing no one wanted to say: Annabeth would be on a different schedule. She might be back at three, or much later, or never. But she

would be on her own, searching for the Athena Parthenos.

Coach Hedge grunted. “That’ll give me time to eat the coconuts—I mean dig the coconuts out of our hull. Percy, Annabeth...I don’t like you two going off on your own. Just remember: *behave*. If I hear about any funny business, I will ground you until the Styx freezes over.”

The idea of getting grounded when they were about to risk their lives was so ridiculous, Percy couldn’t help smiling.

“We’ll be back soon,” he promised. He looked around at his friends, trying not to feel like this was the last time they’d ever be together. “Good luck, everyone.”

Leo lowered the gangplank, and Percy and Annabeth were first off the ship.

PERCY

UNDER DIFFERENT CIRCUMSTANCES, wandering through Rome with Annabeth would have been pretty awesome. They held hands as they navigated the winding streets, dodging cars and crazy Vespa drivers, squeezing through mobs of tourists, and wading through oceans of pigeons. The day warmed up quickly. Once they got away from the car exhaust on the main roads, the air smelled of baking bread and freshly cut flowers.

They aimed for the Colosseum because that was an easy landmark, but getting there proved harder than Percy anticipated. As big and confusing as the city had looked from above, it was even more so on the ground. Several times they got lost on dead-end streets. They found beautiful fountains and huge monuments by accident.

Annabeth commented on the architecture, but Percy kept his eyes open for other things. Once he spotted a glowing purple ghost—a Lar—glaring at them from the window of an apartment building. Another time he saw a white-robed woman—maybe a nymph or a goddess—holding a wicked-looking knife, slipping between ruined columns in a public park. Nothing attacked them, but Percy felt like they were being watched, and the watchers were not friendly.

Finally they reached the Colosseum, where a dozen guys in cheap gladiator

costumes were scuffling with the police—plastic swords versus batons. Percy wasn't sure what that was about, but he and Annabeth decided to keep walking. Sometimes mortals were even stranger than monsters.

They made their way west, stopping every once in a while to ask directions to the river. Percy hadn't considered that—duh—people in Italy spoke Italian, while he did not. As it turned out, though, that wasn't much of a problem. The few times someone approached them on the street and asked a question, Percy just looked at them in confusion, and they switched to English.

Next discovery: the Italians used euros, and Percy didn't have any. He regretted this as soon as he found a tourist shop that sold sodas. By then it was almost noon, getting really hot, and Percy was starting to wish he had a trireme filled with Diet Coke.

Annabeth solved the problem. She dug around in her backpack, brought out Daedalus's laptop, and typed in a few commands. A plastic card ejected from a slot in the side.

Annabeth waved it triumphantly. "International credit card. For emergencies."

Percy stared at her in amazement. "How did you—? No. Never mind. I don't want to know. Just keep being awesome."

The sodas helped, but they were still hot and tired by the time they arrived at the Tiber River. The shore was edged with a stone embankment. A chaotic assortment of warehouses, apartments, stores, and cafés crowded the riverfront.

The Tiber itself was wide, lazy, and caramel-colored. A few tall cypress trees hung over the banks. The nearest bridge looked fairly new, made from iron girders, but right next to it stood a crumbling line of stone arches that stopped halfway across the river—ruins that might've been left over from the days of the Caesars.

"This is it." Annabeth pointed at the old stone bridge. "I recognize that from the map. But what do we do now?"

Percy was glad she had said *we*. He didn't want to leave her yet. In fact, he wasn't sure he could make himself do it when the time came. Gaea's words came back to him: *Will you fall alone?*

He stared at the river, wondering how they could make contact with the god Tiberinus. He didn't really want to jump in. The Tiber didn't look much cleaner than the East River back home, where he'd had too many encounters with grouchy river spirits.

He gestured to a nearby café with tables overlooking the water. "It's about lunchtime. How about we try your credit card again?"

Even though it was noon, the place was empty. They picked a table outside by the river, and a waiter hurried over. He looked a bit surprised to see them—especially when they said they wanted lunch.

"American?" he asked, with a pained smile.

"Yes," Annabeth said.

"And I'd love a pizza," Percy said.

The waiter looked like he was trying to swallow a euro coin. "Of course you would, *signor*. And let me guess: a Coca-Cola? With ice?"

"Awesome," Percy said. He didn't understand why the guy was giving him such a sour face. It wasn't like Percy had asked for a *blue* Coke.

Annabeth ordered a panini and some fizzy water. After the waiter left, she smiled at Percy. "I think Italians eat a lot later in the day. They don't put ice in their drinks. And they only do pizza for tourists."

"Oh." Percy shrugged. "The best Italian food, and they don't even eat it?"

"I wouldn't say that in front of the waiter."

They held hands across the table. Percy was content just to look at Annabeth in the sunlight. It always made her hair so bright and warm. Her eyes took on the colors of the sky and the cobblestones, alternately brown or blue.

He wondered if he should tell Annabeth his dream about Gaea destroying Camp Half-Blood. He decided against it. She didn't need anything else to worry about—not with what she was facing.

But it made him wonder...what would have happened if they hadn't scared off Chrysaor's pirates? Percy and Annabeth would've been put in chains and taken to Gaea's minions. Their blood would have been spilled on ancient stones. Percy guessed that meant they would've been taken to Greece for some big horrible sacrifice. But Annabeth and he had been in plenty of bad situations

together. They could've figured out an escape plan, saved the day...and Annabeth wouldn't be facing this solo quest in Rome.

It doesn't matter when you fall, Gaea had said.

Percy knew it was a horrible wish, but he almost regretted that they hadn't been captured at sea. At least Annabeth and he would've been together.

"You shouldn't feel ashamed," Annabeth said. "You're thinking about Chrysaor, aren't you? Swords can't solve every problem. You saved us in the end."

In spite of himself, Percy smiled. "How do you *do* that? You always know what I'm thinking."

"I know you," she said.

And you like me anyway? Percy wanted to ask, but he held it back.

"Percy," she said, "you can't carry the weight of this whole quest. It's impossible. That's why there are seven of us. And you'll have to let me search for the Athena Parthenos on my own."

"I missed you," he confessed. "For months. A huge chunk of our lives was taken away. If I lost you again—"

Lunch arrived. The waiter looked much calmer. Having accepted the fact that they were clueless Americans, he had apparently decided to forgive them and treat them politely.

"It is a beautiful view," he said, nodding toward the river. "Enjoy, please."

Once he left, they ate in silence. The pizza was a bland, doughy square with not a lot of cheese. Maybe, Percy thought, that's why Romans didn't eat it. Poor Romans.

"You'll have to trust me," Annabeth said. Percy almost thought she was talking to her sandwich, because she didn't meet his eyes. "You've got to believe I'll come back."

He swallowed another bite. "I believe in *you*. That's not the problem. But come back from *where*?"

The sound of a Vespa interrupted them. Percy looked along the riverfront and did a double take. The motor scooter was an old-fashioned model: big and baby blue. The driver was a guy in a silky gray suit. Behind him sat a younger woman

with a headscarf, her hands around the man's waist. They weaved between café tables and pattered to a stop next to Percy and Annabeth.

"Why, hello," the man said. His voice was deep, almost croaky, like a movie actor's. His hair was short and greased back from his craggy face. He was handsome in a 1950s dad-on-television way. Even his clothes seemed old-fashioned. When he stepped off his bike, the waistline of his slacks was way higher than normal, but somehow he still managed to look manly and stylish and not like a total goober. Percy had trouble guessing his age—maybe thirty-something, though the man's fashion and manner seemed grandfatherish.

The woman slid off the bike. "We've had the most *lovely* morning," she said breathlessly.

She looked about twenty-one, also dressed in an old-fashioned style. Her ankle-length marigold skirt and white blouse were pinched together with a large leather belt, giving her the narrowest waist Percy had ever seen. When she removed her scarf, her short wavy black hair bounced into perfect shape. She had dark playful eyes and a brilliant smile. Percy had seen naiads that looked less pixieish than this lady.

Annabeth's sandwich fell out of her hands. "Oh, gods. How—how...?"

She seemed so stunned that Percy figured he ought to know these two.

"You guys *do* look familiar," he decided. He thought he might have seen their faces on television. It seemed like they were from an old show, but that couldn't be right. They hadn't aged at all. Nevertheless, he pointed at the guy and took a guess. "Are you that guy on *Mad Men*?"

"Percy!" Annabeth looked horrified.

"What?" he protested. "I don't watch a lot of TV."

"That's Gregory Peck!" Annabeth's eyes were wide, and her mouth kept falling open. "And...oh *gods!* Audrey Hepburn! I *know* this movie. *Roman Holiday*. But that was from the 1950s. How—?"

"Oh, my dear!" The woman twirled like an air spirit and sat down at their table. "I'm afraid you've mistaken me for someone else! My name is Rhea Silvia. I was the mother to Romulus and Remus, *thousands* of years ago. But you're so kind to think I look as young as the 1950s. And this is my husband..."

“Tiberinus,” said Gregory Peck, thrusting out his hand to Percy in a manly way. “God of the River Tiber.”

Percy shook his hand. The guy smelled of aftershave. Of course, if Percy were the Tiber River, he’d probably want to mask the smell with cologne too.

“Uh, hi,” Percy said. “Do you two always look like American movie stars?”

“Do we?” Tiberinus frowned and studied his clothes. “I’m not sure, actually. The migration of Western civilization goes both ways, you know. Rome affected the world, but the world also affects Rome. There *does* seem to be a lot of American influence lately. I’ve rather lost track over the centuries.”

“Okay,” Percy said. “But...you’re here to help?”

“My naiads told me you two were here.” Tiberinus cast his dark eyes toward Annabeth. “You have the map, my dear? And your letter of introduction?”

“Uh...” Annabeth handed him the letter and the disk of bronze. She was staring at the river god so intently Percy started to feel jealous.

“S-so...” she stammered, “you’ve helped other children of Athena with this quest?”

“Oh, my dear!” The pretty lady, Rhea Silvia, put her hand on Annabeth’s shoulder. “Tiberinus is *ever* so helpful. He saved my children Romulus and Remus, you know, and brought them to the wolf goddess Lupa. Later, when that old king Numen tried to kill me, Tiberinus took pity on me and made me his wife. I’ve been ruling the river kingdom at his side ever since. He’s just dreamy!”

“Thank you, my dear,” Tiberinus said with a wry smile. “And, yes, Annabeth Chase, I’ve helped many of your siblings...to at least begin their journey safely. A shame all of them died painfully later on. Well, your documents seem in order. We should get going. The Mark of Athena awaits!”

Percy gripped Annabeth’s hand—probably a little too tight. “Tiberinus, let me go with her. Just a little farther.”

Rhea Silvia laughed sweetly. “But you can’t, silly boy. You must return to your ship and gather your other friends. Confront the giants! The way will appear in your friend Piper’s knife. Annabeth has a different path. She must walk alone.”

“Indeed,” Tiberinus said. “Annabeth must face the guardian of the shrine by herself. It is the only way. And Percy Jackson, you have less time than you realized to rescue your friend in the jar. You must hurry.”

Percy’s pizza felt like a cement lump in his stomach. “But—”

“It’s all right, Percy.” Annabeth squeezed his hand. “I need to do this.”

He started to protest. Her expression stopped him. She was terrified but doing her best to hide it—for his sake. If he tried to argue, he would only make things harder for her. Or worse, he might convince her to stay. Then she would have to live with the knowledge that she’d backed down from her biggest challenge... assuming that they survived at all, with Rome about to get leveled and Gaea about to rise and destroy the world. The Athena statue held the key to defeating the giants. Percy didn’t know why or how, but Annabeth was the only one who could find it.

“You’re right,” he said, forcing out the words. “Be safe.”

Rhea Silvia giggled like it was a ridiculous comment. “Safe? Not at all! But necessary. Come, Annabeth, my dear. We will show you where your path starts. After that, you’re on your own.”

Annabeth kissed Percy. She hesitated, like she was wondering what else to say. Then she shouldered her backpack and climbed on the back of the scooter.

Percy hated it. He would’ve preferred to fight any monster in the world. He would’ve preferred a rematch with Chrysaor. But he forced himself to stay in his chair and watch as Annabeth motored off through the streets of Rome with Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn.

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ANNABETH

ANNABETH FIGURED IT COULD'VE BEEN WORSE. If she had to go on a horrifying solo quest, at least she'd gotten to have lunch with Percy on the banks of the Tiber first. Now she got to take a scooter ride with Gregory Peck.

She only knew about that old movie because of her dad. Over the past few years, since the two of them had made up, they'd spent more time together, and she had learned that her dad had a sappy side. Sure, he liked military history, weapons, and biplanes, but he also loved old films, especially romantic comedies from the 1940s and '50s. *Roman Holiday* was one of his favorites. He'd made Annabeth watch it.

She thought the plot was silly—a princess escapes her minders and falls in love with an American journalist in Rome—but she suspected her dad liked it because it reminded him of his own romance with the goddess Athena: another impossible pairing that couldn't end happily. Her dad was nothing like Gregory Peck. Athena certainly wasn't anything like Audrey Hepburn. But Annabeth knew that people saw what they wanted to see. They didn't need the Mist to warp their perceptions.

As the baby-blue scooter zipped through the streets of Rome, the goddess Rhea Silvia gave Annabeth a running commentary on how the city had changed

over the centuries.

“The Sublician Bridge was over there,” she said, pointing to a bend in the Tiber. “You know, where Horatius and his two friends defended the city from an invading army? Now, *there* was a brave Roman!”

“And look, dear,” Tiberinus added, “that’s the place where Romulus and Remus washed ashore.”

He seemed to be talking about a spot on the riverside where some ducks were making a nest out of torn-up plastic bags and candy wrappers.

“Ah, yes,” Rhea Silvia sighed happily. “You were so kind to flood yourself and wash my babies ashore for the wolves to find.”

“It was nothing,” Tiberinus said.

Annabeth felt light-headed. The river god was talking about something that had happened thousands of years ago, when this area was nothing but marshes and maybe some shacks. Tiberinus saved two babies, one of whom went on to found the world’s greatest empire. *It was nothing.*

Rhea Silvia pointed out a large modern apartment building. “That used to be a temple to Venus. Then it was a church. Then a palace. Then an apartment building. It burned down three times. Now it’s an apartment building again. And that spot right there—”

“Please,” Annabeth said. “You’re making me dizzy.”

Rhea Silvia laughed. “I’m sorry, dear. Layers upon layers of history here, but it’s nothing compared to Greece. Athens was old when Rome was a collection of mud huts. You’ll see, if you survive.”

“Not helping,” Annabeth muttered.

“Here we are,” Tiberinus announced. He pulled over in front of a large marble building, the facade covered in city grime but still beautiful. Ornate carvings of Roman gods decorated the roofline. The massive entrance was barred with iron gates, heavily padlocked.

“I’m going in there?” Annabeth wished she’d brought Leo, or at least borrowed some wire cutters from his tool belt.

Rhea Silvia covered her mouth and giggled. “No, my dear. Not *in* it. *Under* it.”

Tiberinus pointed to a set of stone steps on the side of the building—the sort that would have led to a basement apartment if this place were in Manhattan.

“Rome is chaotic aboveground,” Tiberinus said, “but that’s nothing compared to *below* ground. You must descend into the buried city, Annabeth Chase. Find the altar of the foreign god. The failures of your predecessors will guide you. After that...I do not know.”

Annabeth’s backpack felt heavy on her shoulders. She’d been studying the bronze map for days now, scouring Daedalus’s laptop for information. Unfortunately, the few things she had learned made this quest seem even more impossible. “My siblings...none of them made it all the way to the shrine, did they.”

Tiberinus shook his head. “But you know what prize awaits, if you can liberate it.”

“Yes,” Annabeth said.

“It could bring peace to the children of Greece and Rome,” Rhea Silvia said. “It could change the course of the coming war.”

“If I live,” Annabeth said.

Tiberinus nodded sadly. “Because you also understand the guardian you must face?”

Annabeth remembered the spiders at Fort Sumter, and the dream Percy had described—the hissing voice in the dark. “Yes.”

Rhea Silvia looked at her husband. “She is brave. Perhaps she is stronger than the others.”

“I hope so,” said the river god. “Good-bye, Annabeth Chase. And good luck.”

Rhea Silvia beamed. “We have such a lovely afternoon planned! Off to shop!”

Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn sped off on their baby-blue motorbike. Then Annabeth turned and descended the steps alone.

She’d been underground plenty of times.

But halfway down the steps, she realized just how long it had been since she’d adventured by herself. She froze.

Gods...she hadn't done something like this since she was a *kid*. After running away from home, she'd spent a few weeks surviving on her own, living in alleyways and hiding from monsters until Thalia and Luke took her under their wings. Then, once she'd arrived at Camp Half-Blood, she'd lived there until she was twelve. After that, all her quests had been with Percy or her other friends.

The last time she had felt this scared and alone, she'd been seven years old. She remembered the day Thalia, Luke, and she had wandered into a Cyclopes' lair in Brooklyn. Thalia and Luke had gotten captured, and Annabeth had had to cut them free. She still remembered shivering in a dark corner of that dilapidated mansion, listening to the Cyclopes mimicking her friends' voices, trying to trick her into coming out into the open.

What if *this* is a trick, too? she wondered. What if those other children of Athena died because Tiberinus and Rhea Silvia led them into a trap? Would Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn do something like that?

She forced herself to keep going. She had no choice. If the Athena Parthenos was really down here, it could decide the fate of the war. More importantly, it could help her mom. Athena *needed* her.

At the bottom of the steps she reached an old wooden door with an iron pull ring. Above the ring was a metal plate with a keyhole. Annabeth started considering ways to pick the lock, but as soon as she touched the pull ring, a fiery shape burned in the middle of the door: the silhouette of Athena's owl. Smoke plumed from the keyhole. The door swung inward.

Annabeth looked up one last time. At the top of the stairwell, the sky was a square of brilliant blue. Mortals would be enjoying the warm afternoon. Couples would be holding hands at the cafés. Tourists would be bustling through the shops and museums. Regular Romans would be going about their daily business, probably not considering the thousands of years of history under their feet, and definitely unaware of the spirits, gods, and monsters that still dwelt here, or the fact that their city might be destroyed today unless a certain group of demigods succeeded in stopping the giants.

Annabeth stepped through the doorway.

She found herself in a basement that was an architectural cyborg. Ancient

brick walls were crisscrossed with modern electrical cables and plumbing. The ceiling was held up with a combination of steel scaffolding and old granite Roman columns.

The front half of the basement was stacked with crates. Out of curiosity, Annabeth opened a few. Some were packed with multicolored spools of string—like for kites or arts and crafts projects. Other crates were full of cheap plastic gladiator swords. Maybe at one point this had been a storage area for a tourist shop.

In the back of the basement, the floor had been excavated, revealing another set of steps—these of white stone—leading still deeper underground.

Annabeth crept to the edge. Even with the glow cast by her dagger, it was too dark to see below. She rested her hand on the wall and found a light switch.

She flipped it. Glaring white fluorescent bulbs illuminated the stairs. Below, she saw a mosaic floor decorated with deer and fauns—maybe a room from an Ancient Roman villa, just stashed away under this modern basement along with the crates of string and plastic swords.

She climbed down. The room was about twenty feet square. The walls had once been brightly painted, but most of the frescoes had peeled or faded. The only exit was a hole dug in one corner of the floor where the mosaic had been pulled up. Annabeth crouched next to the opening. It dropped straight down into a larger cavern, but Annabeth couldn't see the bottom.

She heard running water maybe thirty or forty feet below. The air didn't smell like a sewer—just old and musty, and slightly sweet, like moldering flowers. Perhaps it was an old water line from the aqueducts. There was no way down.

"I'm not jumping," she muttered to herself.

As if in reply, something glowed in the darkness. The Mark of Athena blazed to life at the bottom of the cavern, revealing glistening brickwork along a subterranean canal forty feet below. The fiery owl seemed to be taunting her: *Well, this is the way, kid. So you'd better figure something out.*

Annabeth considered her options. Too dangerous to jump. No ladders or ropes. She thought about borrowing some metal scaffolding from above to use as

a fire pole, but it was all bolted in place. Besides, she didn't want to cause the building to collapse on top of her.

Frustration crawled through her like an army of termites. She had spent her life watching other demigods gain amazing powers. Percy could control water. If he were here, he could raise the water level and simply float down. Hazel, from what she had said, could find her way underground with flawless accuracy and even create or change the course of tunnels. She could easily make a new path. Leo would pull just the right tools from his belt and build something to do the job. Frank could turn into a bird. Jason could simply control the wind and float down. Even Piper with her charmspeak...she could have convinced Tiberinus and Rhea Silvia to be a little more helpful.

What did Annabeth have? A bronze dagger that did nothing special, and a cursed silver coin. She had her backpack with Daedalus's laptop, a water bottle, a few pieces of ambrosia for emergencies, and a box of matches—probably useless, but her dad had drilled into her head that she should always have a way to make fire.

She had no amazing powers. Even her one true magic item, her New York Yankees cap of invisibility, had stopped working, and was still back in her cabin on the *Argo II*.

You've got your intelligence, a voice said. Annabeth wondered if Athena was speaking to her, but that was probably just wishful thinking.

Intelligence...like Athena's favorite hero, Odysseus. He'd won the Trojan War with cleverness, not strength. He had overcome all sorts of monsters and hardships with his quick wits. That's what Athena valued.

Wisdom's daughter walks alone.

That didn't mean just without other people, Annabeth realized. It meant without any special powers.

Okay...so how to get down there safely and make sure she had a way to get out again if necessary?

She climbed back to the basement and stared at the open crates. Kite string and plastic swords. The idea that came to her was so ridiculous, she almost had to laugh; but it was better than nothing.

She set to work. Her hands seemed to know exactly what to do. Sometimes that happened, like when she was helping Leo with the ship's machinery or drawing architectural plans on the computer. She'd never made anything out of kite string and plastic swords, but it seemed easy, natural. Within minutes she'd used a dozen balls of string and a crateful of swords to create a makeshift rope ladder—a braided line, woven for strength yet not too thick, with swords tied at two-foot intervals to serve as hand- and footholds.

As a test, she tied one end around a support column and leaned on the rope with all her weight. The plastic swords bent under her, but they provided some extra bulk to the knots in the cord, so at least she could keep a better grip.

The ladder wouldn't win any design awards, but it might get her to the bottom of the cavern safely. First, she stuffed her backpack with the leftover spools of string. She wasn't sure why, but they were one more resource, and not too heavy.

She headed back to the hole in the mosaic floor. She secured one end of her ladder to the nearest piece of scaffolding, lowered the rope into the cavern, and shinnied down.

ANNABETH

AS ANNABETH HUNG IN THE AIR, descending hand over hand with the ladder swinging wildly, she thanked Chiron for all those years of training on the climbing course at Camp Half-Blood. She'd complained loudly and often that rope climbing would never help her defeat a monster. Chiron had just smiled, like he knew this day would come.

Finally Annabeth made it to the bottom. She missed the brickwork edge and landed in the canal, but it turned out to be only a few inches deep. Freezing water soaked into her running shoes.

She held up her glowing dagger. The shallow channel ran down the middle of a brickwork tunnel. Every few yards, ceramic pipes jutted from the walls. She guessed that the pipes were drains, part of the ancient Roman plumbing system, though it was amazing to her that a tunnel like this had survived, crowded underground with all the other centuries' worth of pipes, basements, and sewers.

A sudden thought chilled her even more than the water. A few years ago, Percy and she had gone on a quest in Daedalus's labyrinth—a secret network of tunnels and rooms, heavily enchanted and trapped, which ran under all the cities of America.

When Daedalus died in the Battle of the Labyrinth, the entire maze had

collapsed—or so Annabeth believed. But what if that was only in America? What if this was an older version of the labyrinth? Daedalus once told her that his maze had a life of its own. It was constantly growing and changing. Maybe the labyrinth could regenerate, like monsters. That would make sense. It was an archetypal force, as Chiron would say—something that could never really die.

If this was part of the labyrinth...

Annabeth decided not to dwell on that, but she also decided not to assume her directions were accurate. The labyrinth made distance meaningless. If she wasn't careful, she could walk twenty feet in the wrong direction and end up in Poland.

Just to be safe, she tied a new ball of string to the end of her rope ladder. She could unravel it behind her as she explored. An old trick, but a good one.

She debated which way to go. The tunnel seemed the same in both directions. Then, about fifty feet to her left, the Mark of Athena blazed against the wall. Annabeth could swear it was glaring at her with those big fiery eyes, as if to say, *What's your problem? Hurry up!*

She was really starting to hate that owl.

By the time she reached the spot, the image had faded, and she'd run out of string on her first spool.

As she was attaching a new line, she glanced across the tunnel. There was a broken section in the brickwork, as if a sledgehammer had knocked a hole in the wall. She crossed to take a look. Sticking her dagger through the opening for light, Annabeth could see a lower chamber, long and narrow, with a mosaic floor, painted walls, and benches running down either side. It was shaped sort of like a subway car.

She stuck her head into the hole, hoping nothing would bite it off. At the near end of the room was a bricked-off doorway. At the far end was a stone table, or maybe an altar.

Hmm...The water tunnel kept going, but Annabeth was sure this was the way. She remembered what Tiberinus had said: *Find the altar of the foreign god.* There didn't seem to be any exits from the altar room, but it was a short drop onto the bench below. She should be able to climb out again with no problem.

Still holding her string, she lowered herself down.

The room's ceiling was barrel-shaped with brick arches, but Annabeth didn't like the look of the supports. Directly above her head, on the arch nearest to the bricked-in doorway, the capstone was cracked in half. Stress fractures ran across the ceiling. The place had probably been intact for two thousand years, but she decided she'd rather not spend too much time here. With her luck, it would collapse in the next two minutes.

The floor was a long narrow mosaic with seven pictures in a row, like a time line. At Annabeth's feet was a raven. Next was a lion. Several others looked like Roman warriors with various weapons. The rest were too damaged or covered in dust for Annabeth to make out details. The benches on either side were littered with broken pottery. The walls were painted with scenes of a banquet: a robed man with a curved cap like an ice cream scoop, sitting next to a larger guy who radiated sunbeams. Standing around them were torchbearers and servants, and various animals like crows and lions wandered in the background. Annabeth wasn't sure what the picture represented, but it didn't remind her of any Greek legends that she knew.

At the far end of the room, the altar was elaborately carved with a frieze showing the man with the ice-cream-scoop hat holding a knife to the neck of a bull. On the altar stood a stone figure of a man sunk to his knees in rock, a dagger and a torch in his outraised hands. Again, Annabeth had no idea what those images meant.

She took one step toward the altar. Her foot went *CRUNCH*. She looked down and realized she'd just put her shoe through a human rib cage.

Annabeth swallowed back a scream. Where had *that* come from? She had glanced down only a moment before and hadn't seen any bones. Now the floor was littered with them. The rib cage was obviously old. It crumbled to dust as she removed her foot. Nearby lay a corroded bronze dagger very much like her own. Either this dead person had been carrying the weapon, or it had killed him.

She held out her blade to see in front of her. A little farther down the mosaic path sprawled a more complete skeleton in the remains of an embroidered red doublet, like a man from the Renaissance. His frilled collar and skull had been badly burned, as if the guy had decided to wash his hair with a blowtorch.

Wonderful, Annabeth thought. She lifted her eyes to the altar statue, which held a dagger and a torch.

Some kind of test, Annabeth decided. These two guys had failed. Correction: not just two guys. More bones and scraps of clothing were scattered all the way to the altar. She couldn't guess how many skeletons were represented, but she was willing to bet they were all demigods from the past, children of Athena on the same quest.

"I will not be another skeleton on your floor," she called to the statue, hoping she sounded brave.

A girl, said a watery voice, echoing through the room. *Girls are not allowed.*

A female demigod, said a second voice. *Inexcusable.*

The chamber rumbled. Dust fell from the cracked ceiling. Annabeth bolted for the hole she'd come through, but it had disappeared. Her string had been severed. She clambered up on the bench and pounded on the wall where the hole had been, hoping the hole's absence was just an illusion, but the wall felt solid.

She was trapped.

Along the benches, a dozen ghosts shimmered into existence—glowing purple men in Roman togas, like the Lares she'd seen at Camp Jupiter. They glared at her as if she'd interrupted their meeting.

She did the only thing she could. She stepped down from the bench and put her back to the bricked-in doorway. She tried to look confident, though the scowling purple ghosts and the demigod skeletons at her feet made her want to turtle in her T-shirt and scream.

"I'm a child of Athena," she said, as boldly as she could manage.

"A Greek," one of the ghosts said with disgust. "That is even worse."

At the other end of the chamber, an old-looking ghost rose with some difficulty (do ghosts have arthritis?) and stood by the altar, his dark eyes fixed on Annabeth. Her first thought was that he looked like the pope. He had a glittering robe, a pointed hat, and a shepherd's crook.

"This is the cavern of Mithras," said the old ghost. "You have disturbed our sacred rituals. You cannot look upon our mysteries and live."

"I don't want to look upon your mysteries," Annabeth assured him. "I'm

following the Mark of Athena. Show me the exit, and I'll be on my way."

Her voice sounded calm, which surprised her. She had no idea how to get out of here, but she knew she had to succeed where her siblings had failed. Her path led farther on—deeper into the underground layers of Rome.

The failures of your predecessors will guide you, Tiberinus had said. *After that...I do not know.*

The ghosts mumbled to each other in Latin. Annabeth caught a few unkind words about female demigods and Athena.

Finally the ghost with the pope hat struck his shepherd's crook against the floor. The other Lares fell silent.

"Your Greek goddess is powerless here," said the pope. "Mithras is the god of Roman warriors! He is the god of the legion, the god of the empire!"

"He wasn't even Roman," Annabeth protested. "Wasn't he, like, Persian or something?"

"Sacrilege!" the old man yelled, banging his staff on the floor a few more times. "Mithras protects us! I am the *pater* of this brotherhood—"

"The father," Annabeth translated.

"Do not interrupt! As *pater*, I must protect our mysteries."

"What mysteries?" Annabeth asked. "A dozen dead guys in togas sitting around in a cave?"

The ghosts muttered and complained, until the *pater* got them under control with a taxicab whistle. The old guy had a good set of lungs. "You are clearly an unbeliever. Like the others, you must die."

The others. Annabeth made an effort not to look at the skeletons.

Her mind worked furiously, grasping for anything she knew about Mithras. He had a secret cult for warriors. He was popular in the legion. He was one of the gods who'd supplanted Athena as a war deity. Aphrodite had mentioned him during their teatime chat in Charleston. Aside from that, Annabeth had no idea. Mithras just wasn't one of the gods they talked about at Camp Half-Blood. She doubted the ghosts would wait while she whipped out Daedalus's laptop and did a search.

She scanned the floor mosaic—seven pictures in a row. She studied the

ghosts and noticed all of them wore some sort of badge on their toga—a raven, or a torch, or a bow.

“You have rites of passage,” she blurted out. “Seven levels of membership. And the top level is the *pater*.”

The ghosts let out a collective gasp. Then they all began shouting at once.

“How does she know this?” one demanded.

“The girl has gleaned our secrets!”

“Silence!” the *pater* ordered.

“But she might know about the ordeals!” another cried.

“The ordeals!” Annabeth said. “I know about them!”

Another round of incredulous gasping.

“Ridiculous!” The *pater* yelled. “The girl lies! Daughter of Athena, choose your way of death. If you do not choose, the god will choose for you!”

“Fire or dagger,” Annabeth guessed.

Even the *pater* looked stunned. Apparently he hadn’t remembered there were victims of past punishments lying on the floor.

“How—how did you... ?” He gulped. “Who *are* you?”

“A child of Athena,” Annabeth said again. “But not just any child. I am...uh, the *mater* in my sisterhood. The *magna mater*, in fact. There are no mysteries to me. Mithras cannot hide anything from my sight.”

“The *magna mater*!” a ghost wailed in despair. “The big mother!”

“Kill her!” One of the ghosts charged, his hands out to strangle her, but he passed right through her.

“You’re dead,” Annabeth reminded him. “Sit down.”

The ghost looked embarrassed and took his seat.

“We do not need to kill you ourselves,” the *pater* growled. “Mithras shall do that for us!”

The statue on the altar began to glow.

Annabeth pressed her hands against the bricked-in doorway at her back. That *had* to be the exit. The mortar was crumbling, but it was not weak enough for her to break through with brute force.

She looked desperately around the room—the cracked ceiling, the floor

mosaic, the wall paintings, and the carved altar. She began to talk, pulling deductions from the top of her head.

“It is no good,” she said. “I know all. You test your initiates with fire because the torch is the symbol of Mithras. His other symbol is the dagger, which is why you can also be tested with the blade. You want to kill me, just as...uh, as Mithras killed the sacred bull.”

It was a total guess, but the altar showed Mithras killing a bull, so Annabeth figured it must be important. The ghosts wailed and covered their ears. Some slapped their faces as if to wake up from a bad dream.

“The big mother knows!” one said. “It is impossible!”

Unless you look around the room, Annabeth thought, her confidence growing.

She glared at the ghost who had just spoken. He had a raven badge on his toga—the same symbol as on the floor at her feet.

“You are just a raven,” she scolded. “That is the lowest rank. Be silent and let me speak to your *pater*.”

The ghost cringed. “Mercy! Mercy!”

At the front of the room, the *pater* trembled—either from rage or fear, Annabeth wasn’t sure which. His pope hat tilted sideways on his head like a gas gauge dropping toward empty. “Truly, you know much, big mother. Your wisdom is great, but that is all the more reason why you cannot leave. The weaver warned us you would come.”

“The weaver...” Annabeth realized with a sinking feeling what the *pater* was talking about: the thing in the dark from Percy’s dream, the guardian of the shrine. This was one time she wished she *didn’t* know the answer, but she tried to maintain her calm. “The weaver fears me. She doesn’t want me to follow the Mark of Athena. But you will let me pass.”

“You must choose an ordeal!” the *pater* insisted. “Fire or dagger! Survive one, and then, perhaps!”

Annabeth looked down at the bones of her siblings. *The failures of your predecessors will guide you.*

They’d all chosen one or the other: fire or dagger. Maybe they’d thought they

could beat the ordeal. But they had all died. Annabeth needed a third choice.

She stared at the altar statue, which was glowing brighter by the second. She could feel its heat across the room. Her instinct was to focus on the dagger or the torch, but instead she concentrated on the statue's base. She wondered why its legs were stuck in stone. Then it occurred to her: maybe the little statue of Mithras wasn't *stuck* in the rock. Maybe he was *emerging* from the rock.

"Neither torch nor dagger," Annabeth said firmly. "There is a third test, which I will pass."

"A third test?" the *pater* demanded.

"Mithras was born from rock," Annabeth said, hoping she was right. "He emerged fully grown from the stone, holding his dagger and torch."

The screaming and wailing told her she had guessed correctly.

"The big mother knows all!" a ghost cried. "That is our most closely guarded secret!"

Then maybe you shouldn't put a statue of it on your altar, Annabeth thought. But she was thankful for stupid male ghosts. If they'd let women warriors into their cult, they might have learned some common sense.

Annabeth gestured dramatically to the wall she'd come from. "I was born from stone, just as Mithras was! Therefore, I have already passed your ordeal!"

"Bah!" the *pater* spat. "You came from a hole in the wall! That's not the same thing."

Okay. So apparently the *pater* wasn't a complete moron, but Annabeth remained confident. She glanced at the ceiling, and another idea came to her—all the details clicking together.

"I have control over the very stones." She raised her arms. "I will prove my power is greater than Mithras. With a single strike, I will bring down this chamber."

The ghosts wailed and trembled and looked at the ceiling, but Annabeth knew they didn't see what she saw. These ghosts were warriors, not engineers. The children of Athena had many skills, and not just in combat. Annabeth had studied architecture for years. She knew this ancient chamber was on the verge of collapse. She recognized what the stress fractures in the ceiling meant, all

emanating from a single point—the top of the stone arch just above her. The capstone was about to crumble, and when that happened, assuming she could time it correctly...

“Impossible!” the *pater* shouted. “The weaver has paid us much tribute to destroy any children of Athena who would dare enter our shrine. We have never let her down. We cannot let you pass.”

“Then you fear my power!” Annabeth said. “You admit that I could destroy your sacred chamber!”

The *pater* scowled. He straightened his hat uneasily. Annabeth knew she’d put him in an impossible position. He couldn’t back down without looking cowardly.

“Do your worst, child of Athena,” he decided. “No one can bring down the cavern of Mithras, especially with one strike. Especially not a girl!”

Annabeth hefted her dagger. The ceiling was low. She could reach the capstone easily, but she’d have to make her one strike count.

The doorway behind her was blocked, but in theory, if the room started to collapse, those bricks should weaken and crumble. She *should* be able to bust her way through before the entire ceiling came down—assuming, of course, that there was something behind the brick wall, not just solid earth; and assuming that Annabeth was quick enough and strong enough and lucky enough. Otherwise, she was about to be a demigod pancake.

“Well, boys,” she said. “Looks like you chose the wrong war god.”

She struck the capstone. The Celestial bronze blade shattered it like a sugar cube. For a moment, nothing happened.

“Ha!” the *pater* gloated. “You see? Athena has no power here!”

The room shook. A fissure ran across the length of the ceiling and the far end of the cavern collapsed, burying the altar and the *pater*. More cracks widened. Bricks fell from the arches. Ghosts screamed and ran, but they couldn’t seem to pass through the walls. Apparently they were bound to this chamber even in death.

Annabeth turned. She slammed against the blocked entrance with all her might, and the bricks gave way. As the cavern of Mithras imploded behind her,

she lunged into darkness and found herself falling.

X X X V

ANNABETH

ANNABETH THOUGHT SHE KNEW PAIN. She had fallen off the lava wall at Camp Half-Blood. She'd been stabbed in the arm with a poison blade on the Williamsburg Bridge. She had even held the weight of the sky on her shoulders.

But that was nothing compared to landing hard on her ankle.

She immediately knew she'd broken it. Pain like a hot steel wire jabbed its way up her leg and into her hip. The world narrowed to just her, her ankle, and the agony.

She almost blacked out. Her head spun. Her breath became short and rapid.

No, she told herself. You can't go into shock.

She tried to breathe more slowly. She lay as still as possible until the pain subsided from absolute torture to just horrible throbbing.

Part of her wanted to howl at the world for being so unfair. All this way, just to be stopped by something as common as a broken ankle?

She forced her emotions back down. At camp, she'd been trained to survive in all sorts of bad situations, *including* injuries like this.

She looked around her. Her dagger had skittered a few feet away. In its dim light she could make out the features of the room. She was lying on a cold floor of sandstone blocks. The ceiling was two stories tall. The doorway through

which she'd fallen was ten feet off the ground, now completely blocked with debris that had cascaded into the room, making a rockslide. Scattered around her were old pieces of lumber—some cracked and desiccated, others broken into kindling.

Stupid, she scolded herself. She'd lunged through that doorway, assuming there would be a level corridor or another room. It had never occurred to her that she'd be tumbling into space. The lumber had probably once been a staircase, long ago collapsed.

She inspected her ankle. Her foot didn't appear too strangely bent. She could feel her toes. She didn't see any blood. That was all good.

She reached out for a piece of lumber. Even that small bit of movement made her yelp.

The board crumbled in her hand. The wood might be centuries old, or even millennia. She had no way of knowing if this room was older than the shrine of Mithras, or if—like the labyrinth—the rooms were a hodgepodge from many eras thrown randomly together.

"Okay," she said aloud, just to hear her voice. "Think, Annabeth. Prioritize."

She remembered a silly wilderness survival course Grover had taught her back at camp. At least it had seemed silly at the time. First step: Scan your surroundings for immediate threats.

This room didn't seem to be in danger of collapsing. The rockslide had stopped. The walls were solid blocks of stone with no major cracks that she could see. The ceiling was not sagging. Good.

The only exit was on the far wall—an arched doorway that led into darkness. Between her and the doorway, a small brickwork trench cut across the floor, letting water flow through the room from left to right. Maybe plumbing from the Roman days? If the water was drinkable, that was good too.

Piled in one corner were some broken ceramic vases, spilling out shriveled brown clumps that might once have been fruit. Yuck. In another corner were some wooden crates that looked more intact, and some wicker boxes bound with leather straps.

"So, no immediate danger," she said to herself. "Unless something comes

barreling out of that dark tunnel.”

She glared at the doorway, almost daring her luck to get worse. Nothing happened.

“Okay,” she said. “Next step: Take inventory.”

What could she use? She had her water bottle, and more water in that trench if she could reach it. She had her knife. Her backpack was full of colorful string (whee), her laptop, the bronze map, some matches, and some ambrosia for emergencies.

Ah...yeah. This qualified as an emergency. She dug the godly food out of her pack and wolfed it down. As usual, it tasted like comforting memories. This time it was buttered popcorn—movie night with her dad at his place in San Francisco, no stepmom, no stepbrothers, just Annabeth and her father curled up on the sofa watching sappy old romantic comedies.

The ambrosia warmed her whole body. The pain in her leg became a dull throb. Annabeth knew she was still in major trouble. Even ambrosia couldn't heal broken bones right away. It might speed up the process, but best-case scenario, she wouldn't be able to put any weight on her foot for a day or more.

She tried to reach her knife, but it was too far away. She scooted in that direction. Pain flared again, like nails were piercing her foot. Her face beaded with sweat, but after one more scoot, she managed to reach the dagger.

She felt better holding it—not just for light and protection, but also because it was so familiar.

What next? Grover's survival class had mentioned something about staying put and waiting for rescue, but that wasn't going to happen. Even if Percy somehow managed to trace her steps, the cavern of Mithras had collapsed.

She could try contacting someone with Daedalus's laptop, but she doubted she could get a signal down here. Besides, who would she call? She couldn't text anyone who was close enough to help. Demigods never carried cell phones, because their signals attracted too much monstrous attention, and none of her friends would be sitting around checking their e-mail.

An Iris-message? She had water, but she doubted that she could make enough light for a rainbow. The only coin she had was her silver Athenian drachma,

which didn't make a great tribute.

There was another problem with calling for help: this was supposed to be a solo quest. If Annabeth did get rescued, she'd be admitting defeat. Something told her that the Mark of Athena would no longer guide her. She could wander down here forever, and she'd never find the Athena Parthenos.

So...no good staying put and waiting for help. Which meant she had to find a way to keep going on her own.

She opened her water bottle and drank. She hadn't realized how thirsty she was. When the bottle was empty, she crawled to the gutter and refilled it.

The water was cold and moving swiftly—good signs that it might be safe to drink. She filled her bottle, then cupped some water in her hands and splashed her face. Immediately she felt more alert. She washed off and cleaned her scrapes as best she could.

Annabeth sat up and glared at her ankle.

"You *had* to break," she scolded it.

The ankle did not reply.

She'd have to immobilize it in some sort of cast. That was the only way she'd be able to move.

Hmm...

She raised her dagger and inspected the room again in its bronze light. Now that she was closer to the open doorway, she liked it even less. It led into a dark silent corridor. The air wafting out smelled sickly sweet and somehow evil. Unfortunately, Annabeth didn't see any other way she could go.

With a lot of gasping and blinking back tears, she crawled over to the wreckage of the stairs. She found two planks that were in fairly good shape and long enough for a splint. Then she scooted over to the wicker boxes and used her knife to cut off the leather straps.

While she was psyching herself up to immobilize her ankle, she noticed some faded words on one of the wooden crates: HERMES EXPRESS.

Annabeth scooted excitedly toward the box.

She had no idea what it was doing here, but Hermes delivered all sorts of useful stuff to gods, spirits, and even demigods. Maybe he'd dropped this care

package here years ago to help demigods like her with this quest.

She pried it open and pulled out several sheets of Bubble Wrap, but whatever had been inside was gone.

“Hermes!” she protested.

She stared glumly at the Bubble Wrap. Then her mind kicked into gear, and she realized the wrapping *was* a gift. “Oh...that’s perfect!”

Annabeth covered her broken ankle in a Bubble Wrap cast. She set it with the lumber splints and tied it all together with the leather straps.

Once before, in first aid practice, she’d splinted a fake broken leg for another camper, but she never imagined she’d have to make a splint for herself.

It was hard, painful work, but finally it was done. She searched the wreckage of the stairs until she found part of the railing—a narrow board about four feet long that could serve as a crutch. She put her back against the wall, got her good leg ready, and hauled herself up.

“Whoa.” Black spots danced in her eyes, but she stayed upright.

“Next time,” she muttered to the dark room, “just let me fight a monster. Much easier.”

Above the open doorway, the Mark of Athena blazed to life against the arch.

The fiery owl seemed to be watching her expectantly, as if to say: *About time. Oh, you want monsters? Right this way!*

Annabeth wondered if that burning mark was based on a real sacred owl. If so, when she survived, she was going to find that owl and punch it in the face.

That thought lifted her spirits. She made it across the trench and hobbled slowly into the corridor.

X X X V I

ANNABETH

THE TUNNEL RAN STRAIGHT AND SMOOTH, but after her fall, Annabeth decided to take no chances. She used the wall for support and tapped the floor in front of her with her crutch to make sure there were no traps.

As she walked, the sickly sweet smell got stronger and set her nerves on edge. The sound of running water faded behind her. In its place came a dry chorus of whispers like a million tiny voices. They seemed to be coming from inside the walls, and they were getting louder.

Annabeth tried to speed up, but she couldn't go much faster without losing her balance or jarring her broken ankle. She hobbled onward, convinced that something was following her. The small voices were massing together, getting closer.

She touched the wall, and her hand came back covered in cobwebs.

She yelped, then cursed herself for making a sound.

It's only a web, she told herself. But that didn't stop the roaring in her ears.

She'd expected spiders. She knew what was ahead: *The weaver. Her Ladyship. The voice in the dark.* But the webs made her realize how close she was.

Her hand trembled as she wiped it on the stones. What had she been thinking?

She couldn't do this quest alone.

Too late, she told herself. Just keep going.

She made her way down the corridor one painful step at a time. The whispering sounds got louder behind her until they sounded like millions of dried leaves swirling in the wind. The cobwebs became thicker, filling the tunnel. Soon she was pushing them out of her face, ripping through gauzy curtains that covered her like Silly String.

Her heart wanted to break out of her chest and run. She stumbled ahead more recklessly, trying to ignore the pain in her ankle.

Finally the corridor ended in a doorway filled waist-high with old lumber. It looked as if someone had tried to barricade the opening. That didn't bode well, but Annabeth used her crutch to push away the boards as best she could. She crawled over the remaining pile, getting a few dozen splinters in her free hand.

On the other side of the barricade was a chamber the size of a basketball court. The floor was done in Roman mosaics. The remains of tapestries hung from the walls. Two unlit torches sat in wall sconces on either side of the doorway, both covered in cobwebs.

At the far end of the room, the Mark of Athena burned over another doorway. Unfortunately, between Annabeth and that exit, the floor was bisected by a chasm fifty feet across. Spanning the pit were two parallel wooden beams, too far apart for both feet, but each too narrow to walk on unless Annabeth was an acrobat, which she wasn't, and didn't have a broken ankle, which she did.

The corridor she'd come from was filled with hissing noises. Cobwebs trembled and danced as the first of the spiders appeared: no larger than gumdrops, but plump and black, skittering over the walls and the floor.

What kind of spiders? Annabeth had no idea. She only knew they were coming for her, and she only had seconds to figure out a plan.

Annabeth wanted to sob. She wanted someone, *anyone*, to be here for her. She wanted Leo with his fire skills, or Jason with his lightning, or Hazel to collapse the tunnel. Most of all she wanted Percy. She always felt braver when Percy was with her.

I am not going to die here, she told herself. I'm going to see Percy again.

The first spiders were almost to the door. Behind them came the bulk of the army—a black sea of creepy-crawlies.

Annabeth hobbled to one of the wall sconces and snatched up the torch. The end was coated in pitch for easy lighting. Her fingers felt like lead, but she rummaged through her backpack and found the matches. She struck one and set the torch ablaze.

She thrust it into the barricade. The old dry wood caught immediately. Flames leaped to the cobwebs and roared down the corridor in a flash fire, roasting spiders by the thousands.

Annabeth stepped back from her bonfire. She'd bought herself some time, but she doubted that she'd killed all the spiders. They would regroup and swarm again as soon as the fire died.

She stepped to the edge of the chasm.

She shined her light into the pit, but she couldn't see the bottom. Jumping in would be suicide. She could try to cross one of the bars hand over hand, but she didn't trust her arm strength, and she didn't see how she would be able to haul herself up with a full backpack and a broken ankle once she reached the other side.

She crouched and studied the beams. Each had a set of iron eye hooks along the inside, set at one-foot intervals. Maybe the rails had been the sides of a bridge and the middle planks had been removed or destroyed. But eye hooks? Those weren't for supporting planks. More like...

She glanced at the walls. The same kind of hooks had been used to hang the shredded tapestries.

She realized the beams weren't meant as a bridge. They were some kind of loom.

Annabeth threw her flaming torch to the other side of the chasm. She had no faith her plan would work, but she pulled all the string out of her backpack and began weaving between the beams, stringing a cat's cradle pattern back and forth from eye hook to eye hook, doubling and tripling the line.

Her hands moved with blazing speed. She stopped thinking about the task and just did it, looping and tying off lines, slowly extending her woven net over the

pit.

She forgot the pain in her leg and the fiery barricade guttering out behind her. She inched over the chasm. The weaving held her weight. Before she knew it, she was halfway across.

How had she learned to do this?

It's Athena, she told herself. My mother's skill with useful crafts. Weaving had never seemed particularly useful to Annabeth—until now.

She glanced behind her. The barricade fire was dying. A few spiders crawled in around the edges of the doorway.

Desperately she continued weaving, and finally she made it across. She snatched up the torch and thrust it into her woven bridge. Flames raced along the string. Even the beams caught fire as if they'd been pre-soaked in oil.

For a moment, the bridge burned in a clear pattern—a fiery row of identical owls. Had Annabeth really woven them into the string, or was it some kind of magic? She didn't know, but as the spiders began to cross, the beams crumbled and collapsed into the pit.

Annabeth held her breath. She didn't see any reason why the spiders couldn't reach her by climbing the walls or the ceiling. If they started to do that, she'd have to run for it, and she was pretty sure she couldn't move fast enough.

For some reason, the spiders didn't follow. They massed at the edge of the pit—a seething black carpet of creepiness. Then they dispersed, flooding back into the burned corridor, almost as if Annabeth was no longer interesting.

“Or I passed a test,” she said aloud.

Her torch sputtered out, leaving her with only the light of her dagger. She realized that she'd left her makeshift crutch on the other side of the chasm.

She felt exhausted and out of tricks, but her mind was clear. Her panic seemed to have burned up along with that woven bridge.

The weaver, she thought. I must be close. At least I know what's ahead.

She made her way down the next corridor, hopping to keep the weight off her bad foot.

She didn't have far to go.

After twenty feet, the tunnel opened into a cavern as large as a cathedral, so

majestic that Annabeth had trouble processing everything she saw. She guessed that this was the room from Percy’s dream, but it wasn’t dark. Bronze braziers of magical light, like the gods used on Mount Olympus, glowed around the circumference of the room, interspersed with gorgeous tapestries. The stone floor was webbed with fissures like a sheet of ice. The ceiling was so high, it was lost in the gloom and layers upon layers of spiderwebs.

Strands of silk as thick as pillars ran from the ceiling all over the room, anchoring the walls and the floor like the cables of a suspension bridge.

Webs also surrounded the centerpiece of the shrine, which was so intimidating that Annabeth had trouble raising her eyes to look at it. Looming over her was a forty-foot-tall statue of Athena, with luminous ivory skin and a dress of gold. In her outstretched hand, Athena held a statue of Nike, the winged victory goddess—a statue that looked tiny from here, but was probably as tall as a real person. Athena’s other hand rested on a shield as big as a billboard, with a sculpted snake peeking out from behind, as if Athena was protecting it.

The goddess’s face was serene and kindly...and it *looked* like Athena. Annabeth had seen many statues that didn’t resemble her mom at all, but this giant version, made thousands of years ago, made her think that the artist must have met Athena in person. He had captured her perfectly.

“Athena Parthenos,” Annabeth murmured. “It’s really here.”

All her life, she had wanted to visit the Parthenon. Now she was seeing the main attraction that *used* to be there—and she was the first child of Athena to do so in millennia.

She realized her mouth was hanging open. She forced herself to swallow. Annabeth could have stood there all day looking at the statue, but she had only accomplished half her mission. She had found the Athena Parthenos. Now, how could she rescue it from this cavern?

Strands of web covered it like a gauze pavilion. Annabeth suspected that without those webs, the statue would have fallen through the weakened floor long ago. As she stepped into the room, she could see that the cracks below were so wide, she could have lost her foot in them. Beneath the cracks, she saw nothing but empty darkness.

A chill washed over her. Where was the guardian? How could Annabeth free the statue without collapsing the floor? She couldn't very well shove the Athena Parthenos down the corridor that she'd come from.

She scanned the chamber, hoping to see something that might help. Her eyes wandered over the tapestries, which were heart-wrenchingly beautiful. One showed a pastoral scene so three-dimensional, it could've been a window. Another tapestry showed the gods battling the giants. Annabeth saw a landscape of the Underworld. Next to it was the skyline of modern Rome. And in the tapestry to her left...

She caught her breath. It was a portrait of two demigods kissing underwater: Annabeth and Percy, the day their friends had thrown them into the canoe lake at camp. It was so lifelike that she wondered if the weaver had been there, lurking in the lake with a waterproof camera.

"How is that possible?" she murmured.

Above her in the gloom, a voice spoke. "For ages I have known that you would come, my sweet."

Annabeth shuddered. Suddenly she was seven years old again, hiding under her covers, waiting for the spiders to attack her in the night. The voice sounded just as Percy had described: an angry buzz in multiple tones, female but not human.

In the webs above the statue, something moved—something dark and large.

"I have seen you in my dreams," the voice said, sickly sweet and evil, like the smell in the corridors. "I had to make sure you were worthy, the *only* child of Athena clever enough to pass my tests and reach this place alive. Indeed, you are her most talented child. This will make your death so much more painful to my old enemy when you *fail utterly*."

The pain in Annabeth's ankle was nothing compared to the icy acid now filling her veins. She wanted to run. She wanted to plead for mercy. But she couldn't show weakness—not now.

"You're Arachne," she called out. "The weaver who was turned into a spider."

The figure descended, becoming clearer and more horrible. "Cursed by your

mother,” she said. “Scorned by all and made into a hideous thing...because *I* was the better weaver.”

“But you lost the contest,” Annabeth said.

“That’s the story written by the winner!” cried Arachne. “Look on my work! See for yourself!”

Annabeth didn’t have to. The tapestries were the best she’d ever seen—better than the witch Circe’s work, and, yes, even better than some weavings she’d seen on Mount Olympus. She wondered if her mother truly *had* lost—if she’d hidden Arachne away and rewritten the truth. But right now, it didn’t matter.

“You’ve been guarding this statue since the ancient times,” Annabeth guessed. “But it doesn’t belong here. I’m taking it back.”

“Ha,” Arachne said.

Even Annabeth had to admit her threat sounded ridiculous. How could one girl in a Bubble Wrap ankle cast remove this huge statue from its underground chamber?

“I’m afraid you would have to defeat me first, my sweet,” Arachne said. “And alas, that is impossible.”

The creature appeared from the curtains of webbing, and Annabeth realized that her quest was hopeless. She was about to die.

Arachne had the body of a giant black widow, with a hairy red hourglass mark on the underside of her abdomen and a pair of oozing spinnerets. Her eight spindly legs were lined with curved barbs as big as Annabeth’s dagger. If the spider came any closer, her sweet stench alone would have been enough to make Annabeth faint. But the most horrible part was her misshapen face.

She might once have been a beautiful woman. Now black mandibles protruded from her mouth like tusks. Her other teeth had grown into thin white needles. Fine dark whiskers dotted her cheeks. Her eyes were large, lidless, and pure black, with two smaller eyes sticking out of her temples.

The creature made a violent *rip-rip-rip* sound that might have been laughter.

“Now I will feast on you, my sweet,” Arachne said. “But do not fear. I will make a beautiful tapestry depicting your death.”

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LEO

LEO WISHED HE WASN'T SO GOOD.

Really, sometimes it was just embarrassing. If he hadn't had such an eye for mechanical stuff, they might never have found the secret chute, gotten lost in the underground, and been attacked by metal dudes. But he just couldn't help himself.

Part of it was Hazel's fault. For a girl with super underground senses, she wasn't much good in Rome. She kept leading them around and around the city, getting dizzy, and doubling back.

"Sorry," she said. "It's just...there's so much underground here, so many layers, it's overwhelming. Like standing in the middle of an orchestra and trying to concentrate on a single instrument. I'm going deaf."

As a result, they got a tour of Rome. Frank seemed happy to plod along like a big sheepdog (hmm, Leo wondered if he could turn into one of those, or even better: a horse that Leo could ride). But Leo started to get impatient. His feet were sore, the day was sunny and hot, and the streets were choked with tourists.

The Forum was okay, but it was mostly ruins overgrown with bushes and trees. It took a lot of imagination to see it as the bustling center of Ancient Rome. Leo could only manage it because he'd seen New Rome in California.

They passed big churches, freestanding arches, clothing stores, and fast-food restaurants. One statue of some Ancient Roman dude seemed to be pointing to a nearby McDonald's.

On the wider streets, the car traffic was absolutely nuts—man, Leo thought people in *Houston* drove crazy—but they spent most of their time weaving through small alleys, coming across fountains and little cafés where Leo was not allowed to rest.

“I never thought I'd get to see Rome,” Hazel said. “When I was alive, I mean the first time, Mussolini was in charge. We were at war.”

“Mussolini?” Leo frowned. “Wasn't he like BFFs with Hitler?”

Hazel stared at him like he was an alien. “BFFs?”

“Never mind.”

“I'd love to see the Trevi Fountain,” she said.

“There's a fountain on every block,” Leo grumbled.

“Or the Spanish Steps,” Hazel said.

“Why would you come to Italy to see Spanish steps?” Leo asked. “That's like going to China for Mexican food, isn't it?”

“You're hopeless,” Hazel complained.

“So I've been told.”

She turned to Frank and grabbed his hand, as if Leo had ceased to exist. “Come on. I think we should go this way.”

Frank gave Leo a confused smile—like he couldn't decide whether to gloat or to thank Leo for being a doofus—but he cheerfully let Hazel drag him along.

After walking forever, Hazel stopped in front of a church. At least, Leo assumed it was a church. The main section had a big domed roof. The entrance had a triangular roof, typical Roman columns, and an inscription across the top: M. AGRIPPA something or other.

“Latin for *Get a grip?*” Leo speculated.

“This is our best bet.” Hazel sounded more certain than she had all day. “There should be a secret passage somewhere inside.”

Tour groups milled around the steps. Guides held up colored placards with different numbers and lectured in dozens of languages like they were playing

some kind of international bingo.

Leo listened to the Spanish tour guide for a few seconds, and then he reported to his friends, “This is the Pantheon. It was originally built by Marcus Agrippa as a temple to the gods. After it burned down, Emperor Hadrian rebuilt it, and it’s been standing for two thousand years. It’s one of the best-preserved Roman buildings in the world.”

Frank and Hazel stared at him.

“How did you know that?” Hazel asked.

“I’m naturally brilliant.”

“Centaur poop,” Frank said. “He eavesdropped on a tour group.”

Leo grinned. “Maybe. Come on. Let’s go find that secret passage. I hope this place has air conditioning.”

Of course, no AC.

On the bright side, there were no lines and no admission fee, so they just muscled their way past the tour groups and walked on in.

The interior was pretty impressive, considering it had been constructed two thousand years ago. The marble floor was patterned with squares and circles like a Roman tic-tac-toe game. The main space was one huge chamber with a circular rotunda, sort of like a capitol building back in the States. Lining the walls were different shrines and statues and tombs and stuff. But the real eye-catcher was the dome overhead. All the light in the building came from one circular opening right at the top. A beam of sunlight slanted into the rotunda and glowed on the floor, like Zeus was up there with a magnifying glass, trying to fry puny humans.

Leo was no architect like Annabeth, but he could appreciate the engineering. The Romans had made the dome out of big stone panels, but they’d hollowed out each panel in a square-within-square pattern. It looked cool. Leo figured it also made the dome lighter and easier to support.

He didn’t mention that to his friends. He doubted they would care, but if Annabeth were here, she would’ve spent the whole day talking about it. Thinking about that made Leo wonder how she was doing on her Mark of Athena expedition. Leo never thought he’d feel this way, but he was worried

about that scary blond girl.

Hazel stopped in the middle of the room and turned in a circle. “This is amazing. In the old days, the children of Vulcan would come here in secret to consecrate demigod weapons. This is where Imperial gold was enchanted.”

Leo wondered how that worked. He imagined a bunch of demigods in dark robes trying to quietly roll a scorpion ballista through the front doors.

“But we’re not here because of that,” he guessed.

“No,” Hazel said. “There’s an entrance—a tunnel that will lead us toward Nico. I can sense it close by. I’m not sure where.”

Frank grunted. “If this building is two thousand years old, it makes sense there could be some kind of secret passage left over from the Roman days.”

That’s when Leo made his mistake of simply being too good.

He scanned the temple’s interior, thinking: If I were designing a secret passage, where would I put it?

He could sometimes figure out how a machine worked by putting his hand on it. He’d learned to fly a helicopter that way. He’d fixed Festus the dragon that way (before Festus crashed and burned). Once he’d even reprogrammed the electronic billboards in Times Square to read: ALL DA LADIES LUV LEO... accidentally, of course.

Now he tried to sense the workings of this ancient building. He turned toward a red marble altar-looking thing with a statue of the Virgin Mary on the top. “Over there,” he said.

He marched confidently to the shrine. It was shaped sort of like a fireplace, with an arched recess at the bottom. The mantel was inscribed with a name, like a tomb.

“The passage is around here,” he said. “This guy’s final resting place is in the way. Raphael somebody?”

“Famous painter, I think,” Hazel said.

Leo shrugged. He had a cousin named Raphael, and he didn’t think much of the name. He wondered if he could produce a stick of dynamite from his tool belt and do a little discreet demolition; but he figured the caretakers of this place probably wouldn’t approve.

“Hold on...” Leo looked around to make sure they weren’t being watched.

Most of the tour groups were gawking at the dome, but one trio made Leo uneasy. About fifty feet away, some overweight middle-aged dudes with American accents were conversing loudly, complaining to each other about the heat. They looked like manatees stuffed into beach clothes—sandals, walking shorts, touristy T-shirts and floppy hats. Their legs were big and pasty and covered with spider veins. The guys acted extremely bored, and Leo wondered why they were hanging around.

They weren’t watching him. Leo wasn’t sure why they made him nervous. Maybe he just didn’t like manatees.

Forget them, Leo told himself.

He slipped around the side of the tomb. He ran his hand down the back of a Roman column, all the way to the base. Right at the bottom, a series of lines had been etched into the marble—Roman numerals.

“Heh,” Leo said. “Not very elegant, but effective.”

“What is?” Frank asked.

“The combination for a lock.” He felt around the back of the column some more and discovered a square hole about the size of an electrical socket. “The lock face itself has been ripped out—probably vandalized sometime in the last few centuries. But I should be able to control the mechanism inside, if I can...”

Leo placed his hand on the marble floor. He could sense old bronze gears under the surface of the stone. Regular bronze would have corroded and become unusable long ago, but these were Celestial bronze—the handiwork of a demigod. With a little willpower, Leo urged them to move, using the Roman numerals to guide him. The cylinders turned—*click, click, click*. Then *click, click*.

On the floor next to the wall, one section of marble tile slid under another, revealing a dark square opening barely large enough to wiggle through.

“Romans must’ve been small.” Leo looked at Frank appraisingly. “You’ll need to change into something thinner to get through here.”

“That’s not nice!” Hazel chided.

“What? Just saying—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Frank mumbled. “We should go get the others before we explore. That’s what Piper said.”

“They’re halfway across the city,” Leo reminded him. “Besides, uh, I’m not sure I can close this hatch again. The gears are pretty old.”

“Great,” Frank said. “How do we know it’s safe down there?”

Hazel knelt. She put her hand over the opening as if checking the temperature. “There’s nothing alive...at least not for several hundred feet. The tunnel slants down, then levels out and goes south, more or less. I don’t sense any traps...”

“How can you tell all that?” Leo asked.

She shrugged. “Same way you can pick locks on marble columns, I guess. I’m glad you’re not into robbing banks.”

“Oh...bank vaults,” Leo said. “Never thought about that.”

“Forget I said anything,” Hazel sighed. “Look, it’s not three o’clock yet. We can at least do a little exploring, try to pinpoint Nico’s location before we contact the others. You two stay here until I call for you. I want to check things out, make sure the tunnel is structurally sound. I’ll be able to tell more once I’m underground.”

Frank scowled. “We can’t let you go by yourself. You could get hurt.”

“Frank, I can take care of myself,” she said. “Underground is my specialty. It’s safest for all of us if I go first.”

“Unless Frank wants to turn into a mole,” Leo suggested. “Or a prairie dog. Those things are awesome.”

“Shut up,” Frank mumbled.

“Or a badger.”

Frank jabbed a finger at Leo’s face. “Valdez, I swear—”

“Both of you, be quiet,” Hazel scolded. “I’ll be back soon. Give me ten minutes. If you don’t hear from me by then...Never mind. I’ll be fine. Just try not to kill each other while I’m down there.”

She dropped down the hole. Leo and Frank blocked her from view as best they could. They stood shoulder to shoulder, trying to look casual, like it was completely natural for two teenaged guys to hang around Raphael’s tomb.

Tour groups came and went. Most ignored Leo and Frank. A few people glanced at them apprehensively and kept walking. Maybe the tourists thought they would ask for tips. For some reason, Leo could unnerve people when he grinned.

The three American manatees were still hanging out in the middle of the room. One of them wore a T-shirt that said ROMA, as if he'd forget what city he was in if he didn't wear it. Every once in a while, he would glance over at Leo and Frank like he found their presence distasteful.

Something about that dude bothered Leo. He wished Hazel would hurry up.

"She talked to me earlier," Frank said abruptly. "Hazel told me you figured out about my lifeline."

Leo stirred. He'd almost forgotten Frank was standing next to him.

"Your lifeline...oh, the burning stick. Right." Leo resisted the urge to set his hand ablaze and yell: *Bwah ha ha!* The idea was sort of funny, but he wasn't that cruel.

"Look, man," he said. "It's cool. I'd never do anything to put you in danger. We're on the same team."

Frank fiddled with his centurion badge. "I always knew fire could kill me, but since my grandmother's mansion burned down in Vancouver...it seems a lot more *real*."

Leo nodded. He felt sympathy for Frank, but the guy didn't make it easy when he talked about his family mansion. Sort of like saying, *I crashed my Lamborghini*, and waiting for people to say, *Oh, you poor baby!*

Of course Leo didn't tell him that. "Your grandmother—did she die in that fire? You didn't say."

"I—I don't know. She was sick, and pretty old. She said she would die in her own time, in her own way. But I think she made it out of the fire. I saw this bird flying up from the flames."

Leo thought about that. "So your whole family has the shape-changing thing?"

"I guess," Frank said. "My mom did. Grandmother thought that's what got her killed in Afghanistan, in the war. Mom tried to help some of her buddies,

and...I don't know exactly what happened. There was a firebomb."

Leo winced with sympathy. "So we both lost our moms to fire."

He hadn't been planning on it, but he told Frank the whole story of the night at the workshop when Gaea had appeared to him, and his mother had died.

Frank's eyes got watery. "I never like it when people tell me, *Sorry about your mom.*"

"It never feels genuine," Leo agreed.

"But I'm sorry about your mom."

"Thanks."

No sign of Hazel. The American tourists were still milling around the Pantheon. They seemed to be circling closer, like they were trying to sneak up on Raphael's tomb without it noticing.

"Back at Camp Jupiter," Frank said, "our cabin Lar, Reticulus, told me I have more power than most demigods, being a son of Mars, plus having the shape-changing ability from my mom's side. He said that's why my life is tied to a burning stick. It's such a huge weakness that it kind of balances things out."

Leo remembered his conversation with Nemesis the revenge goddess at the Great Salt Lake. She'd said something similar about wanting the scales to balance. *Good luck is a sham. True success requires sacrifice.*

Her fortune cookie was still in Leo's tool belt, waiting to be opened. *Soon you will face a problem you cannot solve, though I could help you...for a price.*

Leo wished he could pluck that memory out of his head and shove it in his tool belt. It was taking up too much space. "We've all got weaknesses," he said. "Me, for instance. I'm tragically funny and good-looking."

Frank snorted. "You might have weaknesses. But your life doesn't depend on a piece of firewood."

"No," Leo admitted. He started thinking: if Frank's problem were *his* problem, how would he solve it? Almost every design flaw could be fixed. "I wonder..."

He looked across the room and faltered. The three American tourists were coming their way; no more circling or sneaking. They were making a straight line for Raphael's tomb, and all three were glaring at Leo.

“Uh, Frank?” Leo asked. “Has it been ten minutes yet?”

Frank followed his gaze. The Americans’ faces were angry and confused, like they were sleepwalking through a very annoying nightmare.

“*Leo Valdez,*” called the guy in the ROMA shirt. His voice had changed. It was hollow and metallic. He spoke English as if it was a second language. “*We meet again.*”

All three tourists blinked, and their eyes turned solid gold.

Frank yelped. “Eidolons!”

The manatees clenched their beefy fists. Normally, Leo wouldn’t have worried about getting murdered by overweight guys in floppy hats, but he suspected the eidolons were dangerous even in those bodies, especially since the spirits wouldn’t care whether their hosts survived or not.

“They can’t fit down the hole,” Leo said.

“Right,” Frank said. “Underground is sounding really good.”

He turned into a snake and slithered over the edge. Leo jumped in after him while the spirits began to wail above, “*Valdez! Kill Valdez!*”

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LEO

ONE PROBLEM SOLVED: the hatch above them closed automatically, cutting off their pursuers. It also cut off all light, but Leo and Frank could deal with that. Leo just hoped they didn't need to get out the same way they came in. He wasn't sure he could open the tile from underneath.

At least the possessed manatee dudes were on the other side. Over Leo's head, the marble floor shuddered, like fat touristy feet were kicking it.

Frank must have turned back to human form. Leo could hear him wheezing in the dark.

"What now?" Frank asked.

"Okay, don't freak," Leo said. "I'm going to summon a little fire, just so we can see."

"Thanks for the warning."

Leo's index finger blazed like a birthday candle. In front of them stretched a stone tunnel with a low ceiling. Just as Hazel had predicted, it slanted down, then leveled out and went south.

"Well," Leo said. "It only goes in one direction."

"Let's find Hazel," Frank said.

Leo had no argument with that suggestion. They made their way down the

corridor, Leo going first with the fire. He was glad to have Frank at his back, big and strong and able to turn into scary animals in case those possessed tourists somehow broke through the hatch, squeezed inside, and followed them. He wondered if the eidolons might just leave those bodies behind, seep underground, and possess one of them instead.

Oh, there's my happy thought for the day! Leo scolded himself.

After a hundred feet or so, they turned a corner and found Hazel. In the light of her golden cavalry sword, she was examining a door. She was so engrossed, she didn't notice them until Leo said, "Hi."

Hazel whirled, trying to swing her *spatha*. Fortunately for Leo's face, the blade was too long to wield in the corridor.

"What are you doing here?" Hazel demanded.

Leo gulped. "Sorry. We ran into some angry tourists." He told her what had happened.

She hissed in frustration. "I hate eidolons. I thought Piper made them promise to stay away."

"Oh..." Frank said, like he'd just had his own daily happy thought. "Piper made them promise to stay off the ship and not possess any of *us*. But if they followed us, and used other bodies to attack us, then they're not technically breaking their vow...."

"Great," Leo muttered. "Eidolons who are also lawyers. Now I *really* want to kill them."

"Okay, forget them for now," Hazel said. "This door is giving me fits. Leo, can you try your skill with the lock?"

Leo cracked his knuckles. "Stand aside for the master, please."

The door was interesting, much more complicated than the Roman numeral combination lock above. The entire door was coated in Imperial gold. A mechanical sphere about the size of a bowling ball was embedded in the center. The sphere was constructed from five concentric rings, each inscribed with zodiac symbols—the bull, the scorpion, et cetera—and seemingly random numbers and letters.

"These letters are Greek," Leo said in surprise.

“Well, lots of Romans spoke Greek,” Hazel said.

“I guess,” Leo said. “But this workmanship...no offense to you Camp Jupiter types, but this is too complicated to be Roman.”

Frank snorted. “Whereas you Greeks just *love* making things complicated.”

“Hey,” Leo protested. “All I’m saying is this machinery is delicate, sophisticated. It reminds me of...” Leo stared at the sphere, trying to recall where he’d read or heard about a similar ancient machine. “It’s a more advanced sort of lock,” he decided. “You line up the symbols on the different rings in the right order, and that opens the door.”

“But what’s the right order?” Hazel asked.

“Good question. Greek spheres...astronomy, geometry...” Leo got a warm feeling inside. “Oh, no way. I wonder...What’s the value of pi?”

Frank frowned. “What kind of pie?”

“He means the number,” Hazel guessed. “I learned that in math class once, but—”

“It’s used to measure circles,” Leo said. “This sphere, if it’s made by the guy I’m thinking of...”

Hazel and Frank both stared at him blankly.

“Never mind,” Leo said. “I’m pretty sure pi is, uh, 3.1415 blah blah blah. The number goes on forever, but the sphere has only five rings, so that should be enough, if I’m right.”

“And if you’re not?” Frank asked.

“Well, then, Leo fall down, go boom. Let’s find out!”

He turned the rings, starting on the outside and moving in. He ignored the zodiac signs and letters, lining up the correct numbers so they made the value of pi. Nothing happened.

“I’m stupid,” Leo mumbled. “Pi would expand outward, because it’s infinite.”

He reversed the order of the numbers, starting in the center and working toward the edge. When he aligned the last ring, something inside the sphere clicked. The door swung open.

Leo beamed at his friends. “That, good people, is how we do things in Leo

World. Come on in!”

“I hate Leo World,” Frank muttered.

Hazel laughed.

Inside was enough cool stuff to keep Leo busy for years. The room was about the size of the forge back at Camp Half-Blood, with bronze-topped worktables along the walls, and baskets full of ancient metalworking tools. Dozens of bronze and gold spheres like steampunk basketballs sat around in various stages of disassembly. Loose gears and wiring littered the floor. Thick metal cables ran from each table toward the back of the room, where there was an enclosed loft like a theater’s sound booth. Stairs led up to the booth on either side. All the cables seemed to run into it. Next to the stairs on the left, a row of cubbyholes was filled with leather cylinders—probably ancient scroll cases.

Leo was about to head toward the tables when he glanced to his left and nearly jumped out of his shoes. Flanking the doorway were two armored manikins—like skeletal scarecrows made from bronze pipes, outfitted with full suits of Roman armor, shield and sword.

“Dude.” Leo walked up to one. “These would be *awesome* if they worked.”

Frank edged away from the manikins. “Those things are going to come alive and attack us, aren’t they?”

Leo laughed. “Not a chance. They aren’t complete.” He tapped the nearest manikin’s neck, where loose copper wires sprouted from underneath its breastplate. “Look, the head’s wiring has been disconnected. And here, at the elbow, the pulley system for this joint is out of alignment. My guess? The Romans were trying to duplicate a Greek design, but they didn’t have the skill.”

Hazel arched her eyebrows. “The Romans weren’t good enough at being *complicated*, I suppose.”

“Or delicate,” Frank added. “Or sophisticated.”

“Hey, I just call it like I see it.” Leo jiggled the manikin’s head, making it nod like it was agreeing with him. “Still...a pretty impressive try. I’ve heard legends that the Romans confiscated the writings of Archimedes, but—”

“Archimedes?” Hazel looked baffled. “Wasn’t he an ancient mathematician or something?”

Leo laughed. “He was a lot more than that. He was only the most famous son of Hephaestus who ever lived.”

Frank scratched his ear. “I’ve heard his name before, but how can you be sure this manikin is his design?”

“It has to be!” Leo said. “Look, I’ve read all about Archimedes. He’s a hero to Cabin Nine. The dude was Greek, right? He lived in one of the Greek colonies in southern Italy, back before Rome got all huge and took over. Finally the Romans moved in and destroyed his city. The Roman general wanted to spare Archimedes, because he was so valuable—sort of like the Einstein of the ancient world—but some stupid Roman soldier killed him.”

“There you go again,” Hazel muttered. “*Stupid and Roman* don’t always go together, Leo.”

Frank grunted agreement. “How do you know all this, anyway?” he demanded. “Is there a Spanish tour guide around here?”

“No, man,” Leo said. “You can’t be a demigod who’s into building stuff and not know about Archimedes. The guy was *seriously* elite. He calculated the value of pi. He did all this math stuff we still use for engineering. He invented a hydraulic screw that could move water through pipes.”

Hazel scowled. “A hydraulic screw. Excuse me for not knowing about *that* awesome achievement.”

“He also built a death ray made of mirrors that could burn enemy ships,” Leo said. “Is that awesome enough for you?”

“I saw something about that on TV,” Frank admitted. “They proved it didn’t work.”

“Ah, that’s just because modern mortals don’t know how to use Celestial bronze,” Leo said. “*That’s* the key. Archimedes also invented a massive claw that could swing on a crane and pluck enemy ships out of the water.”

“Okay, that’s cool,” Frank admitted. “I love grabber-arm games.”

“Well, there you go,” Leo said. “Anyway, all his inventions weren’t enough. The Romans destroyed his city. Archimedes was killed. According to legends, the Roman general was a big fan of his work, so he raided Archimedes’s workshop and carted a bunch of souvenirs back to Rome. They disappeared from

history, except..." Leo waved his hands at the stuff on the tables. "Here they are."

"Metal basketballs?" Hazel asked.

Leo couldn't believe that they didn't appreciate what they were looking at, but he tried to contain his irritation. "Guys, Archimedes constructed *spheres*. The Romans couldn't figure them out. They thought they were just for telling time or following constellations, because they were covered with pictures of stars and planets. But that's like finding a rifle and thinking it's a walking stick."

"Leo, the Romans were top-notch engineers," Hazel reminded him. "They built aqueducts, roads—"

"Siege weapons," Frank added. "Public sanitation."

"Yeah, fine," Leo said. "But Archimedes was in a class by himself. His spheres could do all sorts of things, only nobody is sure..."

Suddenly Leo got an idea so incredible that his nose burst into flames. He patted it out as quickly as possible. Man, it was *embarrassing* when that happened.

He ran to the row of cubbyholes and examined the markings on the scroll cases. "Oh, gods. This is it!"

He gingerly lifted out one of the scrolls. He wasn't great at Ancient Greek, but he could tell the inscription on the case read *On Building Spheres*.

"Guys, this is the lost book!" His hands were shaking. "Archimedes wrote this, describing his construction methods, but all the copies were lost in ancient times. If I can translate this..."

The possibilities were endless. For Leo, the quest had now totally taken on a new dimension. Leo had to get the spheres and scrolls safely out of here. He had to protect this stuff until he could get it back to Bunker 9 and study it.

"The secrets of Archimedes," he murmured. "Guys, this is bigger than Daedalus's laptop. If there's a Roman attack on Camp Half-Blood, these secrets could save the camp. They might even give us an edge over Gaea and the giants!"

Hazel and Frank glanced at each other skeptically.

"Okay," Hazel said. "We didn't come here for a scroll, but I guess we can

take it with us.”

“Assuming,” Frank added, “that you don’t mind sharing its secrets with us stupid uncomplicated Romans.”

“What?” Leo stared at him blankly. “No. Look, I didn’t mean to insult— Ah, never mind. The point is this is good news!”

For the first time in days, Leo felt really hopeful.

Naturally, that’s when everything went wrong.

On the table next to Hazel and Frank, one of the orbs clicked and whirred. A row of spindly legs extended from its equator. The orb stood, and two bronze cables shot out of the top, hitting Hazel and Frank like Taser wires. Leo’s friends both crumpled to the floor.

Leo lunged to help them, but the two armored manikins that couldn’t possibly move *did* move. They drew their swords and stepped toward Leo.

The one on the left turned its crooked helmet, which was shaped like a wolf’s head. Despite the fact that it had no face or mouth, a familiar hollow voice spoke from behind its visor.

“You cannot escape us, Leo Valdez,” it said. *“We do not like possessing machines, but they are better than tourists. You will not leave here alive.”*

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LEO

LEO AGREED WITH NEMESIS ABOUT ONE THING: good luck was a sham. At least when it came to Leo's luck.

Last winter he had watched in horror while a family of Cyclopes prepared to roast Jason and Piper with hot sauce. He'd schemed his way out of that one and saved his friends all by himself, but at least he'd had time to think.

Now, not so much. Hazel and Frank had been knocked out by the tendrils of a possessed steampunk bowling ball. Two suits of armor with bad attitudes were about to kill him.

Leo couldn't blast them with fire. Suits of armor wouldn't be hurt by that. Besides, Hazel and Frank were too close. He didn't want to burn them, or accidentally hit the piece of firewood that controlled Frank's life.

On Leo's right, the suit of armor with a lion's head helmet creaked its wiry neck and regarded Hazel and Frank, who were still lying unconscious.

"A male and female demigod," said Lion Head. *"These will do, if the others die."* Its hollow face mask turned back to Leo. *"We do not need you, Leo Valdez."*

"Oh, hey!" Leo tried for a winning smile. "You always need Leo Valdez!"

He spread his hands and hoped he looked confident and useful, not desperate

and terrified. He wondered if it was too late to write TEAM LEO on his shirt.

Sadly, the suits of armor were not as easily swayed as the Narcissus Fan Club had been.

The one with the wolf-headed helmet snarled, *“I have been in your mind, Leo. I helped you start the war.”*

Leo’s smile crumbled. He took a step back. “That was you?”

Now he understood why those tourists had bothered him right away, and why this thing’s voice sounded so familiar. He’d heard it in his mind.

“You made me fire the ballista?” Leo demanded. “You call that *helping?*”

“I know how you think,” said Wolf Head. *“I know your limits. You are small and alone. You need friends to protect you. Without them, you are unable to withstand me. I vowed not to possess you again, but I can still kill you.”*

The armored dudes stepped forward. The points of their swords hovered a few inches from Leo’s face.

Leo’s fear suddenly made way for a whole lot of anger. This eidolon in the wolf helmet had shamed him, controlled him, and made him attack New Rome. It had endangered his friends and botched their quest.

Leo glanced at the dormant spheres on the worktables. He considered his tool belt. He thought about the loft behind him—the area that looked like a sound booth. Presto: *Operation Junk Pile* was born.

“First: you don’t know me,” he told Wolf Head. “And second: Bye.”

He lunged for the stairs and bounded to the top. The suits of armor were scary, but they were not fast. As Leo suspected, the loft had doors on either side—folding metal gates. The operators would’ve wanted protection in case their creations went haywire...like now. Leo slammed both gates shut and summoned fire to his hands, fusing the locks.

The suits of armor closed in on either side. They rattled the gates, hacking at them with their swords.

“This is foolish,” said Lion Head. *“You only delay your death.”*

“Delaying death is one of my favorite hobbies.” Leo scanned his new home. Overlooking the workshop was a single table like a control board. It was crowded with junk, but most of it Leo dismissed immediately: a diagram for a

human catapult that would never work; a strange black sword (Leo was no good with swords); a large bronze mirror (Leo's reflection looked terrible); and a set of tools that someone had broken, either in frustration or clumsiness.

He focused on the main project. In the center of the table, someone had disassembled an Archimedes sphere. Gears, springs, levers, and rods were littered around it. All the bronze cables to the room below were connected to a metal plate under the sphere. Leo could sense the Celestial bronze running through the workshop like arteries from a heart—ready to conduct magical energy from this spot.

“One basketball to rule them all,” Leo muttered.

This sphere was a master regulator. He was standing at Ancient Roman mission control.

“*Leo Valdez!*” the spirit howled. “*Open this gate or I will kill you!*”

“A fair and generous offer!” Leo said, his eyes still on the sphere. “Just let me finish this. A last request, all right?”

That must have confused the spirits, because they momentarily stopped hacking at the bars.

Leo's hands flew over the sphere, reassembling its missing pieces. Why did the stupid Romans have to take apart such a beautiful machine? They had killed Archimedes, stolen his stuff, then messed with a piece of equipment they could never understand. On the other hand, at least they'd had the sense to lock it away for two thousand years so that Leo could retrieve it.

The eidolons started pounding on the gates again.

“Who is it?” Leo called.

“*Valdez!*” Wolf Head bellowed.

“Valdez who?” Leo asked.

Eventually the eidolons would realize they couldn't get in. Then, if Wolf Head truly knew Leo's mind, he would decide there were other ways to force his cooperation. Leo had to work faster.

He connected the gears, got one wrong, and had to start again. Hephaestus's Hand Grenades, this was hard!

Finally he got the last spring in place. The ham-fisted Romans had almost

ruined the tension adjuster, but Leo pulled a set of watchmaker's tools from his belt and did some final calibrations. Archimedes was a genius—assuming this thing actually worked.

He wound the starter coil. The gears began to turn. Leo closed the top of the sphere and studied its concentric circles—similar to the ones on the workshop door.

“*Valdez!*” Wolf Head pounded on the gate. “*Our third comrade will kill your friends!*”

Leo cursed under his breath. *Our third comrade*. He glanced down at the spindly-legged Taser ball that had knocked out Hazel and Frank. He had figured eidolon number three was hiding inside that thing. But Leo still had to deduce the right sequence to activate this control sphere.

“Yeah, okay,” he called. “You got me. Just...just a sec.”

“*No more seconds!*” Wolf Head shouted. “*Open this gate now, or they die.*”

The possessed Taser ball lashed out with its tendrils and sent another shock through Hazel and Frank. Their unconscious bodies flinched. That kind of electricity might have stopped their hearts.

Leo held back tears. This was too hard. He couldn't do it.

He stared at the face of the sphere—seven rings, each one covered with tiny Greek letters, numbers, and zodiac signs. The answer wouldn't be pi. Archimedes would never do the same thing twice. Besides, just by putting his hand on the sphere Leo could feel that the sequence had been generated randomly. It was something only Archimedes would know.

Supposedly, Archimedes's last words had been: *Don't disturb my circles*.

No one knew what that meant, but Leo could apply it to this sphere. The lock was much too complicated. Maybe if Leo had a few years, he could decipher the markings and figure out the right combination, but he didn't even have a few seconds.

He was out of time. Out of luck. And his friends were going to die.

A problem you cannot solve, said a voice in his mind.

Nemesis...she'd told him to expect this moment. Leo thrust his hand in his pocket and brought out the fortune cookie. The goddess had warned him of a

great price for her help—as great as losing an eye. But if he didn't try, his friends would die.

“I need the access code for this sphere,” he said.

He broke open the cookie.

X L

LEO

LEO UNFURLED THE LITTLE STRIP OF PAPER. IT READ:

THAT'S YOUR REQUEST? SERIOUSLY? (OVER)

On the back, the paper said:

YOUR LUCKY NUMBERS ARE: TWELVE, JUPITER, ORION, DELTA, THREE, THETA, OMEGA. (WREAK VENGEANCE UPON GAEA, LEO VALDEZ.)

With trembling fingers, Leo turned the rings.

Outside the gates, Wolf Head growled in frustration. *“If friends do not matter to you, perhaps you need more incentive. Perhaps I should destroy these scrolls instead—priceless works by Archimedes!”*

The last ring clicked into place. The sphere hummed with power. Leo ran his hands along the surface, sensing tiny buttons and levers awaiting his commands.

Magical and electrical pulses coursed via the Celestial bronze cables, and surged through the entire room.

Leo had never played a musical instrument, but he imagined it must be like this—knowing each key or note so well that you didn't really think about what your hands were doing. You just concentrated on the kind of sound you wanted to create.

He started small. He focused on one reasonably intact gold sphere down in

the main room. The gold sphere shuddered. It grew a tripod of legs and clattered over to the Taser ball. A tiny circular saw popped out of the gold sphere's head, and it began cutting into Taser ball's brain.

Leo tried to activate another orb. This one burst in a small mushroom cloud of bronze dust and smoke.

"Oops," he muttered. "Sorry, Archimedes."

"*What are you doing?*" Wolf Head demanded. "*Stop your foolishness and surrender!*"

"Oh, yes, I surrender!" Leo said. "I'm totally surrendering!"

He tried to take control of a third orb. That one broke too. Leo felt bad about ruining all these ancient inventions, but this was life or death. Frank had accused him of caring more for machines than people, but if it came down to saving old spheres or his friends, there was no choice.

The fourth try went better. A ruby-encrusted orb popped its top and helicopter blades unfolded. Leo was glad Buford the table wasn't here—he would've fallen in love. The ruby orb spun into the air and sailed straight for the cubbyholes. Thin golden arms extended from its middle and snapped up the precious scroll cases.

"*Enough!*" Wolf Head yelled. "*I will destroy the—*"

He turned in time to see the ruby sphere take off with the scrolls. It zipped across the room and hovered in the far corner.

"*What?!*" Wolf Head cried. "*Kill the prisoners!*"

He must have been talking to the Taser ball. Unfortunately, Taser ball was in no shape to comply. Leo's gold sphere was sitting on top of its sawed-open head, picking through its gears and wires like it was scooping out a pumpkin.

Thank the gods, Hazel and Frank began to stir.

"*Bah!*" Wolf Head gestured to Lion Head at the opposite gate. "*Come! We will destroy the demigods ourselves.*"

"I don't think so, guys." Leo turned toward Lion Head. His hands worked the control sphere, and he felt a shock travel through the floor.

Lion Head shuddered and lowered his sword.

Leo grinned. "You're in Leo World, now."

Lion Head turned and stormed down the stairs. Instead of advancing on Hazel and Leo, he marched up the opposite stairs and faced his comrade.

“What are you doing?” Wolf Head demanded. *“We have to—”*

BLONG!

Lion Head slammed his shield into Wolf Head’s chest. He smashed the pommel of his sword into his comrade’s helmet, so Wolf Head became Flat, Deformed, Not Very Happy Wolf Head.

“Stop that!” Wolf Head demanded.

“I cannot!” Lion Head wailed.

Leo was getting the hang of it now. He commanded both suits of armor to drop their swords and shields and slap each other repeatedly.

“Valdez!” called Wolf Head in a warbling voice. *“You will die for this!”*

“Yeah,” Leo called out. “Who’s possessing who now, Casper?”

The machine men tumbled down the stairs, and Leo forced them to jitterbug like 1920s flappers. Their joints began smoking. The other spheres around the room began to pop. Too much energy was surging through the ancient system. The control sphere in Leo’s hand grew uncomfortably warm.

“Frank, Hazel!” Leo shouted. “Take cover!”

His friends were still dazed, staring in amazement at the jitterbugging metal guys, but they got his warning. Frank pulled Hazel under the nearest table and shielded her with his body.

One last twist of the sphere, and Leo sent a massive jolt through the system. The armored warriors blew apart. Rods, pistons, and bronze shards flew everywhere. On all the tables, spheres popped like hot soda cans. Leo’s gold sphere froze. His flying ruby orb dropped to the floor with the scroll cases.

The room was suddenly quiet except for a few random sparks and sizzles. The air smelled like burning car engines. Leo raced down the stairs and found Frank and Hazel safe under their table. He had never been so happy to see those two hugging.

“You’re alive!” he said.

Hazel’s left eye twitched, maybe from the Taser shock. Otherwise she looked okay. “Uh, what exactly happened?”

“Archimedes came through!” Leo said. “Just enough power left in those old machines for one final show. Once I had the access code, it was easy.”

He patted the control sphere, which was steaming in a bad way. Leo didn’t know if it could be fixed, but at the moment he was too relieved to care.

“The eidolons,” Frank said. “Are they gone?”

Leo grinned. “My last command overloaded their kill switches—basically locked down all their circuits and melted their cores.”

“In English?” Frank asked.

“I trapped the eidolons inside the wiring,” Leo said. “Then I melted them. They won’t be bothering anyone again.”

Leo helped his friends to their feet.

“You saved us,” Frank said.

“Don’t sound so surprised.” Leo glanced around the destroyed workshop. “Too bad all this stuff got wrecked, but at least I salvaged the scrolls. If I can get them back to Camp Half-Blood, maybe I can learn how to recreate Archimedes’s inventions.”

Hazel rubbed the side of her head. “But I don’t understand. Where is Nico? That tunnel was supposed to lead us to Nico.”

Leo had almost forgotten why they’d come down here in the first place. Nico obviously wasn’t here. The place was a dead end. So why... ?

“Oh.” He felt like there was a buzz-saw sphere on his own head, pulling out his wires and gears. “Hazel, how exactly were you tracking Nico? I mean, could you just sense him nearby because he was your brother?”

She frowned, still looking a bit wobbly from her electric shock treatment. “Not—not totally. Sometimes I can tell when he’s close, but, like I said, Rome is so confusing, so much interference because of all the tunnels and caves—”

“You tracked him with your metal-finding senses,” Leo guessed. “His sword?”

She blinked. “How did you know?”

“You’d better come here.” He led Hazel and Frank up to the control room and pointed to the black sword.

“Oh. Oh, no.” Hazel would’ve collapsed if Frank hadn’t caught her. “But

that's impossible! Nico's sword was with him in the bronze jar. Percy saw it in his dream!"

"Either the dream was wrong," Leo said, "or the giants moved the sword here as a decoy."

"So this was a trap," Frank said. "We were lured here."

"But *why*?" Hazel cried. "Where's my brother?"

A hissing sound filled the control booth. At first, Leo thought the eidolons were back. Then he realized the bronze mirror on the table was steaming.

Ah, my poor demigods. The sleeping face of Gaea appeared in the mirror. As usual, she spoke without moving her mouth, which could only have been creepier if she'd had a ventriloquism puppet. Leo hated those things.

You had your choice, Gaea said. Her voice echoed through the room. It seemed to be coming not just from the mirror, but from the stone walls as well.

Leo realized she was all around them. Of course. They were in the earth. They'd gone to all the trouble of building the *Argo II* so they could travel by sea and air, and they'd ended up in the earth anyway.

I offered salvation to all of you, Gaea said. *You could have turned back. Now it is too late. You've come to the ancient lands where I am strongest—where I will wake.*

Leo pulled a hammer from his tool belt. He whacked the mirror. Being metal, it just quivered like a tea tray, but it felt good to smash Gaea in the nose.

"In case you haven't noticed, Dirt Face," he said, "your little ambush failed. Your three eidolons got melted in bronze, and we're fine."

Gaea laughed softly. *Oh, my sweet Leo. You three have been separated from your friends. That was the whole point.*

The workshop door slammed shut.

You are trapped in my embrace, Gaea said. *Meanwhile, Annabeth Chase faces her death alone, terrified and crippled, at the hands of her mother's greatest enemy.*

The image in the mirror changed. Leo saw Annabeth sprawled on the floor of a dark cavern, holding up her bronze knife as if warding off a monster. Her face was gaunt. Her leg was wrapped up in some sort of splint. Leo couldn't see what

she was looking at, but it was obviously something horrible. He wanted to believe the image was a lie, but he had a bad feeling it was real, and it was happening right now.

The others, Gaea said, Jason Grace, Piper McLean, and my dear friend Percy Jackson—they will perish within minutes.

The scene changed again. Percy was holding Riptide, leading Jason and Piper down a spiral staircase into the darkness.

Their powers will betray them, Gaea said. They will die in their own elements. I almost hoped they would survive. They would have made a better sacrifice. But alas, Hazel and Frank, you will have to do. My minions will collect you shortly and bring you to the ancient place. Your blood will awaken me at last. Until then, I will allow you to watch your friends perish. Please...enjoy this last glimpse of your failed quest.

Leo couldn't stand it. His hand glowed white hot. Hazel and Frank scrambled back as he pressed his palm against the mirror and melted it into a puddle of bronze goo.

The voice of Gaea went silent. Leo could only hear the roar of blood in his ears. He took a shaky breath.

"Sorry," he told his friends. "She was getting annoying."

"What do we do?" Frank asked. "We have to get out and help the others."

Leo scanned the workshop, now littered with smoking pieces of broken spheres. His friends still needed him. This was still his show. As long as he had his tool belt, Leo Valdez wasn't going to sit around helplessly watching the Demigod Death Channel.

"I've got an idea," he said. "But it's going to take all three of us."

He started telling them the plan.

PIPER

PIPER TRIED TO MAKE THE BEST OF THE SITUATION.

Once she and Jason had gotten tired of pacing the deck, listening to Coach Hedge sing “Old MacDonald” (with weapons instead of animals), they decided to have a picnic in the park.

Hedge grudgingly agreed. “Stay where I can see you.”

“What are we, kids?” Jason asked.

Hedge snorted. “Kids are baby goats. They’re cute, and they have redeeming social value. You are definitely not kids.”

They spread their blanket under a willow tree next to a pond. Piper turned over her cornucopia and spilled out an entire meal—neatly wrapped sandwiches, canned drinks, fresh fruit, and (for some reason) a birthday cake with purple icing and candles already lit.

She frowned. “Is it someone’s birthday?”

Jason winced. “I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“Jason!”

“There’s too much going on,” he said. “And honestly...before last month, I didn’t even know when my birthday was. Thalia told me the last time she was at camp.”

Piper wondered what that would be like—not even knowing the day you were born. Jason had been given to Lupa the wolf when he was only two years old. He'd never really known his mortal mom. He'd only been reunited with his sister last winter.

“July First,” Piper said. “The Kalends of July.”

“Yeah.” Jason smirked. “The Romans would find that auspicious—the first day of the month named for Julius Caesar. Juno’s sacred day. Yippee.”

Piper didn’t want to push it, or make a celebration if he didn’t feel like celebrating.

“Sixteen?” she asked.

He nodded. “Oh, boy. I can get my driver’s license.”

Piper laughed. Jason had killed so many monsters and saved the world so many times that the idea of him sweating a driving test seemed ridiculous. She pictured him behind the wheel of some old Lincoln with a STUDENT DRIVER sign on top and a grumpy teacher in the passenger seat with an emergency brake pedal.

“Well?” she urged. “Blow out the candles.”

Jason did. Piper wondered if he’d made a wish—hopefully that he and Piper would survive this quest and stay together forever. She decided not to ask him. She didn’t want to jinx that wish, and she definitely didn’t want to find out that he’d wished for something different.

Since they’d left the Pillars of Hercules yesterday evening, Jason had seemed distracted. Piper couldn’t blame him. Hercules had been a pretty huge disappointment as a big brother, and the old river god Achelous had said some unflattering things about the sons of Jupiter.

Piper stared at the cornucopia. She wondered if Achelous was getting used to having no horns at all. She hoped so. Sure, he had tried to kill them, but Piper still felt bad for the old god. She didn’t understand how such a lonely, depressed spirit could produce a horn of plenty that shot out pineapples and birthday cakes. Could it be that the cornucopia had drained all the goodness out of him? Maybe now that the horn was gone, Achelous would be able to fill up with some happiness and keep it for himself.

She also kept thinking about Achelous's advice: *If you had made it to Rome, the story of the flood would have served you better.* She knew the story he was talking about. She just didn't understand how it would help.

Jason plucked an extinguished candle from his cake. "I've been thinking."

That snapped Piper back to the present. Coming from your boyfriend, *I've been thinking* was kind of a scary line.

"About?" she asked.

"Camp Jupiter," he said. "All the years I trained there. We were always pushing teamwork, working as a unit. I thought I understood what that meant. But honestly? I was always the leader. Even when I was younger—"

"The son of Jupiter," Piper said. "Most powerful kid in the legion. You were the star."

Jason looked uncomfortable, but he didn't deny it. "Being in this crew of seven...I'm not sure what to do. I'm not used to being one of so many, well, equals. I feel like I'm failing."

Piper took his hand. "You're *not* failing."

"It sure felt that way when Chrysaor attacked," Jason said. "I've spent most of this trip knocked out and helpless."

"Come on," she chided. "Being a hero doesn't mean you're invincible. It just means that you're brave enough to stand up and do what's needed."

"And if I don't *know* what's needed?"

"That's what your friends are for. We've all got different strengths. Together, we'll figure it out."

Jason studied her. Piper wasn't sure that he bought what she was saying, but she was glad he could confide in her. She liked that he had a little self-doubt. He didn't succeed all the time. He didn't think the universe owed him an apology whenever something went wrong—unlike another son of the sky god she'd recently met.

"Hercules was a jerk," he said, as if reading her thoughts. "I never want to be like that. But I wouldn't have had the courage to stand up to him without your taking the lead. You were the hero that time."

"We can take turns," she suggested.

“I don’t deserve you.”

“You’re not allowed to say that.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a breakup line. Unless you’re breaking up—”

Jason leaned over and kissed her. The colors of the Roman afternoon suddenly seemed sharper, as if the world had switched to high definition.

“No breakups,” he promised. “I may have busted my head a few times, but I’m not *that* stupid.”

“Good,” she said. “Now, about that cake—”

Her voice faltered. Percy Jackson was running toward them, and Piper could tell from his expression that he brought bad news.

They gathered on deck so that Coach Hedge could hear the story. When Percy was done, Piper still couldn’t believe it.

“So Annabeth was kidnapped on a motor scooter,” she summed up, “by Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn.”

“Not kidnapped, exactly,” Percy said. “But I’ve got this bad feeling....” He took a deep breath, like he was trying hard not to freak out. “Anyway, she’s—she’s gone. Maybe I shouldn’t have let her, but—”

“You had to,” Piper said. “You knew she had to go alone. Besides, Annabeth is tough and smart. She’ll be fine.”

Piper put some charmspeak in her voice, which maybe wasn’t cool, but Percy needed to be able to focus. If they went into battle, Annabeth wouldn’t want him getting hurt because he was too distracted about her.

His shoulders relaxed a little. “Maybe you’re right. Anyway, Gregory—I mean Tiberinus—said we had less time to rescue Nico than we thought. Hazel and the guys aren’t back yet?”

Piper checked the time on the helm control. She hadn’t realized how late it was getting. “It’s two in the afternoon. We said three o’clock for a rendezvous.”

“At the latest,” Jason said.

Percy pointed at Piper’s dagger. “Tiberinus said you could find Nico’s location...you know, with that.”

Piper bit her lip. The last thing she wanted to do was check Katoptris for more terrifying images.

“I’ve tried,” she said. “The dagger doesn’t always show what I want to see. In fact, it hardly *ever* does.”

“Please,” Percy said. “Try again.”

He pleaded with those sea-green eyes, like a cute baby seal that needed help. Piper wondered how Annabeth ever won an argument with this guy.

“Fine,” she sighed, and drew her dagger.

“While you’re at it,” said Coach Hedge, “see if you can get the latest baseball scores. Italians don’t cover baseball worth beans.”

“Shh.” Piper studied the bronze blade. The light shimmered. She saw a loft apartment filled with Roman demigods. A dozen of them stood around a dining table as Octavian talked and pointed to a big map. Reyna paced next to the windows, gazing down at Central Park.

“That’s not good,” Jason muttered. “They’ve already set up a forward base in Manhattan.”

“And that map shows Long Island,” Percy said.

“They’re scouting the territory,” Jason guessed. “Discussing invasion routes.”

Piper did *not* want to see that. She concentrated harder. Light rippled across the blade. She saw ruins—a few crumbling walls, a single column, a stone floor covered with moss and dead vines—all clustered on a grassy hillside dotted with pine trees.

“I was just there,” Percy said. “That’s in the old Forum.”

The view zoomed in. On one side of the stone floor, a set of stairs had been excavated, leading down to a modern iron gate with a padlock. The blade’s image zoomed straight through the doorway, down a spiral stairwell, and into a dark, cylindrical chamber like the inside of a grain silo.

Piper dropped the blade.

“What’s wrong?” Jason asked. “It was showing us something.”

Piper felt like the boat was back on the ocean, rocking under her feet. “We can’t go there.”

Percy frowned. “Piper, Nico is dying. We’ve got to find him. Not to mention,

Rome is about to get destroyed.”

Her voice wouldn't work. She'd kept that vision of the circular room to herself for so long, now she found it impossible to talk about. She had a horrible feeling that explaining it to Percy and Jason wouldn't change anything. She couldn't stop what was about to happen.

She picked up the knife again. Its hilt seemed colder than usual.

She forced herself to look at the blade. She saw two giants in gladiator armor sitting on oversized praetors' chairs. The giants toasted each other with golden goblets as if they'd just won an important fight. Between them stood a large bronze jar.

The vision zoomed in again. Inside the jar, Nico di Angelo was curled in a ball, no longer moving, all the pomegranate seeds eaten.

“We're too late,” Jason said.

“No,” Percy said. “No, I can't believe that. Maybe he's gone into a deeper trance to buy time. We have to hurry.”

The blade's surface went dark. Piper slipped it back into its sheath, trying to keep her hands from shaking. She hoped that Percy was right and Nico was still alive. On the other hand, she didn't see how that image connected with the vision of the drowning room. Maybe the giants were toasting each other because she and Percy and Jason were dead.

“We should wait for the others,” she said. “Hazel, Frank, and Leo should be back soon.”

“We can't wait,” Percy insisted.

Coach Hedge grunted. “It's just two giants. If you guys want, I can take them.”

“Uh, Coach,” Jason said, “that's a great offer, but we need you to man the ship—or *goat* the ship. Whatever.”

Hedge scowled. “And let you three have all the fun?”

Percy gripped the satyr's arm. “Hazel and the others need you here. When they get back, they'll need your leadership. You're their rock.”

“Yeah.” Jason managed to keep a straight face. “Leo always says you're his rock. You can tell them where we've gone and bring the ship around to meet us

at the Forum.”

“And here.” Piper unstrapped Katoptris and put it in Coach Hedge’s hands.

The satyr’s eyes widened. A demigod was never supposed to leave her weapon behind, but Piper was fed up with evil visions. She’d rather face her death without any more previews.

“Keep an eye on us with the blade,” she suggested. “And you can check the baseball scores.”

That sealed the deal. Hedge nodded grimly, prepared to do his part for the quest.

“All right,” he said. “But if any giants come this way—”

“Feel free to blast them,” Jason said.

“What about annoying tourists?”

“No,” they all said in unison.

“Bah. Fine. Just don’t take too long, or I’m coming after you with ballistae blazing.”

PIPER

FINDING THE PLACE WAS EASY. Percy led them right to it, on an abandoned stretch of hillside overlooking the ruined Forum.

Getting in was easy too. Jason's gold sword cut through the padlock, and the metal gate creaked open. No mortals saw them. No alarms went off. Stone steps spiraled down into the gloom.

"I'll go first," Jason said.

"No!" Piper yelled.

Both boys turned toward her.

"Pipes, what is it?" Jason asked. "That image in the blade...you've seen it before, haven't you?"

She nodded, her eyes stinging. "I didn't know how to tell you. I saw the room down there filling with water. I saw the three of us drowning."

Jason and Percy both frowned.

"I can't drown," Percy said, though he sounded like he was asking a question.

"Maybe the future has changed," Jason speculated. "In the image you showed us just now, there wasn't any water."

Piper wished he was right, but she suspected they wouldn't be so lucky.

"Look," Percy said. "I'll check it out first. It's fine. Be right back."

Before Piper could object, he disappeared down the stairwell.

She counted silently as they waited for him to come back. Somewhere around thirty-five, she heard his footsteps, and he appeared at the top, looking more baffled than relieved.

“Good news: no water,” he said. “Bad news: I don’t see any exits down there. And, uh, weird news: well, you should see this...”

They descended cautiously. Percy took the lead, with Riptide drawn. Piper followed, and Jason walked behind her, guarding their backs. The stairwell was a cramped corkscrew of masonry, no more than six feet in diameter. Even though Percy had given the “all clear,” Piper kept her eyes open for traps. With every turn of the stairs, she anticipated an ambush. She had no weapon, just the cornucopia on a leather cord over her shoulder. If worse came to worst, the boys’ swords wouldn’t do much good in such close quarters. Maybe Piper could shoot their enemies with high-velocity smoked hams.

As they wound their way underground, Piper saw old graffiti gouged into the stones: Roman numerals, names and phrases in Italian. That meant other people had been down here more recently than the Roman Empire, but Piper wasn’t reassured. If monsters were below, they’d ignore mortals, waiting for some nice juicy demigods to come along.

Finally, they reached the bottom.

Percy turned. “Watch this last step.”

He jumped to the floor of the cylindrical room, which was five feet lower than the stairwell. Why would someone design a set of stairs like that? Piper had no idea. Maybe the room and the stairwell had been built during different time periods.

She wanted to turn and exit, but she couldn’t do that with Jason behind her, and she couldn’t just leave Percy down there. She clambered down, and Jason followed.

The room was just like she’d seen it in Katoptris’s blade, except there was no water. The curved walls had once been painted with frescoes, which were now faded to eggshell white with only flecks of color. The domed ceiling was about fifty feet above.

Around the back side of the room, opposite the stairwell, nine alcoves were carved into the wall. Each niche was about five feet off the floor and big enough for a human-sized statue, but each was empty.

The air felt cold and dry. As Percy had said, there were no other exits.

“All right.” Percy raised his eyebrows. “Here’s the weird part. Watch.”

He stepped to the middle of the room.

Instantly, green and blue light rippled across the walls. Piper heard the sound of a fountain, but there was no water. There didn’t seem to be any source of light except for Percy’s and Jason’s blades.

“Do you smell the ocean?” Percy asked.

Piper hadn’t noticed at first. She was standing next to Percy, and he always smelled like the sea. But he was right. The scent of salt water and storm was getting stronger, like a summer hurricane approaching.

“An illusion?” she asked. All of a sudden, she felt strangely thirsty.

“I don’t know,” Percy said. “I feel like there should be water here—lots of water. But there isn’t any. I’ve never been in a place like this.”

Jason moved to the row of niches. He touched the bottom shelf of the nearest one, which was just at his eye level. “This stone...it’s embedded with seashells. This is a nymphaeum.”

Piper’s mouth was definitely getting drier. “A what?”

“We have one at Camp Jupiter,” Jason said, “on Temple Hill. It’s a shrine to the nymphs.”

Piper ran her hand along the bottom of another niche. Jason was right. The alcove was studded with cowries, conches, and scallops. The seashells seemed to dance in the watery light. They were ice-cold to the touch.

Piper had always thought of nymphs as friendly spirits—silly and flirtatious, generally harmless. They got along well with the children of Aphrodite. They loved to share gossip and beauty tips. This place, though, didn’t feel like the canoe lake back at Camp Half-Blood, or the streams in the woods where Piper normally met nymphs. This place felt unnatural, hostile, and *very* dry.

Jason stepped back and examined the row of alcoves. “Shrines like this were all over the place in Ancient Rome. Rich people had them outside their villas to

honor nymphs, to make sure the local water was always fresh. Some shrines were built around natural springs, but most were man-made.”

“So...no actual nymphs lived here?” Piper asked hopefully.

“Not sure,” Jason said. “This place where we’re standing would have been a pool with a fountain. A lot of times, if the nymphaeum belonged to a demigod, he or she would invite nymphs to live there. If the spirits took up residence, that was considered good luck.”

“For the owner,” Percy guessed. “But it would also bind the nymphs to the new water source, which would be great if the fountain was in a nice sunny park with fresh water pumped in through the aqueducts—”

“But this place has been underground for centuries,” Piper guessed. “Dry and buried. What would happen to the nymphs?”

The sound of water changed to a chorus of hissing, like ghostly snakes. The rippling light shifted from sea blue and green to purple and sickly lime. Above them, the nine niches glowed. They were no longer empty.

Standing in each was a withered old woman, so dried up and brittle they reminded Piper of mummies—except mummies didn’t normally move. Their eyes were dark purple, as if the clear blue water of their life source had condensed and thickened inside them. Their fine silk dresses were now tattered and faded. Their hair had once been piled in curls, arranged with jewels in the style of Roman noblewomen, but now their locks were disheveled and dry as straw. If water cannibals actually existed, Piper thought, this is what they looked like.

“*What would happen to the nymphs?*” said the creature in the center niche.

She was in even worse shape than the others. Her back was hunched like the handle of a pitcher. Her skeletal hands had only the thinnest papery layer of skin. On her head, a battered wreath of golden laurels glinted in her roadkill hair.

She fixed her purple eyes on Piper. “What an interesting question, my dear. Perhaps the nymphs would still be here, suffering, waiting for revenge.”

The next time that she got a chance, Piper swore she would melt down Katoptris and sell it for scrap metal. The stupid knife never showed her the whole story.

Sure, she'd seen herself drowning. But if she'd realized that nine desiccated zombie nymphs would be waiting for her, she never would've come down here.

She considered bolting for the stairs, but when she turned, the doorway had disappeared. Naturally. Nothing was there now but a blank wall. Piper suspected it wasn't just an illusion. Besides, she would never make it to the opposite side of the room before the zombie nymphs could jump on them.

Jason and Percy stood to either side of her, their swords ready. Piper was glad to have them close, but she suspected their weapons wouldn't do any good. She'd seen what would happen in this room. Somehow, these things were going to defeat them.

"Who are you?" Percy demanded.

The central nymph turned her head. "Ah...names. We once had names. I was Hagno, the first of the nine!"

Piper thought it was a cruel joke that a hag like her would be named *Hagno*, but she decided not to say that.

"The nine," Jason repeated. "The nymphs of this shrine. There were always nine niches."

"Of course." Hagno bared her teeth in a vicious smile. "But we are the *original* nine, Jason Grace, the ones who attended the birth of your father."

Jason's sword dipped. "You mean Jupiter? You were there when he was *born*?"

"Zeus, we called him then," Hagno said. "Such a squealing whelp. We attended Rhea in her labor. When the baby arrived, we hid him so that his father, Kronos, would not eat him. Ah, he had lungs, that baby! It was all we could do to drown out the noise so Kronos could not find him. When Zeus grew up, we were promised eternal honors. But that was in the old country, in Greece."

The other nymphs wailed and clawed at their niches. They seemed to be trapped in them, Piper realized, as if their feet were glued to the stone along with the decorative seashells.

"When Rome rose to power, we were invited here," Hagno said. "A son of Jupiter tempted us with favors. *A new home*, he promised. *Bigger and better! No down payment, an excellent neighborhood. Rome will last forever.*"

“Forever,” the others hissed.

“We gave in to temptation,” Hagno said. “We left our simple wells and springs on Mount Lycaeus and moved here. For centuries, our lives were wonderful! Parties, sacrifices in our honor, new dresses and jewelry every week. All the demigods of Rome flirted with us and honored us.”

The nymphs wailed and sighed.

“But Rome did not last,” Hagno snarled. “The aqueducts were diverted. Our master’s villa was abandoned and torn down. We were forgotten, buried under the earth, but we could not leave. Our life sources were bound to this place. Our old master never saw fit to release us. For centuries, we have withered here in the darkness, thirsty...so thirsty.”

The others clawed at their mouths.

Piper felt her own throat closing up.

“I’m sorry for you,” she said, trying to use charmspeak. “That must have been terrible. But we are not your enemies. If we can help you—”

“Oh, such a sweet voice!” Hagno cried. “Such beautiful features. I was once young like you. My voice was as soothing as a mountain stream. But do you know what happens to a nymph’s mind when she is trapped in the dark, with nothing to feed on but hatred, nothing to drink but thoughts of violence? Yes, my dear. You can help us.”

Percy raised his hand. “Uh...I’m the son of Poseidon. Maybe I can summon a new water source.”

“Ha!” Hagno cried, and the other eight echoed, “Ha! Ha!”

“Indeed, son of Poseidon,” Hagno said. “I know your father well. Ephialtes and Otis promised you would come.”

Piper put her hand on Jason’s arm for balance.

“The giants,” she said. “You’re working for them?”

“They are our neighbors.” Hagno smiled. “Their chambers lie beyond this place, where the aqueduct’s water was diverted for the games. Once we have dealt with you...once you have *helped* us...the twins have promised we will never suffer again.”

Hagno turned to Jason. “You, child of Jupiter—for the horrible betrayal of

your predecessor who brought us here, you shall pay. I know the sky god's powers. I raised him as a baby! Once, we nymphs controlled the rain above our wells and springs. When I am done with you, we will have that power again. And Percy Jackson, child of the sea god...from you, we will take water, an endless supply of water."

"Endless?" Percy's eyes darted from one nymph to the other. "Uh...look, I don't know about *endless*. But maybe I could spare a few gallons."

"And you, Piper McLean." Hagno's purple eyes glistened. "So young, so lovely, so gifted with your sweet voice. From you, we will reclaim our beauty. We have saved our last life force for this day. We are very thirsty. From you three, we shall drink!"

All nine niches glowed. The nymphs disappeared, and water poured from their alcoves—sickly dark water, like oil.

PIPER

PIPER NEEDED A MIRACLE, not a bedtime story. But right then, standing in shock as black water poured in around her legs, she recalled the legend Achelous had mentioned—the story of the flood.

Not the Noah story, but the Cherokee version that her father used to tell her, with the dancing ghosts and the skeleton dog.

When she was little, she would cuddle next to her dad in his big recliner. She'd gaze out the windows at the Malibu coastline, and her dad would tell her the story he'd heard from Grandpa Tom back on the rez in Oklahoma.

"This man had a dog," her father always began.

"You can't start a story that way!" Piper protested. "You have to say *Once upon a time*."

Dad laughed. "But this is a Cherokee story. They are pretty straightforward. So, anyway, this man had a dog. Every day the man took his dog to the edge of the lake to get water, and the dog would bark furiously at the lake, like he was mad at it."

"Was he?"

"Be patient, sweetheart. Finally the man got very annoyed with his dog for barking so much, and he scolded it. 'Bad dog! Stop barking at the water. It's

only water!’ To his surprise, the dog looked right at him and began to talk.”

“Our dog can say *Thank you*,” Piper volunteered. “And she can bark *Out*.”

“Sort of,” her dad agreed. “But this dog spoke entire sentences. The dog said, ‘One day soon, the storms will come. The waters will rise, and everyone will drown. You can save yourself and your family by building a raft, but first you will need to sacrifice me. You must throw me into the water.’”

“That’s terrible!” Piper said. “I would never drown my dog!”

“The man probably said the same thing. He thought the dog was lying—I mean, once he got over the shock that his dog could talk. When he protested, the dog said, ‘If you don’t believe me, look at the scruff of my neck. I am already dead.’”

“That’s sad! Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you asked me to,” her dad reminded her. And indeed, something about the story fascinated Piper. She had heard it dozens of times, but she kept thinking about it.

“Anyway,” said her dad, “the man grabbed the dog by the scruff of its neck and saw that its skin and fur were already coming apart. Underneath was nothing but bones. The dog was a skeleton dog.”

“Gross.”

“I agree. So with tears in his eyes, the man said good-bye to his annoying skeleton dog and tossed it into the water, where it promptly sank. The man built a raft, and when the flood came, he and his family survived.”

“Without the dog.”

“Yes. Without the dog. When the rains subsided, and the raft landed, the man and his family were the only ones alive. The man heard sounds from the other side of a hill—like thousands of people laughing and dancing—but when he raced to the top, alas, down below he saw nothing except bones littering the ground—thousands of skeletons of all the people who had died in the flood. He realized the ghosts of the dead had been dancing. That was the sound he heard.”

Piper waited. “And?”

“And, nothing. The end.”

“You can’t end it that way! Why were the ghosts dancing?”

“I don’t know,” Dad said. “Your grandfather never felt the need to explain. Maybe the ghosts were happy that one family had survived. Maybe they were enjoying the afterlife. They’re ghosts. Who can say?”

Piper was very unsatisfied with that. She had so many unanswered questions. Did the family ever find another dog? Obviously not all dogs drowned, because she herself had a dog.

She couldn’t shake the story. She never looked at dogs the same way, wondering if one of them might be a skeleton dog. And she didn’t understand why the family had to sacrifice their dog to survive. Sacrificing yourself to save your family seemed like a noble thing—a very doglike thing to do.

Now, in the nymphaeum in Rome, as the dark water rose to her waist, Piper wondered why the river god Achelous had mentioned that story.

She wished she had a raft, but she feared she was more like the skeleton dog. She was already dead.

PIPER

THE BASIN FILLED WITH ALARMING SPEED. Piper, Jason, and Percy pounded on the walls, looking for an exit, but they found nothing. They climbed into the alcoves to gain some height, but with water pouring out of each niche, it was like trying to balance at the edge of a waterfall. Even as Piper stood in a niche, the water was soon up to her knees. From the floor, it was probably eight feet deep and rising fast.

“I could try lightning,” Jason said. “Maybe blast a hole in the roof?”

“That could bring down the whole room and crush us,” Piper said.

“Or electrocute us,” Percy added.

“Not many choices,” Jason said.

“Let me search the bottom,” Percy said. “If this place was built as a fountain, there *has* to be a way to drain the thing. You guys, check the niches for secret exits. Maybe the seashells are knobs, or something.” It was a desperate idea, but Piper was glad for something to do.

Percy jumped in the water. Jason and Piper climbed from niche to niche, kicking and pounding, wiggling seashells embedded in the stone; but they had no luck.

Sooner than Piper expected, Percy broke the surface, gasping and flailing.

She offered her hand, and he almost pulled her in before she could help him up.

“Couldn’t breathe,” he choked. “The water...not normal. Hardly made it back.”

The life force of the nymphs, Piper thought. It was so poisoned and malicious, even a son of the sea god couldn’t control it.

As the water rose around her, Piper felt it affecting her too. Her leg muscles trembled like she’d been running for miles. Her hands turned wrinkled and dry, despite being in the middle of a fountain.

The boys moved sluggishly. Jason’s face was pale. He seemed to be having trouble holding his sword. Percy was drenched and shivering. His hair didn’t look quite so dark, as if the color was leaching out.

“They’re taking our power,” Piper said. “Draining us.”

“Jason,” Percy coughed, “do the lightning.”

Jason raised his sword. The room rumbled, but no lightning appeared. The roof didn’t break. Instead, a miniature rainstorm formed at the top of the chamber. Rain poured down, filling the fountain even faster, but it wasn’t normal rain. The stuff was just as dark as the water in the pool. Every drop stung Piper’s skin.

“Not what I wanted,” Jason said.

The water was up to their necks now. Piper could feel her strength fading. Grandpa Tom’s story about the water cannibals was true. Bad nymphs would steal her life.

“We’ll survive,” she murmured to herself, but she couldn’t charmspeak her way out of this. Soon the poisonous water would be over their heads. They’d have to swim, and this stuff was already paralyzing them.

They would drown, just like in the visions she’d seen.

Percy started pushing the water away with the back of his hand, like he was shooing a bad dog. “Can’t—can’t control it!”

You will need to sacrifice me, the skeleton dog had said in the story. *You must throw me into the water.*

Piper felt like someone had grabbed the scruff of her neck and exposed the bones. She clutched her cornucopia.

“We can’t fight this,” she said. “If we hold back, that just makes us weaker.”

“What do you mean?” Jason shouted over the rain.

The water was up to their chins. Another few inches, and they’d have to swim. But the water wasn’t halfway to the ceiling yet. Piper hoped that meant that they still had time.

“The horn of plenty,” she said. “We have to overwhelm the nymphs with *fresh* water, give them more than they can use. If we can dilute this poisonous stuff—”

“Can your horn do that?” Percy struggled to keep his head above water, which was obviously a new experience for him. He looked scared out of his mind.

“Only with your help.” Piper was beginning to understand how the horn worked. The good stuff it produced didn’t come from nowhere. She’d only been able to bury Hercules in groceries when she had concentrated on all her positive experiences with Jason.

To create enough clean fresh water to fill this room, she needed to go even deeper, tap her emotions even more. Unfortunately, she was losing her ability to focus.

“I need you both to channel everything you’ve got into the cornucopia,” she said. “Percy, think about the sea.”

“Salt water?”

“Doesn’t matter! As long as it’s clean. Jason, think about rainstorms—*much* more rain. Both of you hold the cornucopia.”

They huddled together as the water lifted them off their ledges. Piper tried to remember the safety lessons her dad had given her when they had started surfing. To help someone who’s drowning, you put your arm around them from behind and kick your legs in front of you, moving backward like you’re doing the backstroke. She wasn’t sure if the same strategy could work with *two* other people, but she put one arm around each boy and tried to keep them afloat as they held the cornucopia between them.

Nothing happened. The rain came down in sheets, still dark and acidic.

Piper’s legs felt like lead. The rising water swirled, threatening to pull her

under. She could feel her strength fading.

“No good!” Jason yelled, spitting water.

“We’re getting nowhere,” Percy agreed.

“You have to work together,” Piper cried, hoping she was right. “Both of you think of clean water—a storm of water. Don’t hold anything back. Picture all your power, all your strength leaving you.”

“That’s not hard!” Percy said.

“But *force* it out!” she said. “Offer up everything, like—like you’re already dead, and your only goal is to help the nymphs. It’s got to be a gift...a sacrifice.”

They got quiet at that word.

“Let’s try again,” Jason said. “Together.”

This time Piper bent all her concentration toward the horn of plenty as well. The nymphs wanted her youth, her life, her voice? Fine. She gave it up willingly and imagined all of her power flooding out of her.

I’m already dead, she told herself, as calm as the skeleton dog. *This is the only way.*

Clear water blasted from the horn with such force, it pushed them against the wall. The rain changed to a white torrent, so clean and cold, it made Piper gasp.

“It’s working!” Jason cried.

“Too well,” Percy said. “We’re filling the room even faster!”

He was right. The water rose so quickly, the roof was now only a few feet away. Piper could’ve reached up and touched the miniature rain clouds.

“Don’t stop!” she said. “We have to dilute the poison until the nymphs are cleansed.”

“What if they *can’t* be cleansed?” Jason asked. “They’ve been down here turning evil for thousands of years.”

“Just don’t hold back,” Piper said. “Give everything. Even if we go under—”

Her head hit the ceiling. The rainclouds dissipated and melted into the water. The horn of plenty kept blasting out a clean torrent.

Piper pulled Jason closer and kissed him.

“I love you,” she said.

The words just poured out of her, like the water from the cornucopia. She

couldn't tell what his reaction was, because then they were underwater.

She held her breath. The current roared in her ears. Bubbles swirled around her. Light still rippled through the room, and Piper was surprised she could see it. Was the water getting clearer?

Her lungs were about to burst, but Piper poured her last energy into the cornucopia. Water continued to stream out, though there was no room for more. Would the walls crack under the pressure?

Piper's vision went dark.

She thought the roar in her ears was her own dying heartbeat. Then she realized the room was shaking. The water swirled faster. Piper felt herself sinking.

With her last strength, she kicked upward. Her head broke the surface and she gasped for breath. The cornucopia stopped. The water was draining almost as fast as it had filled the room.

With a cry of alarm, Piper realized that Percy's and Jason's faces were still underwater. She hoisted them up. Instantly, Percy gulped and began to thrash, but Jason was as lifeless as a rag doll.

Piper clung to him. She yelled his name, shook him, and slapped his face. She barely noticed when all the water had drained away and left them on the damp floor.

"Jason!" She tried desperately to think. Should she turn him on his side? Slap his back?

"Piper," Percy said, "I can help."

He knelt next to her and touched Jason's forehead. Water gushed from Jason's mouth. His eyes flew open, and a clap of thunder threw Percy and Piper backward.

When Piper's vision cleared, she saw Jason sitting up, still gasping, but the color was coming back to his face.

"Sorry," he coughed. "Didn't mean to—"

Piper tackled him with a hug. She would have kissed him, but she didn't want to suffocate him.

Percy grinned. "In case you're wondering, that was clean water in your lungs."

I could make it come out with no problem.”

“Thanks, man.” Jason clasped his hand weakly. “But I think Piper’s the real hero. She saved us all.”

Yes, she did, a voice echoed through the chamber.

The niches glowed. Nine figures appeared, but they were no longer withered creatures. They were young, beautiful nymphs in shimmering blue gowns, their glossy black curls pinned up with silver and gold brooches. Their eyes were gentle shades of blue and green.

As Piper watched, eight of the nymphs dissolved into vapor and floated upward. Only the nymph in the center remained.

“Hagno?” Piper asked.

The nymph smiled. “Yes, my dear. I didn’t think such selflessness existed in mortals...especially in demigods. No offense.”

Percy got to his feet. “How could we take offense? You just tried to drown us and suck out our lives.”

Hagno winced. “Sorry about that. I was not myself. But you have reminded me of the sun and the rain and the streams in the meadows. Percy and Jason, thanks to you, I remembered the sea and the sky. I am cleansed. But mostly, thanks to Piper. She shared something even better than clear running water.” Hagno turned to her. “You have a good nature, Piper. And I’m a nature spirit. I know what I’m talking about.”

Hagno pointed to the other side of the room. The stairs to the surface reappeared. Directly underneath, a circular opening shimmered into existence, like a sewer pipe, just big enough to crawl through. Piper suspected this was how the water had drained out.

“You may return to the surface,” Hagno said. “Or, if you insist, you may follow the waterway to the giants. But choose quickly, because both doors will fade soon after I am gone. That pipe connects to the old aqueduct line, which feeds both this nymphaeum and the hypogeum that the giants call home.”

“Ugh.” Percy pressed on his temples. “Please, no more complicated words.”

“Oh, *home* is not a complicated word.” Hagno sounded completely sincere. “I thought it was, but now you have unbound us from this place. My sisters have

gone to seek new homes...a mountain stream, perhaps, or a lake in a meadow. I will follow them. I cannot wait to see the forests and grasslands again, and the clear running water.”

“Uh,” Percy said nervously, “things have changed up above in the last few thousand years.”

“Nonsense,” Hagno said. “How bad could it be? Pan would not allow nature to become tainted. I can’t wait to see him, in fact.”

Percy looked like he wanted to say something, but he stopped himself.

“Good luck, Hagno,” Piper said. “And thank you.”

The nymph smiled one last time and vaporized.

Briefly, the nymphaeum glowed with a softer light, like a full moon. Piper smelled exotic spices and blooming roses. She heard distant music and happy voices talking and laughing. She guessed she was hearing hundreds of years of parties and celebrations that had been held at this shrine in ancient times, as if the memories had been freed along with the spirits.

“What is that?” Jason asked nervously.

Piper slipped her hand into his. “The ghosts are dancing. Come on. We’d better go meet the giants.”

PERCY

PERCY WAS TIRED OF WATER.

If he said that aloud, he would probably get kicked out of Poseidon's Junior Sea Scouts, but he didn't care.

After barely surviving the nymphaeum, he wanted to go back to the surface. He wanted to be dry and sit in the warm sunshine for a long time—preferably with Annabeth.

Unfortunately, he didn't know where Annabeth was. Frank, Hazel, and Leo were missing in action. He still had to save Nico di Angelo, assuming the guy wasn't already dead. And there was that little matter of the giants destroying Rome, waking Gaea, and taking over the world.

Seriously, these monsters and gods were thousands of years old. Couldn't they take a few decades off and let Percy live his life? Apparently not.

Percy took the lead as they crawled down the drainage pipe. After thirty feet, it opened into a wider tunnel. To their left, somewhere in the distance, Percy heard rumbling and creaking, like a huge machine needed oiling. He had absolutely no desire to find out what was making that sound, so he figured that must be the way to go.

Several hundred feet later, they reached a turn in the tunnel. Percy held up his

hand, signaling Jason and Piper to wait. He peeked around the corner.

The corridor opened into a vast room with twenty-foot ceilings and rows of support columns. It looked like the same parking-garage-type area Percy had seen in his dreams, but now much more crowded with stuff.

The creaking and rumbling came from huge gears and pulley systems that raised and lowered sections of the floor for no apparent reason. Water flowed through open trenches (oh, great, more water), powering waterwheels that turned some of the machines. Other machines were connected to huge hamster wheels with hellhounds inside. Percy couldn't help thinking of Mrs. O'Leary, and how much she would hate being trapped inside one of those.

Suspended from the ceiling were cages of live animals—a lion, several zebras, a whole pack of hyenas, and even an eight-headed hydra. Ancient-looking bronze and leather conveyor belts trundled along with stacks of weapons and armor, sort of like the Amazons' warehouse in Seattle, except this place was obviously much older and not as well organized.

Leo would love it, Percy thought. The whole room was like one massive, scary, unreliable machine.

"What is it?" Piper whispered.

Percy wasn't even sure how to answer. He didn't see the giants, so he gestured for his friends to come forward and take a look.

About twenty feet inside the doorway, a life-size wooden cutout of a gladiator popped up from the floor. It clicked and whirred along a conveyor belt, got hooked on a rope, and ascended through a slot in the roof.

Jason murmured, "What the heck?"

They stepped inside. Percy scanned the room. There were several thousand things to look at, most of them in motion, but one good aspect of being an ADHD demigod was that Percy was comfortable with chaos. About a hundred yards away, he spotted a raised dais with two empty oversized praetor chairs. Standing between them was a bronze jar big enough to hold a person.

"Look." He pointed it out to his friends.

Piper frowned. "That's too easy."

"Of course," Percy said.

“But we have no choice,” Jason said. “We’ve got to save Nico.”

“Yeah.” Percy started across the room, picking his way around conveyor belts and moving platforms.

The hellhounds in the hamster wheels paid them no attention. They were too busy running and panting, their red eyes glowing like headlights. The animals in the other cages gave them bored looks, as if to say, *I’d kill you, but it would take too much energy.*

Percy tried to watch out for traps, but *everything* here looked like a trap. He remembered how many times he’d almost died in the labyrinth a few years ago. He really wished Hazel were here so she could help with her underground skills (and of course so she could be reunited with her brother).

They jumped over a water trench and ducked under a row of caged wolves. They had made it about halfway to the bronze jar when the ceiling opened over them. A platform lowered. Standing on it like an actor, with one hand raised and his head high, was the purple-haired giant Ephialtes.

Just like Percy had seen in his dreams, the Big F was small by giant standards—about twelve feet tall—but he had tried to make up for it with his loud outfit. He’d changed out of the gladiator armor and was now wearing a Hawaiian shirt that even Dionysus would’ve found vulgar. It had a garish print made up of dying heroes, horrible tortures, and lions eating slaves in the Colosseum. The giant’s hair was braided with gold and silver coins. He had a ten-foot spear strapped to his back, which wasn’t a good fashion statement with the shirt. He wore bright white jeans and leather sandals on his...well, not feet, but curved snakeheads. The snakes flicked their tongues and writhed as if they didn’t appreciate holding up the weight of a giant.

Ephialtes smiled at the demigods like he was really, really pleased to see them.

“At last!” he bellowed. “So very happy! Honestly, I didn’t think you’d make it past the nymphs, but it’s so much better that you did. Much more entertaining. You’re just in time for the main event!”

Jason and Piper closed ranks on either side of Percy. Having them there made him feel a little better. This giant was smaller than a lot of monsters he had

faced, but something about him made Percy's skin crawl. Ephialtes's eyes danced with a crazy light.

"We're here," Percy said, which sounded kind of obvious once he had said it. "Let our friend go."

"Of course!" Ephialtes said. "Though I fear he's a bit past his expiration date. Otis, where are you?"

A stone's throw away, the floor opened, and the other giant rose on a platform.

"Otis, finally!" his brother cried with glee. "You're not dressed the same as me! You're..." Ephialtes's expression turned to horror. "*What are you wearing?*"

Otis looked like the world's largest, grumpiest ballet dancer. He wore a skin-tight baby-blue leotard that Percy *really* wished left more to the imagination. The toes of his massive dancing slippers were cut away so that his snakes could protrude. A diamond tiara (Percy decided to be generous and think of it as a king's crown) was nestled in his green, firecracker-braided hair. He looked glum and miserably uncomfortable, but he managed a dancer's bow, which couldn't have been easy with snake feet and a huge spear on his back.

"Gods and Titans!" Ephialtes yelled. "It's showtime! What are you *thinking?*"

"I didn't want to wear the gladiator outfit," Otis complained. "I still think a ballet would be perfect, you know, while Armageddon is going on." He raised his eyebrows hopefully at the demigods. "I have some extra costumes—"

"No!" Ephialtes snapped, and for once Percy was in agreement.

The purple-haired giant faced Percy. He grinned so painfully, he looked like he was being electrocuted.

"Please excuse my brother," he said. "His stage presence is awful, and he has *no* sense of style."

"Okay." Percy decided not to comment on the Hawaiian shirt. "Now, about our friend..."

"Oh, him," Ephialtes sneered. "We were going to let him finish dying in public, but he has no entertainment value. He's spent *days* curled up sleeping. What sort of spectacle is that? Otis, tip over the jar."

Otis trudged over to the dais, stopping occasionally to do a pli . He knocked over the jar, the lid popped off, and Nico di Angelo spilled out. The sight of his deathly pale face and too-skinny frame made Percy’s heart stop. Percy couldn’t tell whether he was alive or dead. He wanted to rush over and check, but Ephialtes stood in his way.

“Now we have to hurry,” said the Big F. “We should go through your stage directions. The hypogeum is all set!”

Percy was ready to slice this giant in half and get out of there, but Otis was standing over Nico. If a battle started, Nico was in no condition to defend himself. Percy needed to buy him some recovery time.

Jason raised his gold *gladius*. “We’re not going to be part of any show,” he said. “And what’s a hypo—whatever-you-call-it?”

“Hypogeum!” Ephialtes said. “You’re a Roman demigod, aren’t you? You should know! Ah, but I suppose if we do our job right down here in the underworks, you really wouldn’t know the hypogeum exists.”

“I know that word,” Piper said. “It’s the area under a coliseum. It housed all the set pieces and machinery used to create special effects.”

Ephialtes clapped enthusiastically. “Exactly so! Are you a student of the theater, my girl?”

“Uh...my dad’s an actor.”

“Wonderful!” Ephialtes turned toward his brother. “Did you hear that, Otis?”

“Actor,” Otis murmured. “Everybody’s an actor. No one can dance.”

“Be nice!” Ephialtes scolded. “At any rate, my girl, you’re absolutely right, but *this* hypogeum is much more than the stageworks for a coliseum. You’ve heard that in the old days some giants were imprisoned under the earth, and from time to time they would cause earthquakes when they tried to break free? Well, we’ve done much better! Otis and I have been imprisoned under Rome for eons, but we’ve kept busy building our very own hypogeum. Now we’re ready to create the greatest spectacle Rome has ever seen—and the last!”

At Otis’s feet, Nico shuddered. Percy felt like a hellhound hamster wheel somewhere in his chest had started moving again. At least Nico was alive. Now they just had to defeat the giants, preferably without destroying the city of

Rome, and get out of here to find their friends.

“So!” Percy said, hoping to keep the giants’ attention on him. “Stage directions, you said?”

“Yes!” Ephialtes said. “Now, I *know* the bounty stipulates that you and the girl Annabeth should be kept alive if possible, but honestly, the girl is already doomed, so I hope you don’t mind if we deviate from the plan.”

Percy’s mouth tasted like bad nymph water. “Already doomed. You don’t mean she’s—”

“Dead?” the giant asked. “No. Not yet. But don’t worry! We’ve got your other friends locked up, you see.”

Piper made a strangled sound. “Leo? Hazel and Frank?”

“Those are the ones,” Ephialtes agreed. “So we can use *them* for the sacrifice. We can let the Athena girl die, which will please Her Ladyship. And we can use you three for the show! Gaea will be a bit disappointed, but really, this is a win-win. Your deaths will be *much* more entertaining.”

Jason snarled. “You want entertaining? I’ll give you entertaining.”

Piper stepped forward. Somehow she managed a sweet smile. “I’ve got a better idea,” she told the giants. “Why don’t you let us go? That would be an incredible twist. Wonderful entertainment value, and it would prove to the world how cool you are.”

Nico stirred. Otis looked down at him. His snaky feet flicked their tongues at Nico’s head.

“Plus!” Piper said quickly. “Plus, we could do some dance moves as we’re escaping. Perhaps a ballet number!”

Otis forgot all about Nico. He lumbered over and wagged his finger at Ephialtes. “You see? That’s what I was telling you! It would be incredible!”

For a second, Percy thought Piper was going to pull it off. Otis looked at his brother imploringly. Ephialtes tugged at his chin as if considering the idea.

At last he shook his head. “No...no, I’m afraid not. You see, my girl, I am the anti-Dionysus. I have a reputation to uphold. Dionysus thinks he knows parties? He’s wrong! His revels are tame compared to what I can do. That old stunt we pulled, for instance, when we piled up mountains to reach Olympus—”

“I told you that would never work,” Otis muttered.

“And the time my brother covered himself with meat and ran through an obstacle course of drakons—”

“You said Hephaestus-TV would show it during prime time,” Otis said. “No one even saw me.”

“Well, this spectacle will be *even better*,” Ephialtes promised. “The Romans always wanted bread and circuses—food and entertainment! As we destroy their city, I will offer them both. Behold, a sample!”

Something dropped from the ceiling and landed at Percy’s feet: a loaf of sandwich bread in a white plastic wrapper with red and yellow dots.

Percy picked it up. “Wonder bread?”

“Magnificent, isn’t it?” Ephialtes’s eyes danced with crazy excitement. “You can keep that loaf. I plan on distributing millions to the people of Rome as I obliterate them.”

“Wonder bread is good,” Otis admitted. “Though the Romans should dance for it.”

Percy glanced over at Nico, who was just starting to move. Percy wanted him to be at least conscious enough to crawl out of the way when the fighting started. And Percy needed more information from the giants about Annabeth, and where his other friends were being kept.

“Maybe,” Percy ventured, “you should bring our other friends here. You know, spectacular deaths...the more the merrier, right?”

“Hmm.” Ephialtes fiddled with a button on his Hawaiian shirt. “No. It’s really too late to change the choreography. But never fear. The circuses will be marvelous! Ah...not the *modern* sort of circus, mind you. That would require clowns, and I hate clowns.”

“Everyone hates clowns,” Otis said. “Even other clowns hate clowns.”

“Exactly,” his brother agreed. “But we have much better entertainment planned! The three of you will die in agony, up above, where all the gods and mortals can watch. But that’s just the opening ceremony! In the old days, games went on for days or weeks. Our spectacle—the destruction of Rome—will go on for one full month until Gaea awakens.”

“Wait,” Jason said. “One month, and Gaea wakes up?”

Ephialtes waved away the question. “Yes, yes. Something about August First being the best date to destroy all humanity. Not important! In her infinite wisdom, the Earth Mother has agreed that Rome can be destroyed first, slowly and spectacularly. It’s only fitting!”

“So...” Percy couldn’t believe he was talking about the end of the world with a loaf of Wonder bread in his hand. “You’re Gaea’s warm-up act.”

Ephialtes’s face darkened. “This is no warm-up, demigod! We’ll release wild animals and monsters into the streets. Our special effects department will produce fires and earthquakes. Sinkholes and volcanoes will appear randomly out of nowhere! Ghosts will run rampant.”

“The ghost thing won’t work,” Otis said. “Our focus groups say it won’t pull ratings.”

“Doubters!” Ephialtes said. “This hypogeum can make anything work!”

Ephialtes stormed over to a big table covered with a sheet. He pulled the sheet away, revealing a collection of levers and knobs almost as complicated-looking as Leo’s control panel on the *Argo II*.

“This button?” Ephialtes said. “This one will eject a dozen rabid wolves into the Forum. And this one will summon automaton gladiators to battle tourists at the Trevi Fountain. This one will cause the Tiber to flood its banks so we can reenact a naval battle right in the Piazza Navona! Percy Jackson, you should appreciate that, as a son of Poseidon!”

“Uh...I still think the *letting us go* idea is better,” Percy said.

“He’s right,” Piper tried again. “Otherwise we get into this whole confrontation thing. We fight you. You fight us. We wreck your plans. You know, we’ve defeated a lot of giants lately. I’d hate for things to get out of control.”

Ephialtes nodded thoughtfully. “You’re right.”

Piper blinked. “I am?”

“We can’t let things get out of control,” the giant agreed. “Everything has to be timed perfectly. But don’t worry. I’ve choreographed your deaths. You’ll love it.”

Nico started to crawl away, groaning. Percy wanted him to move faster and to groan less. He considered throwing his Wonder bread at him.

Jason switched his sword hand. “And if we refuse to cooperate with your spectacle?”

“Well, you can’t kill us.” Ephialtes laughed, as if the idea was ridiculous. “You have no gods with you, and that’s the only way you could hope to triumph. So really, it would be much more sensible to die painfully. Sorry, but the show must go on.”

This giant was even worse than that sea god Phorcys back in Atlanta, Percy realized. Ephialtes wasn’t so much the anti-Dionysus. He was Dionysus gone crazy on steroids. Sure, Dionysus was the god of revelry and out-of-control parties. But Ephialtes was all about riot and ruin for pleasure.

Percy looked at his friends. “I’m getting tired of this guy’s shirt.”

“Combat time?” Piper grabbed her horn of plenty.

“I hate Wonder bread,” Jason said.

Together, they charged.

PERCY

THINGS WENT WRONG IMMEDIATELY. The giants vanished in twin puffs of smoke. They reappeared halfway across the room, each in a different spot. Percy sprinted toward Ephialtes, but slots in the floor opened under his feet, and metal walls shot up on either side, separating him from his friends.

The walls started closing in on him like the sides of a vise grip. Percy jumped up and grabbed the bottom of the hydra's cage. He caught a brief glimpse of Piper leaping across a hopscotch pattern of fiery pits, making her way toward Nico, who was dazed and weaponless and being stalked by a pair of leopards.

Meanwhile Jason charged at Otis, who pulled his spear and heaved a great sigh, as if he would much rather dance *Swan Lake* than kill another demigod.

Percy registered all this in a split second, but there wasn't much he could do about it. The hydra snapped at his hands. He swung and dropped, landing in a grove of painted plywood trees that sprang up from nowhere. The trees changed positions as he tried to run through them, so he slashed down the whole forest with Riptide.

"Wonderful!" Ephialtes cried. He stood at his control panel about sixty feet to Percy's left. "We'll consider this a dress rehearsal. Shall I unleash the hydra onto the Spanish Steps now?"

He pulled a lever, and Percy glanced behind him. The cage he had just been hanging from was now rising toward a hatch in the ceiling. In three seconds it would be gone. If Percy attacked the giant, the hydra would ravage the city.

Cursing, he threw Riptide like a boomerang. The sword wasn't designed for that, but the Celestial bronze blade sliced through the chains suspending the hydra. The cage tumbled sideways. The door broke open, and the monster spilled out—right in front of Percy.

“Oh, you *are* a spoilsport, Jackson!” Ephialtes called. “Very well. Battle it here, if you must, but your death won't be nearly as good without the cheering crowds.”

Percy stepped forward to confront the monster—then realized he'd just thrown his weapon away. A bit of bad planning on his part.

He rolled to one side as all eight hydra heads spit acid, turning the floor where he'd been standing into a steaming crater of melted stone. Percy really hated hydras. It was almost a good thing that he'd lost his sword, since his gut instinct would've been to slash at the heads, and a hydra simply grew two new ones for each one it lost.

The last time he'd faced a hydra, he'd been saved by a battleship with bronze cannons that blasted the monster to pieces. That strategy couldn't help him now...or could it?

The hydra lashed out. Percy ducked behind a giant hamster wheel and scanned the room, looking for the boxes he'd seen in his dream. He remembered something about rocket launchers.

At the dais, Piper stood guard over Nico as the leopards advanced. She aimed her cornucopia and shot a pot roast over the cats' heads. It must have smelled pretty good, because the leopards raced after it.

About eighty feet to Piper's right, Jason battled Otis, sword against spear. Otis had lost his diamond tiara and looked angry about it. He probably could have impaled Jason several times, but the giant insisted on doing a pirouette with every attack, which slowed him down.

Meanwhile Ephialtes laughed as he pushed buttons on his control board, cranking the conveyor belts into high gear and opening random animal cages.

The hydra charged around the hamster wheel. Percy swung behind a column, grabbed a garbage bag full of Wonder bread, and threw it at the monster. The hydra spit acid, which was a mistake. The bag and wrappers dissolved in midair. The Wonder bread absorbed the acid like fire extinguisher foam and splattered against the hydra, covering it in a sticky, steaming layer of high-calorie poisonous goo.

As the monster reeled, shaking its heads and blinking Wonder acid out of its eyes, Percy looked around desperately. He didn't see the rocket-launcher boxes, but tucked against the back wall was a strange contraption like an artist's easel, fitted with rows of missile launchers. Percy spotted a bazooka, a grenade launcher, a giant Roman candle, and a dozen other wicked-looking weapons. They all seemed to be wired together, pointing in the same direction and connected to a single bronze lever on the side. At the top of the easel, spelled in carnations, were the words: HAPPY DESTRUCTION, ROME!

Percy bolted toward the device. The hydra hissed and charged after him.

"I know!" Ephialtes cried out happily. "We can start with explosions along the Via Labicana! We can't keep our audience waiting forever."

Percy scrambled behind the easel and turned it toward Ephialtes. He didn't have Leo's skill with machines, but he knew how to aim a weapon.

The hydra barreled toward him, blocking his view of the giant. Percy hoped this contraption would have enough firepower to take down two targets at once. He tugged at the lever. It didn't budge.

All eight hydra heads loomed over him, ready to melt him into a pool of sludge. He tugged the lever again. This time the easel shook and the weapons began to hiss.

"Duck and cover!" Percy yelled, hoping his friends got the message.

Percy leaped to one side as the easel fired. The sound was like a fiesta in the middle of an exploding gunpowder factory. The hydra vaporized instantly. Unfortunately, the recoil knocked the easel sideways and sent more projectiles shooting all over the room. A chunk of ceiling collapsed and crushed a waterwheel. More cages snapped off their chains, unleashing two zebras and a pack of hyenas. A grenade exploded over Ephialtes's head, but it only blasted

him off his feet. The control board didn't even look damaged.

Across the room, sandbags rained down around Piper and Nico. Piper tried to pull Nico to safety, but one of the bags caught her shoulder and knocked her down.

"Piper!" Jason cried. He ran toward her, completely forgetting about Otis, who aimed his spear at Jason's back.

"Look out!" Percy yelled.

Jason had fast reflexes. As Otis threw, Jason rolled. The point sailed over him and Jason flicked his hand, summoning a gust of wind that changed the spear's direction. It flew across the room and skewered Ephialtes through his side just as he was getting to his feet.

"Otis!" Ephialtes stumbled away from his control board, clutching the spear as he began to crumble into monster dust. "Will you *please* stop killing me!"

"Not my fault!"

Otis had barely finished speaking when Percy's missile-launching contraption spit out one last sphere of Roman candle fire. The fiery pink ball of death (naturally it had to be pink) hit the ceiling above Otis and exploded in a beautiful shower of light. Colorful sparks pirouetted gracefully around the giant. Then a ten-foot section of roof collapsed and crushed him flat.

Jason ran to Piper's side. She yelped when he touched her arm. Her shoulder looked unnaturally bent, but she muttered, "Fine. I'm fine." Next to her, Nico sat up, looking around him in bewilderment as if just realizing he'd missed a battle.

Sadly, the giants weren't finished. Ephialtes was already re-forming, his head and shoulders rising from the mound of dust. He tugged his arms free and glowered at Percy.

Across the room, the pile of rubble shifted, and Otis busted out. His head was slightly caved in. All the firecrackers in his hair had popped, and his braids were smoking. His leotard was in tatters, which was just about the only way it could've looked *less* attractive on him.

"Percy!" Jason shouted. "The controls!"

Percy unfroze. He found Riptide in his pocket again, uncapped his sword, and lunged for the switchboard. He slashed his blade across the top, decapitating the

controls in a shower of bronze sparks.

“No!” Ephialtes wailed. “You’ve ruined the spectacle!”

Percy turned too slowly. Ephialtes swung his spear like a bat and smacked him across the chest. He fell to his knees, the pain turning his stomach to lava.

Jason ran to his side, but Otis lumbered after him. Percy managed to rise and found himself shoulder to shoulder with Jason. Over by the dais, Piper was still on the floor, unable to get up. Nico was barely conscious.

The giants were healing, getting stronger by the minute. Percy was not.

Ephialtes smiled apologetically. “Tired, Percy Jackson? As I said, you cannot kill us. So I guess we’re at an impasse. Oh, wait...no we’re not! Because we can kill you!”

“That,” Otis grumbled, picking up his fallen spear, “is the first thing sensible thing you’ve said all day, brother.”

The giants pointed their weapons, ready to turn Percy and Jason into a demigod-kabob.

“We won’t give up,” Jason growled. “We’ll cut you into pieces like Jupiter did to Saturn.”

“That’s right,” Percy said. “You’re both dead. I don’t care if we have a god on our side or not.”

“Well, that’s a shame,” said a new voice.

To his right, another platform lowered from the ceiling. Leaning casually on a pinecone-topped staff was a man in a purple camp shirt, khaki shorts, and sandals with white socks. He raised his broad-brimmed hat, and purple fire flickered in his eyes. “I’d hate to think I made a special trip for nothing.”

PERCY

PERCY HAD NEVER THOUGHT OF MR. D as a calming influence, but suddenly everything got quiet. The machines ground to a halt. The wild animals stopped growling.

The two leopards paced over—still licking their lips from Piper’s pot roast—and butted their heads affectionately against the god’s legs. Mr. D scratched their ears.

“Really, Ephialtes,” he chided. “Killing demigods is one thing. But using leopards for your spectacle? That’s over the line.”

The giant made a squeaking sound. “This—this is impossible. D-D—”

“It’s Bacchus, actually, my old friend,” said the god. “And of course it’s possible. Someone told me there was a party going on.”

He looked the same as he had in Kansas, but Percy still couldn’t get over the differences between Bacchus and his old not-so-much-of-a-friend Mr. D.

Bacchus was meaner and leaner, with less of a potbelly. He had longer hair, more spring in his step, and a lot more anger in his eyes. He even managed to make a pinecone on a stick look intimidating.

Ephialtes’s spear quivered. “You—you gods are doomed! Be gone, in the

name of Gaea!”

“Hmm.” Bacchus sounded unimpressed. He strolled through the ruined props, platforms, and special effects.

“Tacky.” He waved his hand at a painted wooden gladiator, then turned to a machine that looked like an oversized rolling pin studded with knives. “Cheap. Boring. And this...” He inspected the rocket-launching contraption, which was still smoking. “Tacky, cheap, *and* boring. Honestly, Ephialtes. You have no sense of style.”

“STYLE?” The giant’s face flushed. “I have *mountains* of style. I *define* style. I—I—”

“My brother *oozes* style,” Otis suggested.

“Thank you!” Ephialtes cried.

Bacchus stepped forward, and the giants stumbled back. “Have you two gotten shorter?” asked the god.

“Oh, that’s low,” Ephialtes growled. “I’m quite tall enough to destroy you, Bacchus! You gods, always hiding behind your mortal heroes, trusting the fate of Olympus to the likes of *these*.”

He sneered at Percy.

Jason hefted his sword. “Lord Bacchus, are we going to kill these giants or what?”

“Well, I certainly hope so,” Bacchus said. “Please, carry on.”

Percy stared at him. “Didn’t you come here to help?”

Bacchus shrugged. “Oh, I appreciated the sacrifice at sea. A whole ship full of Diet Coke. Very nice. Although I would’ve preferred Diet Pepsi.”

“And six million in gold and jewels,” Percy muttered.

“Yes,” Bacchus said, “although with demigod parties of five or more the gratuity is included, so that wasn’t necessary.”

“What?”

“Never mind,” Bacchus said. “At any rate, you got my attention. I’m here. Now I need to see if you’re worthy of my help. Go ahead. Battle. If I’m impressed, I’ll jump in for the grand finale.”

“We speared one,” Percy said. “Dropped the roof on the other. What do you

consider impressive?”

“Ah, a good question...” Bacchus tapped his thyrsus. Then he smiled in a way that made Percy think, *Uh-oh*. “Perhaps you need inspiration! The stage hasn’t been properly set. You call this a spectacle, Ephialtes? Let me show you how it’s done.”

The god dissolved into purple mist. Piper and Nico disappeared.

“Pipes!” Jason yelled. “Bacchus, where did you—?”

The entire floor rumbled and began to rise. The ceiling opened in a series of panels. Sunlight poured in. The air shimmered like a mirage, and Percy heard the roar of a crowd above him.

The hypogeum ascended through a forest of weathered stone columns, into the middle of a ruined coliseum.

Percy’s heart did a somersault. This wasn’t just any coliseum. It was *the* Colosseum. The giants’ special effects machines had gone into overtime, laying planks across ruined support beams so the arena had a proper floor again. The bleachers repaired themselves until they were gleaming white. A giant red-and-gold canopy extended overhead to provide shade from the afternoon sun. The emperor’s box was draped with silk, flanked by banners and golden eagles. The roar of applause came from thousands of shimmering purple ghosts, the Lares of Rome brought back for an encore performance.

Vents opened in the floor and sprayed sand across the arena. Huge props sprang up—garage-size mountains of plaster, stone columns, and (for some reason) life-size plastic barnyard animals. A small lake appeared to one side. Ditches crisscrossed the arena floor in case anyone was in the mood for trench warfare. Percy and Jason stood together facing the twin giants.

“This is a proper show!” boomed the voice of Bacchus. He sat in the emperor’s box wearing purple robes and golden laurels. At his left sat Nico and Piper, her shoulder being tended by a nymph in a nurse’s uniform. At Bacchus’s right crouched a satyr, offering up Doritos and grapes. The god raised a can of Diet Pepsi and the crowd went respectfully quiet.

Percy glared up at him. “You’re just going to *sit* there?”

“The demigod is right!” Ephialtes bellowed. “Fight us yourself, coward! Um,

without the demigods.”

Bacchus smiled lazily. “Juno says she’s assembled a worthy crew of demigods. Show me. Entertain me, heroes of Olympus. Give me a reason to do more. Being a god has its privileges.”

He popped his soda can top, and the crowd cheered.

X L V I I I

P E R C Y

PERCY HAD FOUGHT MANY BATTLES. He'd even fought in a couple of arenas, but nothing like this. In the huge Colosseum, with thousands of cheering ghosts, the god Bacchus staring down at him, and the two twelve-foot giants looming over him, Percy felt as small and insignificant as a bug. He also felt *very* angry.

Fighting giants was one thing. Bacchus making it into a game was something else.

Percy remembered what Luke Castellan had told him years ago, when Percy had come back from his very first quest: *Didn't you realize how useless it all is? All the heroics—being pawns of the Olympians?*

Percy was almost the same age now as Luke had been then. He could understand how Luke became so spiteful. In the past five years, Percy had been a pawn too many times. The Olympians seemed to take turns using him for their schemes.

Maybe the gods were better than the Titans, or the giants, or Gaea, but that didn't make them good or wise. It didn't make Percy like this stupid arena battle.

Unfortunately, he didn't have much choice. If he was going to save his friends, he had to beat these giants. He had to survive and find Annabeth.

Ephialtes and Otis made his decision easier by attacking. Together, the giants picked up a fake mountain as big as Percy's New York apartment and hurled it at the demigods.

Percy and Jason bolted. They dove together into the nearest trench and the mountain shattered above them, spraying them with plaster shrapnel. It wasn't deadly, but it stung like crazy.

The crowd jeered and shouted for blood. "*Fight! Fight!*"

"I'll take Otis again?" Jason called over the noise. "Or do you want him this time?"

Percy tried to think. Dividing was the natural course—fighting the giants one-on-one, but that hadn't worked so well last time. It dawned on him that they needed a different strategy.

This whole trip, Percy had felt responsible for leading and protecting his friends. He was sure Jason felt the same way. They'd worked in small groups, hoping that would be safer. They'd fought as individuals, each demigod doing what he or she did best. But Hera had made them a team of seven for a reason. The few times Percy and Jason had worked together—summoning the storm at Fort Sumter, helping the *Argo II* escape the Pillars of Hercules, even filling the nymphaeum—Percy had felt more confident, better able to figure out problems, as if he'd been a Cyclops his whole life and suddenly woke up with two eyes.

"We attack together," he said. "Otis first, because he's weaker. Take him out quickly and move to Ephialtes. Bronze and gold together—maybe that'll keep them from re-forming a little longer."

Jason smiled dryly, like he'd just found out he would die in an embarrassing way.

"Why not?" he agreed. "But Ephialtes isn't going to stand there and wait while we kill his brother. Unless—"

"Good wind today," Percy offered. "And there're some water pipes running under the arena."

Jason understood immediately. He laughed, and Percy felt a spark of friendship. This guy thought the same way he did about a lot of things.

"On three?" Jason said.

“Why wait?”

They charged out of the trench. As Percy suspected, the twins had lifted another plaster mountain and were waiting for a clear shot. The giants raised it above their heads, preparing to throw, and Percy caused a water pipe to burst at their feet, shaking the floor. Jason sent a blast of wind against Ephialtes’s chest. The purple-haired giant toppled backward and Otis lost his grip on the mountain, which promptly collapsed on top of his brother. Only Ephialtes’s snake feet stuck out, darting their heads around, as if wondering where the rest of their body had gone.

The crowd roared with approval, but Percy suspected Ephialtes was only stunned. They had a few seconds at best.

“Hey, Otis!” he shouted. “*The Nutcracker* bites!”

“Ahhhhh!” Otis snatched up his spear and threw, but he was too angry to aim straight. Jason deflected it over Percy’s head and into the lake.

The demigods backed toward the water, shouting insults about ballet—which was kind of a challenge, as Percy didn’t know much about it.

Otis barreled toward them empty-handed, before apparently realizing that a) he was empty-handed, and b) charging toward a large body of water to fight a son of Poseidon was maybe not a good idea.

Too late, he tried to stop. The demigods rolled to either side, and Jason summoned the wind, using the giant’s own momentum to shove him into the water. As Otis struggled to rise, Percy and Jason attacked as one. They launched themselves at the giant and brought their blades down on Otis’s head.

The poor guy didn’t even have a chance to pirouette. He exploded into powder on the lake’s surface like a huge packet of drink mix.

Percy churned the lake into a whirlpool. Otis’s essence tried to re-form, but as his head appeared from the water, Jason called lightning and blasted him to dust again.

So far so good, but they couldn’t keep Otis down forever. Percy was already tired from his fight underground. His gut still ached from getting smacked with a spear shaft. He could feel his strength waning, and they still had another giant to deal with.

As if on cue, the plaster mountain exploded behind them. Ephialtes rose, bellowing with anger.

Percy and Jason waited as he lumbered toward them, his spear in hand. Apparently, getting flattened under a plaster mountain had only energized him. His eyes danced with murderous light. The afternoon sun glinted in his coin-braided hair. Even his snake feet looked angry, baring their fangs and hissing.

Jason called down another lightning strike, but Ephialtes caught it on his spear and deflected the blast, melting a life-size plastic cow. He slammed a stone column out of his way like a stack of building blocks.

Percy tried to keep the lake churning. He didn't want Otis rising to join this fight, but as Ephialtes closed the last few feet, Percy had to switch focus.

Jason and he met the giant's charge. They lunged around Ephialtes, stabbing and slashing in a blur of gold and bronze, but the giant parried every strike.

"I will not yield!" Ephialtes roared. "You may have ruined my spectacle, but Gaea will still destroy your world!"

Percy lashed out, slicing the giant's spear in half. Ephialtes wasn't even fazed. The giant swept low with the blunt end and knocked Percy off his feet. Percy landed hard on his sword arm, and Riptide clattered out of his grip.

Jason tried to take advantage. He stepped inside the giant's guard and stabbed at his chest, but somehow Ephialtes parried the strike. He sliced the tip of his spear down Jason's chest, ripping his purple shirt into a vest. Jason stumbled, looking at the thin line of blood down his sternum. Ephialtes kicked him backward.

Up in the emperor's box, Piper cried out, but her voice was drowned in the roar of the crowd. Bacchus looked on with an amused smile, munching from a bag of Doritos.

Ephialtes towered over Percy and Jason, both halves of his broken spear poised over their heads. Percy's sword arm was numb. Jason's *gladius* had skittered across the arena floor. Their plan had failed.

Percy glanced up at Bacchus, deciding what final curse he would hurl at the useless wine god, when he saw a shape in the sky above the Colosseum—a large dark oval descending rapidly.

From the lake, Otis yelled, trying to warn his brother, but his half-dissolved face could only manage: “Uh-umh-moooo!”

“Don’t worry, brother!” Ephialtes said, his eyes still fixed on the demigods. “I will make them suffer!”

The *Argo II* turned in the sky, presenting its port side, and green fire blazed from the ballista.

“Actually,” Percy said. “Look behind you.”

He and Jason rolled away as Ephialtes turned and bellowed in disbelief.

Percy dropped into a trench just as the explosion rocked the Colosseum.

When he climbed out again, the *Argo II* was coming in for a landing. Jason poked his head out from behind his improvised bomb shelter of a plastic horse. Ephialtes lay charred and groaning on the arena floor, the sand around him seared into a halo of glass by the heat of the Greek fire. Otis was floundering in the lake, trying to re-form, but from the arms down he looked like a puddle of burnt oatmeal.

Percy staggered over to Jason and clapped him on the shoulder. The ghostly crowd gave them a standing ovation as the *Argo II* extended its landing gear and settled on the arena floor. Leo stood at the helm, Hazel and Frank grinning at his side. Coach Hedge danced around the firing platform, pumping his fist in the air and yelling, “That’s what I’m talking about!”

Percy turned to the emperor’s box. “Well?” he yelled at Bacchus. “Was that entertaining enough for you, you wine-breathed little—”

“No need for that.” Suddenly the god was standing right next to him in the arena. He brushed Dorito dust off his purple robes. “I have decided you are worthy partners for this combat.”

“Partners?” Jason growled. “You did nothing!”

Bacchus walked to the edge of the lake. The water instantly drained, leaving an Otis-headed pile of mush. Bacchus picked his way to the bottom and looked up at the crowd. He raised his thyrsus.

The crowd jeered and hollered and pointed their thumbs down. Percy had never been sure whether that meant *live* or *die*. He’d heard it both ways.

Bacchus chose the more entertaining option. He smacked Otis’s head with his

pinecone staff, and the giant pile of Otismeal disintegrated completely.

The crowd went wild. Bacchus climbed out of the lake and strutted over to Ephialtes, who was still lying spread-eagled, overcooked and smoking.

Again, Bacchus raised his thyrsus.

“DO IT!” the crowd roared.

“DON’T DO IT!” Ephialtes wailed.

Bacchus tapped the giant on the nose, and Ephialtes crumbled to ashes.

The ghosts cheered and threw spectral confetti as Bacchus strode around the stadium with his arms raised triumphantly, exulting in the worship. He grinned at the demigods. “*That*, my friends, is a show! And of *course* I did something. I killed two giants!”

As Percy’s friends disembarked from the ship, the crowd of ghosts shimmered and disappeared. Piper and Nico struggled down from the emperor’s box as the Colosseum’s magical renovations began to turn into mist. The arena floor remained solid, but otherwise the stadium looked as if it hadn’t hosted a good giant killing for eons.

“Well,” Bacchus said. “That was fun. You have my permission to continue your voyage.”

“Your *permission*?” Percy snarled.

“Yes.” Bacchus raised an eyebrow. “Although *your* voyage may be a little harder than you expect, son of Neptune.”

“Poseidon,” Percy corrected him automatically. “What do you mean about *my* voyage?”

“You might try the parking lot behind the Emmanuel Building,” Bacchus said. “Best place to break through. Now, good-bye, my friends. And, ah, good luck with that other little matter.”

The god vaporized in a cloud of mist that smelled faintly of grape juice. Jason ran to meet Piper and Nico.

Coach Hedge trotted up to Percy, with Hazel, Frank, and Leo close behind. “Was that Dionysus?” Hedge asked. “I love that guy!”

“You’re alive!” Percy said to the others. “The giants said you were captured. What happened?”

Leo shrugged. “Oh, just another brilliant plan by Leo Valdez. You’d be amazed what you can do with an Archimedes sphere, a girl who can sense stuff underground, and a weasel.”

“I was the weasel,” Frank said glumly.

“Basically,” Leo explained, “I activated a hydraulic screw with the Archimedes device—which is going to be *awesome* once I install it in the ship, by the way. Hazel sensed the easiest path to drill to the surface. We made a tunnel big enough for a weasel, and Frank climbed up with a simple transmitter that I slapped together. After that, it was just a matter of hacking into Coach Hedge’s favorite satellite channels and telling him to bring the ship around to rescue us. After he got us, finding you was easy, thanks to that godly light show at the Colosseum.”

Percy understood about ten percent of Leo’s story, but he decided it was enough since he had a more pressing question. “Where’s Annabeth?”

Leo winced. “Yeah, about that...she’s still in trouble, we think. Hurt, broken leg, maybe—at least according to this vision Gaea shown us. Rescuing her is our next stop.”

Two seconds before, Percy had been ready to collapse. Now another surge of adrenaline coursed through his body. He wanted to strangle Leo and demand why the *Argo II* hadn’t sailed off to rescue Annabeth first, but he thought that might sound a little ungrateful.

“Tell me about the vision,” he said. “Tell me everything.”

The floor shook. The wooden planks began to disappear, spilling sand into the pits of the hypogeum below.

“Let’s talk on board,” Hazel suggested. “We’d better take off while we still can.”

They sailed out of the Colosseum and veered south over the rooftops of Rome.

All around the Piazza del Colosseo, traffic had come to a standstill. A crowd of mortals had gathered, probably wondering about the strange lights and sounds that had come from the ruins. As far as Percy could see, none of the giants’ spectacular plans for destruction had come off successfully. The city looked the

same as before. No one seemed to notice the huge Greek trireme rising into the sky.

The demigods gathered around the helm. Jason bandaged Piper's sprained shoulder while Hazel sat at the stern, feeding Nico ambrosia. The son of Hades could barely lift his head. His voice was so quiet, Hazel had to lean in whenever he spoke.

Frank and Leo recounted what had happened in the room with the Archimedes spheres, and the visions Gaea had shown them in the bronze mirror. They quickly decided that their best lead for finding Annabeth was the cryptic advice Bacchus had provided: the Emmanuel Building, whatever that was. Frank started typing at the helm's computer while Leo tapped furiously at his controls, muttering, "Emmanuel Building. Emmanuel Building." Coach Hedge tried to help by wrestling with an upside-down street map of Rome.

Percy knelt next to Jason and Piper. "How's the shoulder?"

Piper smiled. "It'll heal. Both of you did great."

Jason elbowed Percy. "Not a bad team, you and me."

"Better than jousting in a Kansas cornfield," Percy agreed.

"There it is!" Leo cried, pointing to his monitor. "Frank, you're amazing! I'm setting course."

Frank hunched his shoulders. "I just read the name off the screen. Some Chinese tourist marked it on Google Maps."

Leo grinned at the others. "He reads Chinese."

"Just a tiny bit," Frank said.

"How cool is that?"

"Guys," Hazel broke in. "I hate to interrupt your admiration session, but you should hear this."

She helped Nico to his feet. He'd always been pale, but now his skin looked like powdered milk. His dark sunken eyes reminded Percy of photos he'd seen of liberated prisoners-of-war, which Percy guessed Nico basically was.

"Thank you," Nico rasped. His eyes darted nervously around the group. "I'd given up hope."

The past week or so, Percy had imagined a lot of scathing things he might say

to Nico when they met again, but the guy looked so frail and sad, Percy couldn't muster much anger.

"You knew about the two camps all along," Percy said. "You could have told me who I was the first day I arrived at Camp Jupiter, but you didn't."

Nico slumped against the helm. "Percy, I'm sorry. I discovered Camp Jupiter last year. My dad led me there, though I wasn't sure why. He told me the gods had kept the camps separate for centuries and that I couldn't tell anyone. The time wasn't right. But he said it would be important for me to know..." He doubled over in a fit of coughing.

Hazel held his shoulders until he could stand again.

"I—I thought Dad meant because of Hazel," Nico continued. "I'd need a safe place to take her. But now...I think he wanted me to know about both camps so I'd understand how important your quest was, and so I'd search for the Doors of Death."

The air turned electric—literally, as Jason started throwing off sparks.

"Did you find the doors?" Percy asked.

Nico nodded. "I was a fool. I thought I could go anywhere in the Underworld, but I walked right into Gaea's trap. I might as well have tried running from a black hole."

"Um..." Frank chewed his lip. "What kind of black hole are you talking about?"

Nico started to speak, but whatever he needed to say must have been too terrifying. He turned to Hazel.

She put her hand on her brother's arm. "Nico told me that the Doors of Death have two sides—one in the mortal world, one in the Underworld. The *mortal* side of the portal is in Greece. It's heavily guarded by Gaea's forces. That's where they brought Nico back into the upper world. Then they transported him to Rome."

Piper must've been nervous, because her cornucopia spit out a cheeseburger. "Where exactly in Greece is this doorway?"

Nico took a rattling breath. "The House of Hades. It's an underground temple in Epirus. I can mark it on a map, but—but the mortal side of the portal isn't the

problem. In the Underworld, the Doors of Death are in...in..."

A cold pair of hands did the itchy-bitsy spider down Percy's back.

A black hole. An inescapable part of the Underworld where even Nico di Angelo couldn't go. Why hadn't Percy thought of this before? He'd been to the very edge of that place. He still had nightmares about it.

"Tartarus," he guessed. "The deepest part of the Underworld."

Nico nodded. "They pulled me into the pit, Percy. The things I saw down there..." His voice broke.

Hazel pursed her lips. "No mortal has ever been to Tartarus," she explained. "At least, no one has ever gone in and returned alive. It's the maximum-security prison of Hades, where the old Titans and the other enemies of the gods are bound. It's where all monsters go when they die on the earth. It's...well, no one knows exactly what it's like."

Her eyes drifted to her brother. The rest of her thought didn't need to be spoken: *No one except Nico.*

Hazel handed him his black sword.

Nico leaned on it like it was an old man's cane. "Now I understand why Hades hasn't been able to close the doors," he said. "Even the gods don't go into Tartarus. Even the god of death, Thanatos himself, wouldn't go near that place."

Leo glanced over from the wheel. "So let me guess. We'll have to go there."

Nico shook his head. "It's impossible. I'm the son of Hades, and even I barely survived. Gaea's forces overwhelmed me instantly. They're so powerful down there...no demigod would stand a chance. I almost went insane."

Nico's eyes looked like shattered glass. Percy wondered sadly if something inside him had broken permanently.

"Then we'll sail for Epirus," Percy said. "We'll just close the gates on this side."

"I wish it were that easy," Nico said. "The doors would have to be controlled on both sides to be closed. It's like a double seal. Maybe, just maybe, all seven of you working together could defeat Gaea's forces on the mortal side, at the House of Hades. But unless you had a team fighting simultaneously on the Tartarus side, a team powerful enough to defeat a legion of monsters in their

home territory—”

“There has to be a way,” Jason said.

Nobody volunteered any brilliant ideas.

Percy thought his stomach was sinking. Then he realized the entire ship was descending toward a big building like a palace.

Annabeth. Nico’s news was so horrible Percy had momentarily forgotten she was still in danger, which made him feel incredibly guilty.

“We’ll figure out the Tartarus problem later,” he said. “Is that the Emmanuel Building?”

Leo nodded. “Bacchus said something about the parking lot in back? Well, there it is. What now?”

Percy remembered his dream of the dark chamber, the evil buzzing voice of the monster called Her Ladyship. He remembered how shaken Annabeth had looked when she’d come back from Fort Sumter after her encounter with the spiders. Percy had begun to suspect what might be down in that shrine...literally, the mother of all spiders. If he was right, and Annabeth had been trapped down there alone with that creature for hours, her leg broken...At this point, he didn’t care if her quest was supposed to be solo or not.

“We have to get her out,” he said.

“Well, yeah,” Leo agreed. “But, uh...”

He looked like he wanted to say, *What if we’re too late?*

Wisely, he changed tack. “There’s a parking lot in the way.”

Percy looked at Coach Hedge. “Bacchus said something about *breaking through*. Coach, you still have ammo for those ballistae?”

The satyr grinned like a wild goat. “I thought you’d never ask.”

ANNABETH

ANNABETH HAD REACHED HER TERROR LIMIT.

She'd been assaulted by chauvinist ghosts. She'd broken her ankle. She'd been chased across a chasm by an army of spiders. Now, in severe pain, with her ankle wrapped in boards and Bubble Wrap, and carrying no weapon except her dagger, she faced Arachne—a monstrous half-spider who wanted to kill her and make a commemorative tapestry about it.

In the last few hours, Annabeth had shivered, sweated, whimpered, and blinked back so many tears that her body simply gave up on being scared. Her mind said something like, *Okay, sorry. I can't be any more terrified than I already am.*

So instead, Annabeth started to think.

The monstrous creature picked her way down from the top of the web-covered statue. She moved from strand to strand, hissing with pleasure, her four eyes glittering in the dark. Either she was not in a hurry, or she was slow.

Annabeth hoped she was slow.

Not that it mattered. Annabeth was in no condition to run, and she didn't like her chances in combat. Arachne probably weighed several hundred pounds. Those barbed legs were perfect for capturing and killing prey. Besides, Arachne

probably had other horrible powers—a poisonous bite, or web-slinging abilities like an Ancient Greek Spider-Man.

No. Combat was not the answer.

That left trickery and brains.

In the old legends, Arachne had gotten into trouble because of pride. She'd bragged about her tapestries being better than Athena's, which had led to Mount Olympus's first reality TV punishment program: *So You Think You Can Weave Better Than a Goddess?* Arachne had lost in a big way.

Annabeth knew something about being prideful. It was *her* fatal flaw as well. She often had to remind herself that she couldn't do everything alone. She wasn't *always* the best person for every job. Sometimes she got tunnel vision and forgot about what other people needed, even Percy. And she could get easily distracted talking about her favorite projects.

But could she use that weakness against the spider? Maybe if she stalled for time...though she wasn't sure how stalling would help. Her friends wouldn't be able to reach her, even if they knew where to go. The cavalry would not be coming. Still, stalling was better than dying.

She tried to keep her expression calm, which wasn't easy with a broken ankle. She limped toward the nearest tapestry—a cityscape of Ancient Rome.

"Marvelous," she said. "Tell me about this tapestry."

Arachne's lips curled over her mandibles. "Why do you care? You're about to die."

"Well, yes," Annabeth said. "But the way you captured the light is amazing. Did you use real golden thread for the sunbeams?"

The weaving truly was stunning. Annabeth didn't have to pretend to be impressed.

Arachne allowed herself a smug smile. "No, child. Not gold. I blended the colors, contrasting bright yellow with darker hues. That's what gives it a three-dimensional effect."

"Beautiful." Annabeth's mind split into two different levels: one carrying on the conversation, the other madly grasping for a scheme to survive. Nothing came to her. Arachne had been beaten only once—by Athena herself, and that

had taken godly magic and incredible skill in a weaving contest.

“So...” she said. “Did you see this scene yourself?”

Arachne hissed, her mouth foaming in a not-very-attractive way. “You are trying to delay your death. It won’t work.”

“No, no,” Annabeth insisted. “It just seems a shame that these beautiful tapestries can’t be seen by everyone. They belong in a museum, or...”

“Or what?” Arachne asked.

A crazy idea sprang fully formed from Annabeth’s mind, like her mom jumping out of Zeus’s noggin. But could she make it work?

“Nothing.” She sighed wistfully. “It’s a silly thought. Too bad.”

Arachne scuttled down the statue until she was perched atop the goddess’s shield. Even from that distance, Annabeth could smell the spider’s stink, like an entire bakery full of pastries left to go bad for a month.

“What?” the spider pressed. “What silly thought?”

Annabeth had to force herself not to back away. Broken ankle or no, every nerve in her body pulsed with fear, telling her to get away from the huge spider hovering over her.

“Oh...it’s just that I was put in charge of redesigning Mount Olympus,” she said. “You know, after the Titan War. I’ve completed most of the work, but we need a lot of quality public art. The throne room of the gods, for instance...I was thinking your work would be perfect to display there. The Olympians could finally see how talented you are. As I said, it was a silly thought.”

Arachne’s hairy abdomen quivered. Her four eyes glimmered as if she had a separate thought behind each and was trying to weave them into a coherent web.

“You’re redesigning Mount Olympus,” she said. “My work...in the throne room.”

“Well, other places too,” Annabeth said. “The main pavilion could use several of these. That one with the Greek landscape—the Nine Muses would love that. And I’m sure the other gods would be fighting over your work as well. They’d compete to have your tapestries in their palaces. I guess, aside from Athena, none of the gods has ever seen what you can do?”

Arachne snapped her mandibles. “Hardly. In the old days, Athena tore up all

my best work. My tapestries depicted the gods in rather unflattering ways, you see. Your mother didn't appreciate that."

"Rather hypocritical," Annabeth said, "since the gods make fun of each other all the time. I think the trick would be to pit one god against another. Ares, for instance, would *love* a tapestry making fun of my mother. He's always resented Athena."

Arachne's head tilted at an unnatural angle. "You would work against your own mother?"

"I'm just telling you what Ares would like," Annabeth said. "And Zeus would love something that made fun of Poseidon. Oh, I'm sure if the Olympians saw your work, they'd realize how amazing you are, and I'd have to broker a bidding war. As for working against my mother, why shouldn't I? She sent me here to die, didn't she? The last time I saw her in New York, she basically disowned me."

Annabeth told her the story. She shared her bitterness and sorrow, and it must have sounded genuine. The spider did not pounce.

"This is Athena's nature," Arachne hissed. "She casts aside even her own daughter. The goddess would never allow my tapestries to be shown in the palaces of the gods. She was always jealous of me."

"But imagine if you could get your revenge at long last."

"By killing you!"

"I suppose." Annabeth scratched her head. "Or...by letting me be your agent. I could get your work into Mount Olympus. I could arrange an exhibition for the other gods. By the time my mother found out, it would be too late. The Olympians would finally *see* that your work is better."

"Then you admit it!" Arachne cried. "A daughter of Athena admits I am better! Oh, this is sweet to my ears."

"But a lot of good it does you," Annabeth pointed out. "If I die down here, you go on living in the dark. Gaea destroys the gods, and they never realize you were the better weaver."

The spider hissed.

Annabeth was afraid her mother might suddenly appear and curse her with

some terrible affliction. The first lesson every child of Athena learned: Mom was the best at everything, and you should never, *ever* suggest otherwise.

But nothing bad happened. Maybe Athena understood that Annabeth was only saying these things to save her life. Or maybe Athena was in such in bad shape, split between her Greek and Roman personalities, that she wasn't even paying attention.

"This will not do," Arachne grumbled. "I cannot allow it."

"Well..." Annabeth shifted, trying to keep her weight off her throbbing ankle. A new crack appeared in the floor, and she hobbled back.

"Careful!" Arachne snapped. "The foundations of this shrine have been eaten away over the centuries!"

Annabeth's heartbeat faltered. "Eaten away?"

"You have no idea how much hatred boils beneath us," the spider said. "The spiteful thoughts of so many monsters trying to reach the Athena Parthenos and destroy it. My webbing is the only thing holding the room together, girl! One false step, and you'll fall all the way to Tartarus—and believe me, unlike the Doors of Death, this would be a one-way trip, a very hard fall! I will *not* have you dying before you tell me your plan for my artwork."

Annabeth's mouth tasted like rust. *All the way to Tartarus?* She tried to stay focused, but it wasn't easy as she listened to the floor creak and crack, spilling rubble into the void below.

"Right, the plan," Annabeth said. "Um...as I said, I'd *love* to take your tapestries to Olympus and hang them everywhere. You could rub your craftsmanship in Athena's nose for all eternity. But the only way I could do that...No. It's too difficult. You might as well go ahead and kill me."

"No!" Arachne cried. "That is unacceptable. It no longer brings me any pleasure to contemplate. I must have my work on Mount Olympus! What must I do?"

Annabeth shook her head. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said anything. Just push me into Tartarus or something."

"I refuse!"

"Don't be ridiculous. Kill me."

“I do not take orders from you! Tell me what I must do! Or...or—”

“Or you’ll kill me?”

“Yes! No!” The spider pressed her front legs against her head. “I *must* show my work on Mount Olympus.”

Annabeth tried to contain her excitement. Her plan might actually work...but she still had to convince Arachne to do something impossible. She remembered some good advice Frank Zhang had given her: *Keep it simple*.

“I suppose I could pull a few strings,” she conceded.

“I excel at pulling strings!” said Arachne. “I’m a spider!”

“Yes, but to get your work shown on Mount Olympus, we’d need a proper audition. I’d have to pitch the idea, submit a proposal, put together a portfolio. Hmm...do you have any headshots?”

“Headshots?”

“Glossy black-and-white...Oh, never mind. The audition piece is the most important thing. These tapestries are excellent. But the gods would require something *really* special—something that shows off your talent in the extreme.”

Arachne snarled. “Are you suggesting that these are not my best work? Are you challenging me to a contest?”

“Oh, no!” Annabeth laughed. “Against me? Gosh, no. You are *much* too good. It would only be a contest against *yourself*, to see if you really have what it takes to show your work on Mount Olympus.”

“Of course I do!”

“Well, I certainly think so. But the audition, you know...it’s a formality. I’m afraid it would be very difficult. Are you sure you don’t just want to kill me?”

“Stop saying that!” Arachne screeched. “What must I make?”

“I’ll show you.” Annabeth unslung her backpack. She took out Daedalus’s laptop and opened it. The delta logo glowed in the dark.

“What is that?” Arachne asked. “Some sort of loom?”

“In a way,” Annabeth said. “It’s for weaving ideas. It holds a diagram of the artwork you would build.”

Her fingers trembled on the keyboard. Arachne lowered herself to peer directly over Annabeth’s shoulder. Annabeth couldn’t help thinking how easily

those needlelike teeth could sink into her neck.

She opened her 3-D imaging program. Her last design was still up—the key to Annabeth’s plan, inspired by the most unlikely muse ever: Frank Zhang.

Annabeth did some quick calculations. She increased the dimensions of the model, then showed Arachne how it could be created—strands of material woven into strips, then braided into a long cylinder.

The golden light from the screen illuminated the spider’s face. “You want me to make that? But this is nothing! So small and simple!”

“The actual size would be much bigger,” Annabeth cautioned. “You see these measurements? Naturally it must be large enough to impress the gods. It may look simple, but the structure has incredible properties. Your spider silk would be the perfect material—soft and flexible, yet hard as steel.”

“I see...” Arachne frowned. “But this isn’t even a tapestry.”

“That’s why it’s a challenge. It’s outside your comfort zone. A piece like this—an abstract sculpture—is what the gods are looking for. It would stand in the entry hall of the Olympian throne room for every visitor to see. You would be famous forever!”

Arachne made a discontented hum in her throat. Annabeth could tell she wasn’t going for the idea. Her hands started to feel cold and sweaty.

“This would take a great deal of web,” the spider complained. “More than I could make in a year.”

Annabeth had been hoping for that. She’d calculated the mass and size accordingly. “You’d need to unravel the statue,” she said. “Reuse the silk.”

Arachne seemed about to object, but Annabeth waved at the Athena Parthenos like it was nothing. “What’s more important—covering that old statue or proving your artwork is the best? Of course, you’d have to be incredibly careful. You’d need to leave enough webbing to hold the room together. And if you think it’s too difficult—”

“I didn’t say that!”

“Okay. It’s just...Athena said that creating this braided structure would be impossible for any weaver, even her. So if you don’t think you can—”

“Athena said that?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Ridiculous! I can do it!”

“Great! But you’d need to start right away, before the Olympians choose another artist for their installations.”

Arachne growled. “If you are tricking me, girl—”

“You’ll have me right here as a hostage,” Annabeth reminded her. “It’s not like I can go anywhere. Once this sculpture is complete, you’ll agree that it’s the most amazing piece you’ve ever done. If not, I will gladly die.”

Arachne hesitated. Her barbed legs were so close, she could’ve impaled Annabeth with a quick swipe.

“Fine,” the spider said. “One last challenge—against myself!”

Arachne climbed her web and began to unravel the Athena Parthenos.

L

ANNABETH

ANNABETH LOST TRACK OF TIME.

She could feel the ambrosia she'd eaten earlier starting to repair her leg, but it still hurt so badly that the pain throbbed right up to her neck. All along the walls, small spiders scuttled in the darkness, as if awaiting their mistress's orders. Thousands of them rustled behind the tapestries, making the woven scenes move like wind.

Annabeth sat on the crumbling floor and tried to preserve her strength. While Arachne wasn't watching, she attempted to get some sort of signal on Daedalus's laptop to contact her friends, but of course she had no luck. That left her nothing to do but watch in amazement and horror as Arachne worked, her eight legs moving with hypnotic speed, slowly unraveling the silk strands around the statue.

With its golden clothes and its luminous ivory face, the Athena Parthenos was even scarier than Arachne. It gazed down sternly as if to say, *Bring me tasty snacks or else*. Annabeth could imagine being an Ancient Greek, walking into the Parthenon and seeing this massive goddess with her shield, spear, and python, her free hand holding out Nike, the winged spirit of victory. It would've been enough to put a kink in the *chiton* of any mortal.

More than that, the statue radiated power. As Athena was unwrapped, the air around her grew warmer. Her ivory skin glowed with life. All across the room, the smaller spiders became agitated and began retreating back into the hallway.

Annabeth guessed that Arachne's webs had somehow masked and dampened the statue's magic. Now that it was free, the Athena Parthenos filled the chamber with magical energy. Centuries of mortal prayers and burnt offerings had been made in its presence. It was infused with the power of Athena.

Arachne didn't seem to notice. She kept muttering to herself, counting out yards of silk and calculating the number of strands her project would require. Whenever she hesitated, Annabeth called out encouragement and reminded her how wonderful her tapestries would look on Mount Olympus.

The statue grew so warm and bright that Annabeth could see more details of the shrine—the Roman masonry that had probably once been gleaming white, the dark bones of Arachne's past victims and meals hanging in the web, and the massive cables of silk that connected the floor to the ceiling. Annabeth now saw just how fragile the marble tiles were under her feet. They were covered in a fine layer of webbing, like mesh holding together a shattered mirror. Whenever the Athena Parthenos shifted even slightly, more cracks spread and widened along the floor. In some places, there were holes as big as manhole covers. Annabeth almost wished it were dark again. Even if her plan succeeded and she defeated Arachne, she wasn't sure how she could make it out of this chamber alive.

"So much silk," Arachne muttered. "I could make twenty tapestries—"

"Keep going!" Annabeth called up. "You're doing a wonderful job."

The spider kept working. After what seemed like forever, a mountain of glistening silk was piled at the feet of the statue. The walls of the chamber were still covered in webs. The support cables holding the room together hadn't been disturbed. But the Athena Parthenos was free.

Please wake up, Annabeth begged the statue. Mother, help me.

Nothing happened, but the cracks seemed to be spreading across the floor more rapidly. According to Arachne, the malicious thoughts of monsters had eaten away at the shrine's foundations for centuries. If that was true, now that it was free the Athena Parthenos might be attracting even more attention from the

monsters in Tartarus.

“The design,” Annabeth said. “You should hurry.”

She lifted the computer screen for Arachne to see, but the spider snapped, “I’ve memorized it, child. I have an artist’s eye for detail.”

“Of course you do. But we should hurry.”

“Why?”

“Well...so we can introduce your work to the world!”

“Hmm. Very well.”

Arachne began to weave. It was slow work, turning silk strands into long strips of cloth. The chamber rumbled. The cracks at Annabeth’s feet became wider.

If Arachne noticed, she didn’t seem to care. Annabeth considered trying to push the spider into the pit somehow, but she dismissed the idea. There wasn’t a big enough hole, and besides, if the floor gave way, Arachne could probably hang from her silk and escape, while Annabeth and the ancient statue would tumble into Tartarus.

Slowly, Arachne finished the long strips of silk and braided them together. Her skill was flawless. Annabeth couldn’t help being impressed. She felt another flicker of doubt about her own mother. What if Arachne *was* a better weaver than Athena?

But Arachne’s skill wasn’t the point. She had been punished for being prideful and rude. No matter how amazing you were, you couldn’t go around insulting the gods. The Olympians were a reminder that there was *always* someone better than you, so you shouldn’t get a big head. Still...being turned into a monstrous immortal spider seemed like a pretty harsh punishment for bragging.

Arachne worked more quickly, bringing the strands together. Soon, the structure was done. At the feet of the statue lay a braided cylinder of silk strips, five feet in diameter and ten feet long. The surface glistened like abalone shell, but it didn’t seem beautiful to Annabeth. It was just functional: a trap. It would only be beautiful if it worked.

Arachne turned to her with a hungry smile. “Done! Now, my reward! Prove

to me that you can deliver on your promises.”

Annabeth studied the trap. She frowned and walked around it, inspecting the weaving from every angle. Then, careful of her bad ankle, she got down on hands and knees and crawled inside. She’d done the measurements in her head. If she’d gotten them wrong, her plan was doomed. But she slipped through the silken tunnel without touching the sides. The webbing was sticky, but not impossibly so. She crawled out the other end and shook her head.

“There’s a flaw,” she said.

“What?!” Arachne cried. “Impossible! I followed your instructions—”

“Inside,” Annabeth said. “Crawl in and see for yourself. It’s right in the middle—a flaw in the weaving.”

Arachne foamed at the mouth. Annabeth was afraid she’d pushed too hard, and the spider would snap her up. She’d be just another set of bones in the cobwebs.

Instead, Arachne stamped her eight legs petulantly. “I do *not* make mistakes.”

“Oh, it’s small,” Annabeth said. “You can probably fix it. But I don’t want to show the gods anything but your best work. Look, go inside and check. If you can fix it, then we’ll show it to the Olympians. You’ll be the most famous artist of all time. They’ll probably fire the Nine Muses and hire you to oversee all the arts. The goddess Arachne...yes, I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“The goddess...” Arachne’s breathing turned shallow. “Yes, yes. I will fix this flaw.”

She poked her head into the tunnel. “Where is it?”

“Right in the middle,” Annabeth urged. “Go ahead. It might be a bit snug for you.”

“I’m fine!” she snapped, and wriggled in.

As Annabeth had hoped, the spider’s abdomen fit, but only barely. As she pushed her way in, the braided strips of silk expanded to accommodate her. Arachne got all the way up to her spinnerets.

“I see no flaw!” she announced.

“Really?” Annabeth asked. “Well, that’s odd. Come out and I’ll take another look.”

Moment of truth. Arachne wriggled, trying to back up. The woven tunnel contracted around her and held her fast. She tried to wriggle forward, but the trap was already stuck to her abdomen. She couldn't get through that way either. Annabeth had been afraid the spider's barbed legs might puncture the silk, but Arachne's legs were pressed so tightly against her body she could barely move them.

"What—what is this?" she called. "I am stuck!"

"Ah," Annabeth said. "I forgot to tell you. This piece of art is called Chinese Handcuffs. At least, it's a larger variation on that idea. I call it Chinese Spidercuffs."

"Treachery!" Arachne thrashed and rolled and squirmed, but the trap held her tight.

"It was a matter of survival," Annabeth corrected. "You were going to kill me either way, whether I helped you or not, yes?"

"Well, of course! You're a child of Athena." The trap went still. "I mean... no, of course not! I respect my promises."

"Uh-huh." Annabeth stepped back as the braided cylinder began to thrash again. "Normally these traps are made from woven bamboo, but spider silk is even better. It will hold you fast, and it's much too strong to break—even for you."

"Gahhhh!" Arachne rolled and wriggled, but Annabeth moved out of the way. Even with her broken ankle, she could manage to avoid a giant silk finger trap.

"I will destroy you!" Arachne promised. "I mean...no, I'll be very nice to you if you let me out."

"I'd save my energy if I were you." Annabeth took a deep breath, relaxing for the first time in hours. "I'm going to call my friends."

"You—you're going to call them about my artwork?" Arachne asked hopefully.

Annabeth scanned the room. There had to be a way to send an Iris-message to the *Argo II*. She had some water left in her bottle, but how to create enough light and mist to make a rainbow in a dark cavern?

Arachne began to roll around again. "You're calling your friends to kill me!"

she shrieked. “I will *not* die! Not like this!”

“Calm down,” Annabeth said. “We’ll let you live. We just want the statue.”

“The statue?”

“Yes.” Annabeth should’ve left it at that, but her fear was turning to anger and resentment. “The artwork that I’ll display most prominently on Mount Olympus? It won’t be yours. The Athena Parthenos belongs there—right in the central park of the gods.”

“No! No, that’s horrible!”

“Oh, it won’t happen right away,” Annabeth said. “First we’ll take the statue with us to Greece. A prophecy told us it has the power to help defeat the giants. After that...well, we can’t simply restore it to the Parthenon. That would raise too many questions. It’ll be safer in Mount Olympus. It will unite the children of Athena and bring peace to the Romans and Greeks. Thanks for keeping it safe all these centuries. You’ve done Athena a great service.”

Arachne screamed and flailed. A strand of silk shot from the monster’s spinnerets and attached itself to a tapestry on the far wall. Arachne contracted her abdomen and blindly ripped away the weaving. She continued to roll, shooting silk randomly, pulling over braziers of magic fire and ripping tiles out of the floor. The chamber shook. Tapestries began to burn.

“Stop that!” Annabeth tried to hobble out of the way of the spider’s silk. “You’ll bring down the whole cavern and kill us both!”

“Better than seeing you win!” Arachne cried. “My children! Help me!”

Oh, great. Annabeth had hoped the statue’s magic aura would keep away the little spiders, but Arachne continued shrieking, imploring them to help. Annabeth considered killing the spider woman to shut her up. It would be easy to use her knife now. But she hesitated to kill any monster when it was so helpless, even Arachne. Besides, if she stabbed through the braided silk, the trap might unravel. It was possible Arachne could break free before Annabeth could finish her off.

All these thoughts came too late. Spiders began swarming into the chamber. The statue of Athena glowed brighter. The spiders clearly didn’t want to approach, but they edged forward as if gathering their courage. Their mother was

screaming for help. Eventually they would pour in, overwhelming Annabeth.

“Arachne, stop it!” she yelled. “I’ll—”

Somehow Arachne twisted in her prison, pointing her abdomen toward the sound of Annabeth’s voice. A strand of silk hit her in the chest like a heavyweight’s glove.

Annabeth fell, her leg flaring with pain. She slashed wildly at the webbing with her dagger as Arachne pulled her toward her snapping spinnerets.

Annabeth managed to cut the strand and crawl away, but the little spiders were closing around her.

She realized her best efforts had not been enough. She wouldn’t make it out of here. Arachne’s children would kill her at the feet of her mother’s statue.

Percy, she thought, I’m sorry.

At that moment, the chamber groaned, and the cavern ceiling exploded in a blast of fiery light.

ANNABETH

ANNABETH HAD SEEN SOME STRANGE THINGS BEFORE, but she'd never seen it rain cars.

As the roof of the cavern collapsed, sunlight blinded her. She got the briefest glimpse of the *Argo II* hovering above. It must have used its ballistae to blast a hole straight through the ground.

Chunks of asphalt as big as garage doors tumbled down, along with six or seven Italian cars. One would've crushed the Athena Parthenos, but the statue's glowing aura acted like a force field, and the car bounced off. Unfortunately, it fell straight toward Annabeth.

She jumped to one side, twisting her bad foot. A wave of agony almost made her pass out, but she flipped on her back in time to see a bright red Fiat 500 slam into Arachne's silk trap, punching through the cavern floor and disappearing with the Chinese Spidercuffs.

As Arachne fell, she screamed like a freight train on a collision course; but her wailing rapidly faded. All around Annabeth, more chunks of debris slammed through the floor, riddling it with holes.

The Athena Parthenos remained undamaged, though the marble under its pedestal was a starburst of fractures. Annabeth was covered in cobwebs. She

trailed strands of leftover spider silk from her arms and legs like the strings of a marionette, but somehow, amazingly, none of the debris had hit her. She wanted to believe that the statue had protected her, though she suspected it might've been nothing but luck.

The army of spiders had disappeared. Either they had fled back into the darkness, or they'd fallen into the chasm. As daylight flooded the cavern, Arachne's tapestries along the walls crumbled to dust, which Annabeth could hardly bear to watch—especially the tapestry depicting her and Percy.

But none of that mattered when she heard Percy's voice from above: "Annabeth!"

"Here!" she sobbed.

All the terror seemed to leave her in one massive yelp. As the *Argo II* descended, she saw Percy leaning over the rail. His smile was better than any tapestry she'd ever seen.

The room kept shaking, but Annabeth managed to stand. The floor at her feet seemed stable for the moment. Her backpack was missing, along with Daedalus's laptop. Her bronze knife, which she'd had since she was seven, was also gone—probably fallen into the pit. But Annabeth didn't care. She was alive.

She edged closer to the gaping hole made by the Fiat 500. Jagged rock walls plunged into the darkness as far as Annabeth could see. A few small ledges jutted out here and there, but Annabeth saw nothing on them—just strands of spider silk dripping over the sides like Christmas tinsel.

Annabeth wondered if Arachne had told the truth about the chasm. Had the spider fallen all the way to Tartarus? She tried to feel satisfied with that idea, but it made her sad. Arachne *had* made some beautiful things. She'd already suffered for eons. Now her last tapestries had crumbled. After all that, falling into Tartarus seemed like too harsh an end.

Annabeth was dimly aware of the *Argo II* hovering to a stop about forty feet from the floor. It lowered a rope ladder, but Annabeth stood in a daze, staring into the darkness. Then suddenly Percy was next to her, lacing his fingers in hers.

He turned her gently away from the pit and wrapped his arms around her. She

buried her face in his chest and broke down in tears.

“It’s okay,” he said. “We’re together.”

He didn’t say *you’re okay*, or *we’re alive*. After all they’d been through over the last year, he knew the most important thing was that they were together. She loved him for saying that.

Their friends gathered around them. Nico di Angelo was there, but Annabeth’s thoughts were so fuzzy, this didn’t seem surprising to her. It seemed only right that he would be with them.

“Your leg.” Piper knelt next to her and examined the Bubble Wrap cast. “Oh, Annabeth, what *happened*?”

She started to explain. Talking was difficult, but as she went along, her words came more easily. Percy didn’t let go of her hand, which also made her feel more confident. When she finished, her friends’ faces were slack with amazement.

“Gods of Olympus,” Jason said. “You did all that alone. With a broken ankle.”

“Well...*some* of it with a broken ankle.”

Percy grinned. “You made Arachne weave her own trap? I knew you were good, but Holy Hera—Annabeth, you *did* it. Generations of Athena kids tried and failed. You found the Athena Parthenos!”

Everyone gazed at the statue.

“What do we do with her?” Frank asked. “She’s huge.”

“We’ll have to take her with us to Greece,” Annabeth said. “The statue is powerful. Something about it will help us stop the giants.”

“*The giants’ bane stands gold and pale*,” Hazel quoted. “*Won with pain from a woven jail*.” She looked at Annabeth with admiration. “It was Arachne’s jail. You tricked her into weaving it.”

With a *lot* of pain, Annabeth thought.

Leo raised his hands. He made a finger picture frame around the Athena Parthenos like he was taking measurements. “Well, it might take some rearranging, but I think we can fit her through the bay doors in the stable. If she sticks out the end, I might have to wrap a flag around her feet or something.”

Annabeth shuddered. She imagined the Athena Parthenos jutting from their trireme with a sign across her pedestal that read: WIDE LOAD.

Then she thought about the other lines of the prophecy: *The twins snuff out the angel's breath, who holds the keys to endless death.*

“What about you guys?” she asked. “What happened with the giants?”

Percy told her about rescuing Nico, the appearance of Bacchus, and the fight with the twins in the Colosseum. Nico didn't say much. The poor guy looked like he'd been wandering through a wasteland for six weeks. Percy explained what Nico had found out about the Doors of Death, and how they had to be closed on both sides. Even with sunlight streaming in from above, Percy's news made the cavern seem dark again.

“So the mortal side is in Epirus,” she said. “At least that's somewhere we can reach.”

Nico grimaced. “But the other side is the problem. Tartarus.”

The word seemed to echo through the chamber. The pit behind them exhaled a cold blast of air. That's when Annabeth knew with certainty. The chasm *did* go straight to the Underworld.

Percy must have felt it too. He guided her a little farther from the edge. Her arms and legs trailed spider silk like a bridal train. She wished she had her dagger to cut that junk off. She almost asked Percy to do the honors with Riptide, but before she could, he said, “Bacchus mentioned something about *my* voyage being harder than I expected. Not sure why—”

The chamber groaned. The Athena Parthenos tilted to one side. Its head caught on one of Arachne's support cables, but the marble foundation under the pedestal was crumbling.

Nausea swelled in Annabeth's chest. If the statue fell into the chasm, all her work would be for nothing. Their quest would fail.

“Secure it!” Annabeth cried.

Her friends understood immediately.

“Zhang!” Leo cried. “Get me to the helm, quick! The coach is up there alone.”

Frank transformed into a giant eagle, and the two of them soared toward the

ship.

Jason wrapped his arm around Piper. He turned to Percy. “Back for you guys in a sec.” He summoned the wind and shot into the air.

“This floor won’t last!” Hazel warned. “The rest of us should get to the ladder.”

Plumes of dust and cobwebs blasted from holes in the floor. The spider’s silk support cables trembled like massive guitar strings and began to snap. Hazel lunged for the bottom of the rope ladder and gestured for Nico to follow, but Nico was in no condition to sprint.

Percy gripped Annabeth’s hand tighter. “It’ll be fine,” he muttered.

Looking up, she saw grappling lines shoot from the *Argo II* and wrap around the statue. One lassoed Athena’s neck like a noose. Leo shouted orders from the helm as Jason and Frank flew frantically from line to line, trying to secure them.

Nico had just reached the ladder when a sharp pain shot up Annabeth’s bad leg. She gasped and stumbled.

“What is it?” Percy asked.

She tried to stagger toward the ladder. Why was she moving backward instead? Her legs swept out from under her and she fell on her face.

“Her ankle!” Hazel shouted from the ladder. “Cut it! Cut it!”

Annabeth’s mind was woolly from the pain. Cut her ankle?

Apparently Percy didn’t realize what Hazel meant either. Then something yanked Annabeth backward and dragged her toward the pit. Percy lunged. He grabbed her arm, but the momentum carried him along as well.

“Help them!” Hazel yelled.

Annabeth glimpsed Nico hobbling in their direction, Hazel trying to disentangle her cavalry sword from the rope ladder. Their other friends were still focused on the statue, and Hazel’s cry was lost in the general shouting and the rumbling of the cavern.

Annabeth sobbed as she hit the edge of the pit. Her legs went over the side. Too late, she realized what was happening: she was tangled in the spider silk. She should have cut it away immediately. She had thought it was just loose line, but with the entire floor covered in cobwebs, she hadn’t noticed that one of the

strands was wrapped around her foot—and the other end went straight into the pit. It was attached to something heavy down in the darkness, something that was pulling her in.

“No,” Percy muttered, light dawning in his eyes. “My sword...”

But he couldn't reach Riptide without letting go of Annabeth's arm, and Annabeth's strength was gone. She slipped over the edge. Percy fell with her.

Her body slammed into something. She must have blacked out briefly from the pain. When she could see again, she realized that she'd fallen partway into the pit and was dangling over the void. Percy had managed to grab a ledge about fifteen feet below the top of the chasm. He was holding on with one hand, gripping Annabeth's wrist with the other, but the pull on her leg was much too strong.

No escape, said a voice in the darkness below. *I go to Tartarus, and you will come too.*

Annabeth wasn't sure if she actually heard Arachne's voice or if it was just in her mind.

The pit shook. Percy was the only thing keeping her from falling. He was barely holding on to a ledge the size of a bookshelf.

Nico leaned over the edge of the chasm, thrusting out his hand, but he was much too far away to help. Hazel was yelling for the others, but even if they heard her over all the chaos, they'd never make it in time.

Annabeth's leg felt like it was pulling free of her body. Pain washed everything in red. The force of the Underworld tugged at her like dark gravity. She didn't have the strength to fight. She knew she was too far down to be saved.

“Percy, let me go,” she croaked. “You can't pull me up.”

His face was white with effort. She could see in his eyes that he knew it was hopeless.

“Never,” he said. He looked up at Nico, fifteen feet above. “The other side, Nico! We'll see you there. Understand?”

Nico's eyes widened. “But—”

“Lead them there!” Percy shouted. “Promise me!”

“I—I will.”

Below them, the voice laughed in the darkness. *Sacrifices. Beautiful sacrifices to wake the goddess.*

Percy tightened his grip on Annabeth’s wrist. His face was gaunt, scraped and bloody, his hair dusted with cobwebs, but when he locked eyes with her, she thought he had never looked more handsome.

“We’re staying together,” he promised. “You’re not getting away from me. Never again.”

Only then did she understand what would happen. *A one-way trip. A very hard fall.*

“As long as we’re together,” she said.

She heard Nico and Hazel still screaming for help. She saw the sunlight far, far above—maybe the last sunlight she would ever see.

Then Percy let go of his tiny ledge, and together, holding hands, he and Annabeth fell into the endless darkness.

LEO

LEO WAS STILL IN SHOCK.

Everything had happened so quickly. They had secured grappling lines to the Athena Parthenos just as the floor gave way, and the final columns of webbing snapped. Jason and Frank dove down to save the others, but they'd only found Nico and Hazel hanging from the rope ladder. Percy and Annabeth were gone. The pit to Tartarus had been buried under several tons of debris. Leo pulled the *Argo II* out of the cavern seconds before the entire place imploded, taking the rest of the parking lot with it.

The *Argo II* was now parked on a hill overlooking the city. Jason, Hazel, and Frank had returned to the scene of the catastrophe, hoping to dig through the rubble and find a way to save Percy and Annabeth, but they'd come back demoralized. The cavern was simply gone. The scene was swarming with police and rescue workers. No mortals had been hurt, but the Italians would be scratching their heads for months, wondering how a massive sinkhole had opened right in the middle of a parking lot and swallowed a dozen perfectly good cars.

Dazed with grief, Leo and the others carefully loaded the Athena Parthenos into the hold, using the ship's hydraulic winches with an assist from Frank

Zhang, part-time elephant. The statue just fit, though what they were going to do with it, Leo had no idea.

Coach Hedge was too miserable to help. He kept pacing the deck with tears in his eyes, pulling at his goatee and slapping the side of his head, muttering, “I should have saved them! I should have blown up more stuff!”

Finally Leo told him to go belowdecks and secure everything for departure. He wasn’t doing any good beating himself up.

The six demigods gathered on the quarterdeck and gazed at the distant column of dust still rising from the site of the implosion.

Leo rested his hand on the Archimedes sphere, which now sat on the helm, ready to be installed. He should have been excited. It was the biggest discovery of his life—even bigger than Bunker 9. If he could decipher Archimedes’s scrolls, he could do amazing things. He hardly dared to hope, but he might even be able to build a new control disk for a certain dragon friend of his.

Still, the price had been too high.

He could almost hear Nemesis laughing. *I told you we could do business, Leo Valdez.*

He had opened the fortune cookie. He’d gotten the access code for the sphere and saved Frank and Hazel. But the sacrifice had been Percy and Annabeth. Leo was sure of it.

“It’s my fault,” he said miserably.

The others stared at him. Only Hazel seemed to understand. She’d been with him at the Great Salt Lake.

“No,” she insisted. “No, this is *Gaea*’s fault. It had nothing to do with you.”

Leo wanted to believe that, but he couldn’t. They’d started this voyage with Leo messing up, firing on New Rome. They’d ended in old Rome with Leo breaking a cookie and paying a price much worse than an eye.

“Leo, listen to me.” Hazel gripped his hand. “I won’t allow you to take the blame. I couldn’t bear that after—after Sammy...”

She choked up, but Leo knew what she meant. His *bisabuelo* had blamed himself for Hazel’s disappearance. Sammy had lived a good life, but he’d gone to his grave believing that he’d spent a cursed diamond and doomed the girl he

loved.

Leo didn't want to make Hazel miserable all over again, but this was different. *True success requires sacrifice*. Leo had chosen to break that cookie. Percy and Annabeth had fallen into Tartarus. That couldn't be a coincidence.

Nico di Angelo shuffled over, leaning on his black sword. "Leo, they're not dead. If they were, I could feel it."

"How can you be sure?" Leo asked. "If that pit really led to...you know... how could you sense them so far away?"

Nico and Hazel shared a look, maybe comparing notes on their Hades/Pluto death radar. Leo shivered. Hazel had never seemed like a child of the Underworld to him, but Nico di Angelo—that guy was creepy.

"We can't be one hundred percent sure," Hazel admitted. "But I think Nico is right. Percy and Annabeth are still alive...at least, so far."

Jason pounded his fist against the rail. "I should've been *paying attention*. I could have flown down and saved them."

"Me, too," Frank moaned. The big dude looked on the verge of tears.

Piper put her hand on Jason's back. "It's not your fault, either of you. You were trying to save the statue."

"She's right," Nico said. "Even if the pit hadn't been buried, you couldn't have flown into it without being pulled down. I'm the only one who has actually been into Tartarus. It's impossible to describe how powerful that place is. Once you get close, it sucks you in. I never stood a chance."

Frank sniffled. "Then Percy and Annabeth don't stand a chance either?"

Nico twisted his silver skull ring. "Percy is the most powerful demigod I've ever met. No offense to you guys, but it's true. If anybody can survive, he will, especially if he's got Annabeth at his side. They're going to find a way through Tartarus."

Jason turned. "To the Doors of Death, you mean. But you told us it's guarded by Gaea's most powerful forces. How could two demigods possibly—?"

"I don't know," Nico admitted. "But Percy told me to lead you guys to Epirus, to the mortal side of the doorway. He's planning on meeting us there. If we can survive the House of Hades, fight our way through Gaea's forces, then

maybe we can work together with Percy and Annabeth and seal the Doors of Death from both sides.”

“And get Percy and Annabeth back safely?” Leo asked.

“Maybe.”

Leo didn’t like the way Nico said that, as if he wasn’t sharing all his doubts. Besides, Leo knew something about locks and doors. If the Doors of Death needed to be sealed from both sides, how could they do that unless someone stayed in the Underworld, trapped?

Nico took a deep breath. “I don’t know how they’ll manage it, but Percy and Annabeth will find a way. They’ll journey through Tartarus and find the Doors of Death. When they do, we have to be ready.”

“It won’t be easy,” Hazel said. “Gaea will throw everything she’s got at us to keep us from reaching Epirus.”

“What else is new?” Jason sighed.

Piper nodded. “We’ve got no choice. We have to seal the Doors of Death before we can stop the giants from raising Gaea. Otherwise her armies will never die. And we’ve got to hurry. The Romans are in New York. Soon, they’ll be marching on Camp Half-Blood.”

“We’ve got one month at best,” Jason added. “Ephialtes said Gaea would awaken in exactly one month.”

Leo straightened. “We can do it.”

Everyone stared at him.

“The Archimedes sphere can upgrade the ship,” he said, hoping he was right. “I’m going to study those ancient scrolls we got. There’s got to be all kinds of new weapons I can make. We’re going to hit Gaea’s armies with a whole new arsenal of hurt.”

At the prow of the ship, Festus creaked his jaw and blew fire defiantly.

Jason managed a smile. He clapped Leo on the shoulder.

“Sounds like a plan, Admiral. You want to set the course?”

They kidded him, calling him Admiral, but for once Leo accepted the title. This was his ship. He hadn’t come this far to be stopped.

They would find this House of Hades. They’d take the Doors of Death. And

by the gods, if Leo had to design a grabber arm long enough to snatch Percy and Annabeth out of Tartarus, then that's what he would do.

Nemesis wanted him to wreak vengeance on Gaea? Leo would be happy to oblige. He was going to make Gaea sorry she had ever messed with Leo Valdez.

"Yeah." He took one last look at the cityscape of Rome, turning bloodred in the sunset. "Festus, raise the sails. We've got some friends to save."

Glossary

AΘE alpha, theta, epsilon. In Greek it stands for *of the Athenians, or the children of Athena*.

Achelous a *potamus*, or river god

Alcyoneus the eldest of the giants born to Gaea, destined to fight Pluto

Amazons a nation of all-female warriors

Aphrodite the Greek goddess of love and beauty. She was married to Hephaestus, but she loved Ares, the god of war. Roman form: Venus

Arachne a weaver who claimed to have skills superior to Athena's. This angered the goddess, who destroyed Arachne's tapestry and loom. Arachne hung herself, and Athena brought her back to life as a spider.

Archimedes a Greek mathematician, physicist, engineer, inventor, and astronomer who lived between 287 and 212 BCE and is regarded as one of the leading scientists in classical antiquity

Ares the Greek god of war; the son of Zeus and Hera, and half brother to Athena. Roman form: Mars

argentum silver

Argo II the fantastical ship built by Leo, which can both sail and fly and has Festus's bronze dragon head as its figurehead. The ship was named after the *Argo*, the vessel used by a band of Greek heroes who accompanied Jason on his quest to find the Golden Fleece.

Athena the Greek goddess of wisdom. Roman form: Minerva

Athena Parthenos a giant statue of Athena: the most famous Greek statue of all time

augury a sign of something coming, an omen; the practice of divining the future

aurum gold

Bacchus the Roman god of wine and revelry. Greek form: Dionysus

ballista (**ballistae**, pl.) a Roman missile siege weapon that launched a large

projectile at a distant target (*see also Scorpion ballista*)

Bellona a Roman goddess of war

Camp Half-Blood the training ground for Greek demigods, located on Long Island, New York

Camp Jupiter the training ground for Roman demigods, located between the Oakland Hills and the Berkeley Hills, in California

Celestial bronze a rare metal deadly to monsters

centaur a race of creatures that is half human, half horse

centurion an officer of the Roman army

Ceres the Roman goddess of agriculture. Greek form: Demeter

charmspeak a blessing bestowed by Aphrodite on her children that enables them to persuade others with their voice

chiton a Greek garment; a sleeveless piece of linen or wool secured at the shoulders by brooches and at the waist by a belt

Chrysaor the brother of Pegasus, the son of Poseidon and Medusa; known as “the Gold Sword”

Circe a Greek sorceress. In ancient times, she turned Odysseus’s crew into swine.

Colosseum an elliptical amphitheater in the center of Rome, Italy. Capable of seating 50,000 spectators, the Colosseum was used for gladiatorial contests and public spectacles such as mock sea battles, animal hunts, executions, re-enactments of famous battles, and dramas.

cornucopia a large horn-shaped container overflowing with edibles or wealth in some form. The cornucopia was created when Heracles (Roman: Hercules) wrestled with the river god Achelous and wrenched off one of his horns.

Cyclops a member of a primordial race of giants (**Cyclopes**, pl.), each with a single eye in the middle of his or her forehead

Daedalus in Greek mythology, a skilled craftsman who created the Labyrinth on Crete in which the Minotaur (part man, part bull) was kept

Deianira Heracles’s second wife. She was of such striking beauty that both Heracles and Achelous wanted to marry her and there was a contest to win her hand. The centaur Nessus tricked her into killing Heracles by dipping his tunic

in what she thought was a love potion but was actually Nessus's poisonous blood.

Demeter the Greek goddess of agriculture, a daughter of the Titans Rhea and Kronos. Roman form: Ceres

denarius (denarii, pl.) the most common coin in the Roman currency system

Dionysus the Greek god of wine and revelry, a son of Zeus. Roman form: Bacchus

Doors of Death a well-hidden passageway that when open allows souls to travel from the Underworld to the world of mortals

drachma the silver coin of Ancient Greece

drakon gigantic serpent

eidolon possessing spirit

Ephialtes and Otis twin giants, sons of Gaea

Epirus a region presently in northwestern Greece and southern Albania

Eurystheus a grandson of Perseus, who, through the favor of Hera, inherited the kingship of Mycenae, which Zeus had intended for Heracles

faun a Roman forest god, part goat and part man. Greek form: satyr

Fortuna the Roman goddess of fortune and good luck. Greek form: Tyche

Forum The Roman Forum was the center of ancient Rome, a plaza where Romans conducted business, trials, and religious activities.

Gaea the Greek earth goddess; mother of Titans, giants, Cyclopes, and other monsters. Roman form: Terra

gladius a short sword

Gorgons three monstrous sisters who have hair of living, venomous snakes. The most famous, Medusa, had eyes that turned the beholder to stone.

greaves shin armor

Greek fire an incendiary weapon used in naval battles because it can continue burning in water

Hades the Greek god of death and riches. Roman form: Pluto

Hadrian a Roman Emperor who ruled from 117 to 138 CE. He is best known for building Hadrian's Wall, which marked the northern limit of Roman Britain. In Rome, he rebuilt the Pantheon and constructed the Temple of Venus and

Roma.

Hagno a nymph who is said to have brought up Zeus. On Mount Lycaeus in Arcadia there was a well sacred to and named after her.

harpy a winged female creature that snatches things

Hebe the goddess of youth; the daughter of Zeus and Hera, and married to Heracles. Roman form: Juventas

Hephaestus the Greek god of fire and crafts and of blacksmiths; the son of Zeus and Hera, and married to Aphrodite. Roman form: Vulcan

Hera the Greek goddess of marriage; Zeus's wife and sister. Roman form: Juno

Heracles the Greek equivalent of Hercules; the son of Zeus and Alcmene; the strongest of all mortals

Hercules the Roman equivalent of Heracles; the son of Jupiter and Alcmene, who was born with great strength

hippocampi creatures that from the waist up have the body of a horse and from the waist down have silvery fish bodies, with glistening scales and rainbow tail fins. They were used to draw Poseidon's chariot, and sea foam was created by their movement.

hippodrome a Greek stadium for horse racing and chariot racing

House of Hades an underground temple in Epirus, Greece, dedicated to the Hades and Persephone, sometimes called a necromanteion, or "oracle of death." Ancient Greeks believed it marked one entrance to the Underworld, and pilgrims would go there to commune with the dead.

hypogeum the area under a coliseum that housed set pieces and machinery used for special effects

ichthyocentaur a fish-centaur described as having the forefeet of a horse, a human torso and head, and a fish tail. It is sometimes shown with a pair of lobster-claw horns.

Imperial gold a rare metal deadly to monsters, consecrated at the Pantheon; its existence was a closely guarded secret of the emperors

Invidia the Roman goddess of revenge. Greek form: Nemesis

Iris the Greek rainbow goddess and a messenger of the gods; the daughter of Thaumias and Electra. Roman form: Iris

Juno the Roman goddess of women, marriage, and fertility; sister and wife of Jupiter; mother of Mars. Greek form: Hera

Jupiter the Roman king of the gods; also called Jupiter Optimus Maximus (the best and the greatest). Greek form: Zeus

Juventas the Roman goddess of youth. Greek form: Hebe

Kalends of July the first day of July, which was sacred to Juno

karpoi grain spirits

Katoptris Piper's dagger, once owned by Helen of Troy. The word means "looking glass."

Keto the Greek goddess of sea monsters and large sea creatures, such as whales and sharks. She is the daughter of Gaea and the sister-wife of Phorcys, god of the dangers of the sea.

Khione the Greek goddess of snow; daughter of Boreas

Kronos the Greek god of agriculture, the son of Uranus and Gaea and the father of Zeus. Roman form: Saturn

Lar a house god, ancestral spirit of Rome (Lares, pl.).

Lupa the sacred Roman she-wolf that nursed the foundling twins Romulus and Remus

Marcus Agrippa a Roman statesman and general; defense minister to Octavian, and responsible for most of his military victories. He commissioned the Pantheon as a temple to all the gods of Ancient Rome.

Mare Nostrum Latin for *Our Sea*, was a Roman name for the Mediterranean Sea

Mars the Roman god of war; also called Mars Ultor. Patron of the empire; divine father of Romulus and Remus. Greek form: Ares

Minerva the Roman goddess of wisdom. Greek form: Athena

Minotaur a monster with the head of a bull on the body of a man

Mist a magic force that disguises things from mortals

Mithras Originally a Persian god of the sun, Mithras was worshipped by Roman warriors as a guardian of arms and a patron of soldiers.

muskeg bog

Narcissus a Greek hunter who was renowned for his beauty. He was

exceptionally proud and disdained those who loved him. Nemesis saw this and attracted Narcissus to a pool where he saw his reflection in the water and fell in love with it. Unable to leave the beauty of his reflection, Narcissus died.

Nemesis the Greek goddess of revenge. Roman form: Invidia

Neptune the Roman god of the sea. Greek form: Poseidon

Nereids fifty female sea spirits; patrons of sailors and fishermen and caretakers of the sea's bounty

Nessus a crafty centaur who tricked Deianira into killing Heracles

New Rome a community near Camp Jupiter where demigods can live together in peace, without interference from mortals or monsters

Nike the Greek goddess of strength, speed, and victory. Roman form: Victoria

nymph a female nature deity who animates nature

nymphaeum a shrine to nymphs

Pantheon a building in Rome, Italy, commissioned by Marcus Agrippa as a temple to all the gods of Ancient Rome, and rebuilt by Emperor Hadrian in about 126 CE

pater Latin for *father*; also the name of an ancient Roman god of the Underworld, later subsumed by Pluto

pauldron a piece of plate armor for the shoulder and the upper part of the arm

Pegasus In Greek mythology, a winged divine horse; sired by Poseidon, in his role as horse-god, and foaled by the Gorgon Medusa; the brother of Chrysaor

Persephone the Greek queen of the Underworld; wife of Hades; daughter of Zeus and Demeter. Roman form: Proserpine

Phorcys In Greek mythology, a primordial god of the dangers of the sea; son of Gaea; brother-husband of Keto

Piazza Navona a city square in Rome, built on the site of the Stadium of Domitian, where Ancient Romans watched competitive games

Pluto the Roman god of death and riches. Greek form: Hades

Polybotes the giant son of Gaea, the Earth Mother

Pomerian Line the boundary around New Rome, and in ancient times, the city limits of Rome

Porphyron the king of the Giants in Greek and Roman mythology

Poseidon the Greek god of the sea; son of the Titans Kronos and Rhea, and brother of Zeus and Hades. Roman form: Neptune

praetor an elected Roman magistrate and commander of the army

Proserpine Roman queen of the Underworld. Greek form: Persephone

Rhea Silvia a priestess and mother of the twins Romulus and Remus, who founded Rome

Riptide the name of Percy Jackson's sword (*Anaklusmos* in Greek)

Romulus and Remus the twin sons of Mars and the priestess Rhea Silvia. They were thrown into the River Tiber by their human father, Amulius, and rescued and raised by a she-wolf. Upon reaching adulthood, they founded Rome.

Saturn the Roman god of agriculture; the son of Uranus and Gaea, and the father of Jupiter. Greek form: Kronos

satyr a Greek forest god, part goat and part man. Roman equivalent: faun

Scorpion ballista a Roman missile siege weapon that launched a large projectile at a distant target

Senatus Populusque Romanus (SPQR) meaning "The Senate and People of Rome," refers to the government of the Roman Republic and is used as an official emblem of Rome

skolopendra a gargantuan Greek sea monster with hairy nostrils, a flat crayfish-like tail, and rows of webbed feet lining its flanks

Stymphalian birds in Greek mythology, man-eating birds with bronze beaks and sharp metallic feathers they could launch at their victims; sacred to Ares, the god of war

Sybilline Books a collection of prophecies in rhyme written in Greek. Tarquinius Superbus, a king of Rome, bought them from a prophetess named Sibyl and consulted them in times of great danger.

Tartarus husband of Gaea; spirit of the abyss; father of the giants

telkhines mysterious sea demons and smiths native to the islands of Kaos and Rhodes; children of Thalassa and Pontus; they had flippers instead of hands and dogs' heads and were known as fish children

Terminus the Roman god of boundaries and landmarks

Terra the Roman goddess of the Earth. Greek form: Gaea

Thanatos the Greek god of death. Roman form: Letus

thyrsus Bacchus's weapon, a staff topped by a pinecone and twined with ivy

Tiber River the third-longest river in Italy. Rome was founded on its banks. In Ancient Rome, executed criminals were thrown into the river.

Tiberius was Roman Emperor from 14 CE to 37 CE. He was one of Rome's greatest generals, but he came to be remembered as a reclusive and somber ruler who never really wanted to be emperor.

Titans a race of powerful Greek deities, descendants of Gaia and Uranus, who ruled during the Golden Age and were overthrown by a race of younger gods, the Olympians

Trevi Fountain a fountain in the Trevi district in Rome. Standing more than eighty-five feet high and sixty-five feet wide, it is the largest Baroque fountain in the city and one of the most famous fountains in the world.

trireme an Ancient Greek or Roman warship, having three tiers of oars on each side

Tyche the Greek goddess of good luck; daughter of Hermes and Aphrodite. Roman form: Fortuna

Venus the Roman goddess of love and beauty. She was married to Vulcan, but she loved Mars, the god of war. Greek form: Aphrodite

Vestal Virgins Roman priestesses of Vesta, goddess of the hearth. The Vestals were free of the usual social obligations to marry and bear children and took a vow of chastity in order to devote themselves to the study and observance of ritual.

Via Labicana an ancient road of Italy, leading east-southeast from Rome

Via Principalis the main street in a Roman camp or fort

Victoria the Roman goddess of strength, speed, and victory. Greek form: Nike

Vulcan the Roman god of fire and crafts and of blacksmiths; the son of Jupiter and Juno, and married to Venus. Greek form: Hephaestus

Wolf House a ruined mansion, originally commissioned by Jack London near Sonoma, California, where Percy Jackson was trained as a Roman demigod by Lupa

Zeus Greek god of the sky and king of the gods. Roman form: Jupiter

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—VOYA(starred review)

“Should pacing and wit continue unabated into the third volume, whose foretold European setting promises further freshness, fans will eagerly await numbers four and five.”

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About the Author

Rick Riordan is the author of the *New York Times* #1 best-selling *The Lost Hero* and *The Son of Neptune*, the first two books in his Heroes of Olympus series. He also penned the *New York Times* #1 best-selling Percy Jackson and the Olympians series: Book One: *The Lightning Thief*; Book Two: *The Sea of Monsters*; Book Three: *The Titan's Curse*; Book Four: *The Battle of the Labyrinth*; and Book Five: *The Last Olympian*. His three books in the Kane Chronicles, based on Egyptian mythology, *The Red Pyramid*, *The Throne of Fire*, and *The Serpent's Shadow*, were *New York Times* best sellers as well. Rick lives in San Antonio, Texas, with his wife and two sons. To learn more about him, visit his Web site at www.rickriordan.com.

THE HEROES



OF OLYMPUS

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The Son of Sobek

A Carter Kane/Percy Jackson Short Story

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ISBN 978-1-4231-5515-7

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To my wonderful readers:

Sorry about that last cliff-hanger.

Well, no, not really. HAHAHAHA.

But seriously, I love you guys.

HAZEL

DURING THE THIRD ATTACK, Hazel almost ate a boulder. She was peering into the fog, wondering how it could be so difficult to fly across one stupid mountain range, when the ship's alarm bells sounded.

"Hard to port!" Nico yelled from the foremast of the flying ship.

Back at the helm, Leo yanked the wheel. The *Argo II* veered left, its aerial oars slashing through the clouds like rows of knives.

Hazel made the mistake of looking over the rail. A dark spherical shape hurtled toward her. She thought: *Why is the moon coming at us?* Then she yelped and hit the deck. The huge rock passed so close overhead it blew her hair out of her face.

CRACK!

The foremast collapsed—sail, spars, and Nico all crashing to the deck. The boulder, roughly the size of a pickup truck, tumbled off into the fog like it had important business elsewhere.

"Nico!" Hazel scrambled over to him as Leo brought the ship level.

"I'm fine," Nico muttered, kicking folds of canvas off his legs.

She helped him up, and they stumbled to the bow. Hazel peeked over more carefully this time.

The clouds parted just long enough to reveal the top of the mountain below them: a spearhead of black rock jutting from mossy green slopes. Standing at the summit was a mountain god—one of the *numina montanum*, Jason had called them. Or *ourae*, in Greek. Whatever you called them, they were nasty.

Like the others they had faced, this one wore a simple white tunic over skin as rough and dark as basalt. He was about twenty feet tall and extremely muscular, with a flowing white beard, scraggly hair, and a wild look in his eyes, like a crazy hermit. He bellowed something Hazel didn't understand, but it obviously wasn't welcoming. With his bare hands, he pried another chunk of rock from his mountain and began shaping it into a ball.

The scene disappeared in the fog, but when the mountain god bellowed again, other *numina* answered in the distance, their voices echoing through the valleys.

“Stupid rock gods!” Leo yelled from the helm. “That’s the *third* time I’ve had to replace that mast! You think they grow on trees?”

Nico frowned. “Masts *are* from trees.”

“That’s not the point!” Leo snatched up one of his controls, rigged from a Nintendo Wii stick, and spun it in a circle. A few feet away, a trapdoor opened in the deck. A Celestial bronze cannon rose. Hazel just had time to cover her ears before it discharged into the sky, spraying a dozen metal spheres that trailed green fire. The spheres grew spikes in midair, like helicopter blades, and hurtled away into the fog.

A moment later, a series of explosions crackled across the mountains, followed by the outraged roars of mountain gods.

“Ha!” Leo yelled.

Unfortunately, Hazel guessed, judging from their last two encounters, Leo’s newest weapon had only annoyed the *numina*.

Another boulder whistled through the air off to their starboard side.

Nico yelled, “Get us out of here!”

Leo muttered some unflattering comments about *numina*, but he turned the wheel. The engines hummed. Magical rigging lashed itself tight, and the ship tacked to port. The *Argo II* picked up speed, retreating northwest, as they’d been doing for the past two days.

Hazel didn’t relax until they were out of the mountains. The fog cleared. Below them, morning sunlight illuminated the Italian countryside—rolling green hills and golden fields not too different from those in Northern California. Hazel could almost imagine she was sailing home to Camp Jupiter.

The thought weighed on her chest. Camp Jupiter had only been her home for nine months, since Nico had brought her back from the Underworld. But she missed it more than her birthplace of New Orleans, and *definitely* more than Alaska, where she’d died back in 1942.

She missed her bunk in the Fifth Cohort barracks. She missed dinners in the mess hall, with wind spirits whisking platters through the air and legionnaires joking about the war games. She wanted to wander the streets of New Rome, holding hands with Frank Zhang. She wanted to experience just being a regular girl for once, with an actual sweet, caring boyfriend.

Most of all, she wanted to feel safe. She was tired of being scared and worried all the time.

She stood on the quarterdeck as Nico picked mast splinters out of his arms and Leo punched buttons on the ship’s console.

“Well, *that* was sucktastic,” Leo said. “Should I wake the others?” Hazel was tempted to say yes, but the other crew members had taken the night shift and had earned their rest. They were exhausted from defending the ship. Every few hours, it seemed, some Roman monster had decided the *Argo II* looked like a tasty treat.

A few weeks ago, Hazel wouldn’t have believed that anyone could sleep through a *numina* attack, but now she imagined her friends were still snoring away belowdecks. Whenever *she* got a chance to crash, she slept like a coma patient.

“They need rest,” she said. “We’ll have to figure out another way on our own.”

“Huh.” Leo scowled at his monitor. In his tattered work shirt and grease-splattered jeans, he looked like he’d just lost a wrestling match with a locomotive.

Ever since their friends Percy and Annabeth had fallen into Tartarus, Leo had been working almost nonstop. He’d been acting angrier and even more driven than usual.

Hazel worried about him. But part of her was relieved by the change. Whenever Leo smiled and joked, he looked *too* much like Sammy, his great-grandfather... Hazel’s first boyfriend, back in 1942.

Ugh, why did her life have to be so complicated?

“Another way,” Leo muttered. “Do you see one?”

On his monitor glowed a map of Italy. The Apennine Mountains ran down the middle of the boot-shaped country. A green dot for the *Argo II* blinked on the western side of the range, a few hundred miles north of Rome. Their path should have been simple. They needed to get to a place called Epirus in Greece and find an old temple called the House of Hades (or Pluto, as the Romans called him; or as Hazel liked to think of him: the World’s Worst Absent Father).

To reach Epirus, all they had to do was go straight east—over the Apennines and across the Adriatic Sea. But it hadn’t worked out that way. Each time they tried to cross the spine of Italy, the mountain gods attacked.

For the past two days they’d skirted north, hoping to find a safe pass, with no luck. The *numina montanum* were sons of Gaea, Hazel’s least favorite goddess. That made them *very* determined enemies. The *Argo II* couldn’t fly high enough to avoid their attacks; and even with all its defenses, the ship couldn’t make it across the range without being smashed to pieces.

“It’s our fault,” Hazel said. “Nico’s and mine. The *numina* can sense us.” She glanced at her half brother. Since they’d rescued him from the giants, he’d started to regain his strength, but he was still painfully thin. His black shirt and jeans hung off his skeletal frame. Long dark hair framed his sunken eyes. His olive complexion had turned a sickly greenish white, like the color of tree sap.

In human years, he was barely fourteen, just a year older than Hazel, but that

didn't tell the whole story. Like Hazel, Nico di Angelo was a demigod from another era. He radiated a kind of *old* energy

—a melancholy that came from knowing he didn't belong in the modern world.

Hazel hadn't known him very long, but she understood, even shared, his sadness. The children of Hades (Pluto—whichever) rarely had happy lives. And judging from what Nico had told her the night before, their biggest challenge was yet to come when they reached the House of Hades—a challenge he'd implored her to keep secret from the others.

Nico gripped the hilt of his Stygian iron sword. "Earth spirits don't like children of the Underworld. That's true. We get under their skin—*literally*. But I think the *numina* could sense this ship anyway. We're carrying the Athena Parthenos. That thing is like a magical beacon." Hazel shivered, thinking of the massive statue that took up most of the hold. They'd sacrificed so much saving it from the cavern under Rome; but they had no idea what to do with it. So far the only thing it seemed to be good for was alerting more monsters to their presence.

Leo traced his finger down the map of Italy. "So crossing the mountains is out. Thing is, they go a long way in either direction."

"We could go by sea," Hazel suggested. "Sail around the southern tip of Italy."

"That's a long way," Nico said. "Plus, we don't have..." His voice cracked. "You know...our sea expert, Percy."

The name hung in the air like an impending storm.

Percy Jackson, son of Poseidon...probably the demigod Hazel admired most. He'd saved her life so many times on their quest to Alaska; but when he had needed Hazel's help in Rome, she'd failed him. She'd watched, powerless, as he and Annabeth had plunged into that pit.

Hazel took a deep breath. Percy and Annabeth were still alive. She knew that in her heart. She could *still* help them if she could get to the House of Hades, if she could survive the challenge Nico had warned her about....

"What about continuing north?" she asked. "There *has* to be a break in the mountains, or something."

Leo fiddled with the bronze Archimedes sphere that he'd installed on the console—his newest and most dangerous toy. Every time Hazel looked at the thing, her mouth went dry. She worried that Leo would turn the wrong combination on the sphere and accidentally eject them all from the deck, or blow up the ship, or turn the *Argo II* into a giant toaster.

Fortunately, they got lucky. The sphere grew a camera lens and projected a 3-D image of the Apennine Mountains above the console.

“I dunno.” Leo examined the hologram. “I don’t see any good passes to the north. But I like that idea better than backtracking south. I’m done with Rome.” No one argued with that. Rome had not been a good experience.

“Whatever we do,” Nico said, “we have to hurry. Every day that Annabeth and Percy are in Tartarus...”

He didn’t need to finish. They had to hope Percy and Annabeth could survive long enough to find the Tartarus side of the Doors of Death. Then, assuming the *Argo II* could reach the House of Hades, they *might* be able to open the Doors on the mortal side, save their friends, and seal the entrance, stopping Gaea’s forces from being reincarnated in the mortal world over and over.

Yes...nothing could go wrong with *that* plan.

Nico scowled at the Italian countryside below them. “Maybe we *should* wake the others. This decision affects us all.”

“No,” Hazel said. “We can find a solution.”

She wasn’t sure why she felt so strongly about it, but since leaving Rome, the crew had started to lose its cohesion. They’d been learning to work as a team. Then *bam*...their two most important members fell into Tartarus. Percy had been their backbone. He’d given them confidence as they sailed across the Atlantic and into the Mediterranean. As for Annabeth—she’d been the de facto leader of the quest. She’d recovered the Athena Parthenos single-handedly. She was the smartest of the seven, the one with the answers.

If Hazel woke up the rest of the crew every time they had a problem, they’d just start arguing again, feeling more and more hopeless.

She had to make Percy and Annabeth proud of her. She had to take the initiative. She couldn't believe her only role in this quest would be what Nico had warned her of—removing the obstacle waiting for them in the House of Hades. She pushed the thought aside.

“We need some creative thinking,” she said. “Another way to cross those mountains, or a way to hide ourselves from the *numina*.”

Nico sighed. “If I was on my own, I could shadow-travel. But that won't work for an entire ship.

And honestly, I'm not sure I have the strength to even transport *myself* anymore.”

“I could maybe rig some kind of camouflage,” Leo said, “like a smoke screen to hide us in the clouds.” He didn't sound very enthusiastic.

Hazel stared down at the rolling farmland, thinking about what lay beneath it—the realm of her father, lord of the Underworld. She'd only met Pluto once, and she hadn't even realized who he was.

She certainly had never expected help from him—not when she was alive the first time, not during her time as a spirit in the Underworld, not since Nico had brought her back to the world of the living.

Her dad's servant Thanatos, god of death, had suggested that Pluto might be doing Hazel a favor by ignoring her. After all, she wasn't supposed to be alive. If Pluto took notice of her, he might have to return her to the land of the dead.

Which meant calling on Pluto would be a very bad idea. And yet...

Please, Dad, she found herself praying. I have to find a way to your temple in Greece—the House of Hades. If you're down there, show me what to do.

At the edge of the horizon, a flicker of movement caught her eye—something small and beige racing across the fields at incredible speed, leaving a vapor trail like a plane's.

Hazel couldn't believe it. She didn't dare hope, but it *had* to be...“Arion.”

“What?” Nico asked.

Leo let out a happy whoop as the dust cloud got closer. “It’s her horse, man! You missed that whole part. We haven’t seen him since Kansas!”

Hazel laughed—the first time she’d laughed in days. It felt so good to see her old friend.

About a mile to the north, the small beige dot circled a hill and stopped at the summit. He was difficult to make out, but when the horse reared and whinnied, the sound carried all the way to the *Argo II*. Hazel had no doubt—it was Arion.

“We have to meet him,” she said. “He’s here to help.”

“Yeah, okay.” Leo scratched his head. “But, uh, we talked about not landing the ship on the ground anymore, remember? You know, with Gaea wanting to destroy us and all.”

“Just get me close, and I’ll use the rope ladder.” Hazel’s heart was pounding. “I think Arion wants to tell me something.”

II

HAZEL

HAZEL HAD NEVER FELT SO HAPPY. Well, except for maybe on the night of the victory feast at Camp Jupiter, when she’d kissed Frank for the first time...but this was a close second.

As soon as she reached the ground, she ran to Arion and threw her arms around him. “I missed you!” She pressed her face into the horse’s warm neck, which smelled of sea salt and apples. “Where have you been?”

Arion nickered. Hazel wished she could speak Horse like Percy could, but she got the general idea. Arion sounded impatient, as if saying, *No time for sentiment, girl! Come on!*

“You want me to go with you?” she guessed.

Arion bobbed his head, trotting in place. His dark brown eyes gleamed with urgency.

Hazel still couldn’t believe he was actually here. He could run across any surface, even the sea; but she’d been afraid he wouldn’t follow them into the ancient lands. The Mediterranean was too dangerous for demigods and their allies.

He wouldn’t have come unless Hazel was in dire need. And he seemed so agitated.... Anything that could make a fearless horse skittish should have terrified Hazel.

Instead, she felt elated. She was so tired of being seasick and airsick. Aboard the *Argo II*, she felt about as useful as a box of ballast. She was glad to be back on solid ground, even if it was Gaea’s territory. She was ready to ride.

“Hazel!” Nico called down from the ship. “What’s going on?”

“It’s fine!” She crouched down and summoned a gold nugget from the earth. She was getting better at controlling her power. Precious stones hardly ever popped up around her by accident anymore, and pulling gold from the ground was easy.

She fed Arion the nugget...his favorite snack. Then she smiled up at Leo and Nico, who were watching her from the top of the ladder a hundred feet above. “Arion wants to take me somewhere.” The boys exchanged nervous looks.

“Uh...” Leo pointed north. “Please tell me he’s not taking you into *that*?” Hazel had been so focused on Arion, she hadn’t noticed the disturbance. A mile away, on the crest of the next hill, a storm had gathered over some old stone ruins—maybe the remains of a Roman temple or a fortress. A funnel cloud snaked its

way down toward the hill like an inky black finger.

Hazel's mouth tasted like blood. She looked at Arion. "You want to go *there*?" Arion whinnied, as if to say, *Uh, duh!*

Well...Hazel had asked for help. Was this her dad's answer?

She hoped so, but she sensed something besides Pluto at work in that storm... something dark, powerful, and not necessarily friendly.

Still, this was her chance to help her friends—to lead instead of follow.

She tightened the straps of her Imperial gold cavalry sword and climbed onto Arion's back.

"I'll be okay!" she called up to Nico and Leo. "Stay put and wait for me."

"Wait for how long?" Nico asked. "What if you don't come back?"

"Don't worry, I will," she promised, hoping it was true.

She spurred Arion, and they shot across the countryside, heading straight for the growing tornado.

I I I

HAZEL

THE STORM SWALLOWED THE HILL in a swirling cone of black vapor.

Arion charged straight into it.

Hazel found herself at the summit, but it felt like a different dimension. The world lost its color.

The walls of the storm encircled the hill in murky black. The sky churned gray. The crumbling ruins were bleached so white, they almost glowed. Even Arion had turned from caramel brown to a dark shade of ash.

In the eye of the tempest, the air was still. Hazel's skin tingled coolly, as if she'd been rubbed with alcohol. In front of her, an arched gateway led through mossy walls into some sort of enclosure.

Hazel couldn't see much through the gloom, but she felt a presence within, as if she were a chunk of iron close to a large magnet. Its pull was irresistible, dragging her forward.

Yet she hesitated. She reined in Arion, and he clopped impatiently, the ground crackling under his hooves. Wherever he stepped, the grass, dirt, and stones turned white like frost. Hazel remembered the Hubbard Glacier in Alaska—how the surface had cracked under their feet. She remembered the floor of that horrible cavern in Rome crumbling to dust, plunging Percy and Annabeth into Tartarus.

She hoped this black-and-white hilltop wouldn't dissolve under her, but she decided it was best to keep moving.

"Let's go, then, boy." Her voice sounded muffled, as if she were speaking into a pillow.

Arion trotted through the stone archway. Ruined walls bordered a square courtyard about the size of a tennis court. Three other gateways, one in the middle of each wall, led north, east, and west.

In the center of the yard, two cobblestone paths intersected, making a cross. Mist hung in the air—

hazy shreds of white that coiled and undulated as if they were alive.

Not mist, Hazel realized. *The Mist*.

All her life, she'd heard about the Mist—the supernatural veil that obscured the world of myth from the sight of mortals. It could deceive humans, even demigods, into seeing monsters as harmless animals, or gods as regular people.

Hazel had never thought of it as actual smoke, but as she watched it curling around Arion's legs, floating through the broken arches of the ruined courtyard, the hairs stood up on her arms. Somehow she knew: this white stuff was pure magic.

In the distance, a dog howled. Arion wasn't usually scared of anything, but he reared, huffing nervously.

"It's okay." Hazel stroked his neck. "We're in this together. I'm going to get down, all right?" She slid off Arion's back. Instantly he turned and ran.

"Arion, wai—"

But he'd already disappeared the way he'd come.

So much for being in this together.

Another howl cut through the air—closer this time.

Hazel stepped toward the center of the courtyard. The Mist clung to her like freezer fog.

"Hello?" she called.

"Hello," a voice answered.

The pale figure of a woman appeared at the northern gateway. No, wait...she stood at the eastern entrance. No, the western. *Three* smoky images of the same woman moved in unison toward the center of the ruins. Her form was blurred, made from Mist, and she was trailed by two smaller wisps of smoke, darting at her heels like animals. Some sort of pets?

She reached the center of the courtyard and her three forms merged into one. She solidified into a young woman in a dark sleeveless gown. Her golden hair was

gathered into a high-set ponytail, Ancient Greek style. Her dress was so silky, it seemed to ripple, as if the cloth were ink spilling off her shoulders. She looked no more than twenty, but Hazel knew that meant nothing.

“Hazel Levesque,” said the woman.

She was beautiful, but deathly pale. Once, back in New Orleans, Hazel had been forced to attend a wake for a dead classmate. She remembered the lifeless body of the young girl in the open casket.

Her face had been made up prettily, as if she were resting, which Hazel had found terrifying.

This woman reminded Hazel of that girl—except the woman’s eyes were open and completely black. When she tilted her head, she seemed to break into three different people again...misty afterimages blurring together, like a photograph of someone moving too fast to capture.

“Who are you?” Hazel’s fingers twitched at the hilt of her sword. “I mean... which goddess?” Hazel was sure of that much. This woman radiated power. Everything around them—the swirling Mist, the monochromatic storm, the eerie glow of the ruins—was because of her presence.

“Ah.” The woman nodded. “Let me give you some light.”

She raised her hands. Suddenly she was holding two old-fashioned reed torches, guttering with fire. The Mist receded to the edges of the courtyard. At the woman’s sandaled feet, the two wispy animals took on solid form. One was a black Labrador retriever. The other was a long, gray, furry rodent with a white mask around its face. A weasel, maybe?

The woman smiled serenely.

“I am Hecate,” she said. “Goddess of magic. We have much to discuss if you’re to live through tonight.”

HAZEL

HAZEL WANTED TO RUN, but her feet seemed stuck to the white-glazed ground.

On either side of the crossroads, two dark metal torch-stands erupted from the dirt like plant stalks. Hecate fixed her torches in them, then walked a slow circle around Hazel, regarding her as if they were partners in some eerie dance.

The black dog and the weasel followed in her wake.

“You are like your mother,” Hecate decided.

Hazel’s throat constricted. “You knew her?”

“Of course. Marie was a fortune-teller. She dealt in charms and curses and *gris-gris*. I am the goddess of magic.”

Those pure black eyes seemed to pull at Hazel, as if trying to extract her soul. During her *first* lifetime in New Orleans, Hazel had been tormented by the kids at St. Agnes School because of her mother. They called Marie Levesque a witch. The nuns muttered that Hazel’s mother was trading with the Devil.

If the nuns were scared of my mom, Hazel wondered, what would they make of this goddess?

“Many fear me,” Hecate said, as if reading her thoughts. “But magic is neither good nor evil. It is a tool, like a knife. Is a knife evil? Only if the wielder is evil.”

“My—my mother...” Hazel stammered. “She didn’t believe in magic. Not really. She was just faking it, for the money.”

The weasel chittered and bared its teeth. Then it made a squeaking sound from its back end.

Under other circumstances, a weasel passing gas might have been funny, but Hazel didn’t laugh. The rodent’s red eyes glared at her balefully, like tiny coals.

“Peace, Gale,” said Hecate. She gave Hazel an apologetic shrug. “Gale does not like hearing about nonbelievers and con artists. She herself was once a witch, you see.”

“Your weasel was a witch?”

“She’s a polecat, actually,” Hecate said. “But, yes—Gale was once a disagreeable human witch.

She had terrible personal hygiene, plus extreme—ah, digestive issues.” Hecate waved her hand in front of her nose. “It gave my other followers a bad name.”

“Okay.” Hazel tried not to look at the weasel. She really didn’t want to know about the rodent’s intestinal problems.

“At any rate,” Hecate said, “I turned her into a polecat. She’s much better as a polecat.” Hazel swallowed. She looked at the black dog, which was affectionately nuzzling the goddess’s hand. “And your Labrador...?”

“Oh, she’s Hecuba, the former queen of Troy,” Hecate said, as if that should be obvious.

The dog grunted.

“You’re right, Hecuba,” the goddess said. “We don’t have time for long introductions. The point is, Hazel Levesque, your mother may have claimed not to believe, but she had true magic. Eventually, she realized this. When she searched for a spell to summon the god Pluto, *I* helped her find it.”

“You...?”

“Yes.” Hecate continued circling Hazel. “I saw potential in your mother. I see even *more* potential in you.”

Hazel’s head spun. She remembered her mother’s confession just before she had died: how she’d summoned Pluto, how the god had fallen in love with her, and how, because of her greedy wish, her daughter Hazel had been born with a curse. Hazel could summon riches from the earth, but anyone who used them would suffer and die.

Now this goddess was saying that *she* had made all that happen.

“My mother suffered because of that magic. My whole life—”

“Your life wouldn’t have happened without me,” Hecate said flatly. “I have no time for your anger. Neither do you. Without my help, you will die.”

The black dog snarled. The polecat snapped its teeth and passed gas.

Hazel felt like her lungs were filling with hot sand.

“What kind of help?” she demanded.

Hecate raised her pale arms. The three gateways she’d come from—north, east, and west—

began to swirl with Mist. A flurry of black-and-white images glowed and flickered, like the old silent movies that were still playing in theaters sometimes when Hazel was small.

In the western doorway, Roman and Greek demigods in full armor fought one another on a hillside under a large pine tree. The grass was strewn with the wounded and the dying. Hazel saw herself riding Arion, charging through the melee and shouting—trying to stop the violence.

In the gateway to the east, Hazel saw the *Argo II* plunging through the sky above the Apennines.

Its rigging was in flames. A boulder smashed into the quarterdeck. Another

punched through the hull.

The ship burst like a rotten pumpkin, and the engine exploded.

The images in the northern doorway were even worse. Hazel saw Leo, unconscious—or dead—

falling through the clouds. She saw Frank staggering alone down a dark tunnel, clutching his arm, his shirt soaked in blood. And Hazel saw herself in a vast cavern filled with strands of light like a luminous web. She was struggling to break through while, in the distance, Percy and Annabeth lay sprawled and unmoving at the foot of two black-and-silver metal doors.

“Choices,” said Hecate. “You stand at the crossroads, Hazel Levesque. And I am the goddess of crossroads.”

The ground rumbled at Hazel’s feet. She looked down and saw the glint of silver coins...

thousands of old Roman denarii breaking the surface all around her, as if the entire hilltop was coming to a boil. She’d been so agitated by the visions in the doorways that she must have summoned every bit of silver in the surrounding countryside.

“The past is close to the surface in this place,” Hecate said. “In ancient times, two great Roman roads met here. News was exchanged. Markets were held. Friends met, and enemies fought. Entire armies had to choose a direction. Crossroads are always places of decision.”

“Like...like Janus.” Hazel remembered the shrine of Janus on Temple Hill back at Camp Jupiter.

Demigods would go there to make decisions. They would flip a coin, heads or tails, and hope the two-faced god would guide them well. Hazel had always hated that place. She’d never understood why her friends were so willing to let a god take away their responsibility for choosing. After all Hazel had been through, she trusted the wisdom of the gods about as much as she trusted a New Orleans slot machine.

The goddess of magic made a disgusted hiss. “Janus and his doorways. He

would have you believe that all choices are black or white, yes or no, in or out. In fact, it's not that simple. Whenever you reach the crossroads, there are always at least *three* ways to go...four, if you count going backward. You are at such a crossing now, Hazel."

Hazel looked again at each swirling gateway: a demigod war, the destruction of the *Argo II*, disaster for herself and her friends. "All the choices are bad."

"All choices have risks," the goddess corrected. "But what is your goal?"

"My goal?" Hazel waved helplessly at the doorways. "None of these." The dog Hecuba snarled. Gale the polecat skittered around the goddess's feet, farting and gnashing her teeth.

"You could go backward," Hecate suggested, "retrace your steps to Rome...but Gaea's forces are expecting that. None of you will survive."

"So...what are you saying?"

Hecate stepped to the nearest torch. She scooped a handful of fire and sculpted the flames until she was holding a miniature relief map of Italy.

"You could go west." Hecate let her finger drift away from her fiery map. "Go back to America with your prize, the Athena Parthenos. Your comrades back home, Greek and Roman, are on the brink of war. Leave now, and you might save many lives."

"*Might*," Hazel repeated. "But Gaea is supposed to wake in Greece. That's where the giants are gathering."

"True. Gaea has set the date of August first, the Feast of Spes, goddess of hope, for her rise to power. By waking on the Day of Hope, she intends to destroy all hope forever. Even if you reached Greece by then, could you stop her? I do not know." Hecate traced her finger along the tops of the fiery Apennines. "You could go east, across the mountains, but Gaea will do anything to stop you from crossing Italy. She has raised her mountain gods against you."

"We noticed," Hazel said.

"Any attempt to cross the Apennines will mean the destruction of your ship.

Ironically, this might be the *safest* option for your crew. I foresee that all of you would survive the explosion. It is possible, though unlikely, you could still reach Epirus and close the Doors of Death. You might find Gaea and prevent her rise. But by then, both demigod camps would be destroyed. You would have no home to return to.” Hecate smiled. “More likely, the destruction of your ship would strand you in the mountains. It would mean the end of your quest, but it would spare you and your friends much pain and suffering in the days to come. The war with the giants would have to be won or lost without you.” *Won or lost without us.*

A small, guilty part of Hazel found that appealing. She’d been wishing for the chance to be a normal girl. She didn’t want any more pain or suffering for herself and her friends. They’d already been through so much.

She looked behind Hecate at the middle gateway. She saw Percy and Annabeth sprawled helplessly before those black-and-silver doors. A massive dark shape, vaguely humanoid, now loomed over them, its foot raised as if to crush Percy.

“What about them?” Hazel asked, her voice ragged. “Percy and Annabeth?” Hecate shrugged. “West, east, or south...they die.”

“Not an option,” Hazel said.

“Then you have only one path, though it is the most dangerous.” Hecate’s finger crossed her miniature Apennines, leaving a glowing white line in the red flames.

“There is a secret pass here in the north, a place where I hold sway, where Hannibal once crossed when he marched against Rome.”

The goddess made a wide loop...to the top of Italy, then east to the sea, then down along the western coast of Greece. “Once through the pass, you would travel north to Bologna, and then to Venice. From there, sail the Adriatic to your goal, here: Epirus in Greece.” Hazel didn’t know much about geography. She had no idea what the Adriatic Sea was like.

She’d never heard of Bologna, and all she knew about Venice was vague stories about canals and gondolas. But one thing was obvious. “That’s so far out of the way.”

“Which is why Gaea will not expect you to take this route,” Hecate said. “I can

obscure your progress somewhat, but the success of your journey will depend on you, Hazel Levesque. You must learn to use the Mist.”

“Me?” Hazel’s heart felt like it was tumbling down her rib cage. “Use the Mist how?” Hecate extinguished her map of Italy. She flicked her hand at the black dog Hecuba. Mist collected around the Labrador until she was completely hidden in a cocoon of white. The fog cleared with an audible *poof!* Where the dog had stood was a disgruntled-looking black kitten with golden eyes.

“Mew,” it complained.

“I am the goddess of the Mist,” Hecate explained. “I am responsible for keeping the veil that separates the world of the gods from the world of mortals. My children learn to use the Mist to their advantage, to create illusions or influence the minds of mortals. Other demigods can do this as well.

And so must you, Hazel, if you are to help your friends.”

“But...” Hazel looked at the cat. She knew it was actually Hecuba, the black Labrador, but she couldn’t convince herself. The cat seemed so real. “I can’t do that.”

“Your mother had the talent,” Hecate said. “You have even more. As a child of Pluto who has returned from the dead, you understand the veil between worlds better than most. You *can* control the Mist. If you do not...well, your brother Nico has already warned you. The spirits have whispered to him, told him of your future. When you reach the House of Hades, you will meet a formidable enemy.

She cannot be overcome by strength or sword. You alone can defeat her, and you will require magic.” Hazel’s legs felt wobbly. She remembered Nico’s grim expression, his fingers digging into her arm. *You can’t tell the others. Not yet. Their courage is already stretched to the limit.*

“Who?” Hazel croaked. “Who is this enemy?”

“I will not speak her name,” Hecate said. “That would alert her to your presence before you are ready to face her. Go north, Hazel. As you travel, practice summoning the Mist. When you arrive in Bologna, seek out the two dwarfs. They will lead you to a treasure that may help you survive in the House of

Hades.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Mew,” the kitten complained.

“Yes, yes, Hecuba.” The goddess flicked her hand again, and the cat disappeared. The black Labrador was back in its place.

“You *will* understand, Hazel,” the goddess promised. “From time to time, I will send Gale to check on your progress.”

The polecat hissed, its beady red eyes full of malice.

“Wonderful,” Hazel muttered.

“Before you reach Epirus, you must be prepared,” Hecate said. “If you succeed, then perhaps we will meet again...for the final battle.”

A final battle, Hazel thought. Oh, joy.

Hazel wondered if she could prevent the revelations she saw in the Mist—Leo falling through the sky; Frank stumbling through the dark, alone and gravely wounded; Percy and Annabeth at the mercy of a dark giant.

She hated the gods’ riddles and their unclear advice. She was starting to despise crossroads.

“Why are you helping me?” Hazel demanded. “At Camp Jupiter, they said you sided with the *Titans* in the last war.”

Hecate’s dark eyes glinted. “Because I *am* a Titan—daughter of Perses and Asteria. Long before the Olympians came to power, I ruled the Mist. Despite this, in the First Titan War, millennia ago, I sided with Zeus against Kronos. I was not blind to Kronos’s cruelty. I hoped Zeus would prove a better king.”

She gave a small, bitter laugh. “When Demeter lost her daughter Persephone, kidnapped by *your* father, I guided Demeter through the darkest night with my torches, helping her search. And when the giants rose the first time, I again sided with the gods. I fought my archenemy Clytius, made by Gaea to absorb and

defeat all my magic.”

“Clytius.” Hazel had never heard that name— *Clai-tee-us*—but saying it made her limbs feel heavy. She glanced at the images in the northern doorway—the massive dark shape looming over Percy and Annabeth. “Is he the threat in the House of Hades?”

“Oh, he waits for you there,” Hecate said. “But first you must defeat the witch. Unless you manage that...”

She snapped her fingers, and all of the gateways turned dark. The Mist dissolved, the images gone.

“We all face choices,” the goddess said. “When Kronos arose the second time, I made a mistake.

I supported him. I had grown tired of being ignored by the so-called *major* gods. Despite my years of faithful service, they mistrusted me, refused me a seat in their hall...” The polecat Gale chittered angrily.

“It does not matter anymore.” The goddess sighed. “I have made peace again with Olympus.

Even now, when they are laid low—their Greek and Roman personas fighting each other—I will help them. Greek or Roman, I have always been only Hecate. I will assist you against the giants, if you prove yourself worthy. So now it is your choice, Hazel Levesque. Will you trust me...or will you shun me, as the Olympian gods have done too often?”

Blood roared in Hazel’s ears. Could she trust this dark goddess, who’d given her mother the magic that ruined her life? Sorry, no. She didn’t much like Hecate’s dog or her gassy polecat, either.

But she also knew she couldn’t let Percy and Annabeth die.

“I’ll go north,” she said. “We’ll take your secret pass through the mountains.” Hecate nodded, the slightest hint of satisfaction in her face. “You have chosen well, though the path will not be easy. Many monsters will rise against you. Even some of my *own* servants have sided with Gaea, hoping to destroy your mortal world.”

The goddess took her double torches from their stands. “Prepare yourself, daughter of Pluto. If you succeed against the witch, we will meet again.”

“I’ll succeed,” Hazel promised. “And Hecate? I’m not choosing one of your paths. I’m making my own.”

The goddess arched her eyebrows. Her polecat writhed, and her dog snarled.

“We’re going to find a way to stop Gaea,” Hazel said. “We’re going to rescue our friends from Tartarus. We’re going to keep the crew and the ship together, *and* we’re going to stop Camp Jupiter and Camp Half-Blood from going to war. We’re going to do it all.” The storm howled, the black walls of the funnel cloud swirling faster.

“Interesting,” Hecate said, as if Hazel were an unexpected result in a science experiment. “That would be magic worth seeing.”

A wave of darkness blotted out the world. When Hazel’s sight returned, the storm, the goddess, and her minions were gone. Hazel stood on the hillside in the morning sunlight, alone in the ruins except for Arion, who paced next to her, nickering impatiently.

“I agree,” Hazel told the horse. “Let’s get out of here.”

“What happened?” Leo asked as Hazel climbed aboard the *Argo II*.

Hazel’s hands still shook from her talk with the goddess. She glanced over the rail and saw the dust of Arion’s wake stretching across the hills of Italy. She had hoped her friend would stay, but couldn’t blame him for wanting to get away from this place as fast as possible.

The countryside sparkled as the summer sun hit the morning dew. On the hill, the old ruins stood white and silent—no sign of ancient paths, or goddesses, or farting weasels.

“Hazel?” Nico asked.

Her knees buckled. Nico and Leo grabbed her arms and helped her to the steps of the foredeck.

She felt embarrassed, collapsing like some fairy-tale damsel, but her energy was gone. The memory of those glowing scenes at the crossroads filled her with dread.

“I met Hecate,” she managed.

She didn’t tell them everything. She remembered what Nico had said: *Their courage is already stretched to the limit*. But she told them about the secret northern pass through the mountains, and the detour Hecate described that could take them to Epirus.

When she was done, Nico took her hand. His eyes were full of concern. “Hazel, you met Hecate at a crossroads. That’s...that’s something many demigods don’t survive. And the ones who *do* survive are never the same. Are you sure you’re —”

“I’m fine,” she insisted.

But she knew she wasn’t. She remembered how bold and angry she’d felt, telling the goddess she’d find her own path and succeed at everything. Now her boast seemed ridiculous. Her courage had abandoned her.

“What if Hecate is tricking us?” Leo asked. “This route could be a trap.” Hazel shook her head. “If it was a trap, I think Hecate would’ve made the northern route sound tempting. Believe me, she didn’t.”

Leo pulled a calculator out of his tool belt and punched in some numbers. “That’s...something like three hundred miles out of our way to get to Venice. Then we’d have to backtrack down the Adriatic. And you said something about baloney dwarfs?”

“Dwarfs in Bologna,” Hazel said. “I guess Bologna is a city. But why we have to find dwarfs there...I have no idea. Some sort of treasure to help us with the quest.”

“Huh,” Leo said. “I mean, I’m all about treasure, but—”

“It’s our best option.” Nico helped Hazel to her feet. “We have to make up for lost time, travel as fast as we can. Percy’s and Annabeth’s lives might depend on it.”

“Fast?” Leo grinned. “I can do fast.”

He hurried to the console and started flipping switches.

Nico took Hazel’s arm and guided her out of earshot. “What else did Hecate say? Anything about

—”

“I can’t.” Hazel cut him off. The images she’d seen had almost overwhelmed her: Percy and Annabeth helpless at the feet of those black metal doors, the dark giant looming over them, Hazel herself trapped in a glowing maze of light, unable to help.

You must defeat the witch, Hecate had said. You alone can defeat her. Unless you manage that...

The end, Hazel thought. All gateways closed. All hope extinguished.

Nico had warned her. He’d communed with the dead, heard them whispering hints about their future. Two children of the Underworld would enter the House of Hades. They would face an impossible foe. Only one of them would make it to the Doors of Death.

Hazel couldn’t meet her brother’s eyes.

“I’ll tell you later,” she promised, trying to keep her voice from trembling. “Right now, we should rest while we can. Tonight, we cross the Apennines.”

ANNABETH

NINE DAYS.

As she fell, Annabeth thought about Hesiod, the old Greek poet who'd speculated it would take nine days to fall from earth to Tartarus.

She hoped Hesiod was wrong. She'd lost track of how long she and Percy had been falling—

hours? A day? It felt like an eternity. They'd been holding hands ever since they dropped into the chasm. Now Percy pulled her close, hugging her tight as they tumbled through absolute darkness.

Wind whistled in Annabeth's ears. The air grew hotter and damper, as if they were plummeting into the throat of a massive dragon. Her recently broken ankle throbbed, though she couldn't tell if it was still wrapped in spiderwebs.

That cursed monster Arachne. Despite having been trapped in her own webbing, smashed by a car, and plunged into Tartarus, the spider lady had gotten her revenge. Somehow her silk had entangled Annabeth's leg and dragged her over the side of the pit, with Percy in tow.

Annabeth couldn't imagine that Arachne was still alive, somewhere below them in the darkness.

She didn't want to meet that monster again when they reached the bottom. On the bright side, assuming there *was* a bottom, Annabeth and Percy would probably be flattened on impact, so giant spiders were the least of their worries.

She wrapped her arms around Percy and tried not to sob. She'd never expected her life to be easy. Most demigods died young at the hands of terrible monsters. That was the way it had been since ancient times. The Greeks *invented* tragedy. They knew the greatest heroes didn't get happy endings.

Still, this wasn't *fair*. She'd gone through so much to retrieve that statue of Athena. Just when she'd succeeded, when things had been looking up and she'd been reunited with Percy, they had plunged to their deaths.

Even the gods couldn't devise a fate so twisted.

But Gaea wasn't like other gods. The Earth Mother was older, more vicious, more bloodthirsty.

Annabeth could imagine her laughing as they fell into the depths.

Annabeth pressed her lips to Percy's ear. "I love you."

She wasn't sure he could hear her—but if they were going to die she wanted those to be her last words.

She tried desperately to think of a plan to save them. She was a daughter of Athena. She'd proven herself in the tunnels under Rome, beaten a whole series of challenges with only her wits. But she couldn't think of any way to reverse or even slow their fall.

Neither of them had the power to fly—not like Jason, who could control the wind, or Frank, who could turn into a winged animal. If they reached the bottom at terminal velocity...well, she knew enough science to know it would be *terminal*.

She was seriously wondering whether they could fashion a parachute out of their shirts—*that's* how desperate she was—when something about their surroundings changed. The darkness took on a gray-red tinge. She realized she could see Percy's hair as she hugged him. The whistling in her ears turned into more of a roar. The air became intolerably hot, permeated with a smell like

rotten eggs.

Suddenly, the chute they'd been falling through opened into a vast cavern. Maybe half a mile below them, Annabeth could see the bottom. For a moment she was too stunned to think properly. The entire island of Manhattan could have fit inside this cavern—and she couldn't even see its full extent.

Red clouds hung in the air like vaporized blood. The landscape—at least what she could see of it—

was rocky black plains, punctuated by jagged mountains and fiery chasms. To Annabeth's left, the ground dropped off in a series of cliffs, like colossal steps leading deeper into the abyss.

The stench of sulfur made it hard to concentrate, but she focused on the ground directly below them and saw a ribbon of glittering black liquid—a *river*.

“Percy!” she yelled in his ear. “Water!”

She gestured frantically. Percy's face was hard to read in the dim red light. He looked shell-shocked and terrified, but he nodded as if he understood.

Percy could control water—assuming that *was* water below them. He might be able to cushion their fall somehow. Of course Annabeth had heard horrible stories about the rivers of the Underworld. They could take away your memories, or burn your body and soul to ashes. But she decided not to think about that. This was their only chance.

The river hurtled toward them. At the last second, Percy yelled defiantly. The water erupted in a massive geyser and swallowed them whole.

ANNABETH

THE IMPACT DIDN'T KILL HER, but the cold nearly did.

Freezing water shocked the air right out of her lungs. Her limbs turned rigid, and she lost her grip on Percy. She began to sink. Strange wailing sounds filled her ears—millions of heartbroken voices, as if the river were made of distilled sadness. The voices were worse than the cold. They weighed her down and made her numb.

What's the point of struggling? they told her. *You're dead anyway. You'll never leave this place.*

She could sink to the bottom and drown, let the river carry her body away. That would be easier.

She could just close her eyes....

Percy gripped her hand and jolted her back to reality. She couldn't see him in the murky water, but suddenly she didn't want to die. Together they kicked upward and broke the surface.

Annabeth gasped, grateful for the air, no matter how sulfurous. The water swirled around them, and she realized Percy was creating a whirlpool to buoy them up.

Though she couldn't make out their surroundings, she knew this was a river. Rivers had shores.

"Land," she croaked. "Go sideways."

Percy looked near dead with exhaustion. Usually water reinvigorated him, but not *this* water.

Controlling it must have taken every bit of his strength. The whirlpool began to dissipate. Annabeth hooked one arm around his waist and struggled across the current. The river worked against her: thousands of weeping voices whispering in her ears, getting inside her brain.

Life is despair, they said. Everything is pointless, and then you die.

"Pointless," Percy murmured. His teeth chattered from the cold. He stopped swimming and began to sink.

"Percy!" she shrieked. "The river is messing with your mind. It's the Cocytus—the River of Lamentation. It's made of pure misery!"

"Misery," he agreed.

"Fight it!"

She kicked and struggled, trying to keep both of them afloat. Another cosmic joke for Gaea to laugh at: *Annabeth dies trying to keep her boyfriend, the son of Poseidon, from drowning.*

Not going to happen, you hag, Annabeth thought.

She hugged Percy tighter and kissed him. "Tell me about New Rome," she demanded. "What were your plans for us?"

"New Rome...For us..."

"Yeah, Seaweed Brain. You said we could have a future there! Tell me!" Annabeth had never wanted to leave Camp Half-Blood. It was the only real home she'd ever known. But days ago, on the *Argo II*, Percy had told her that he imagined a future for the two of them among the Roman demigods. In their city

of New Rome, veterans of the legion could settle down safely, go to college, get married, even have kids.

“Architecture,” Percy murmured. The fog started to clear from his eyes.

“Thought you’d like the houses, the parks. There’s one street with all these cool fountains.” Annabeth started making progress against the current. Her limbs felt like bags of wet sand, but Percy was helping her now. She could see the dark line of the shore about a stone’s throw away.

“College,” she gasped. “Could we go there together?”

“Y-yeah,” he agreed, a little more confidently.

“What would you study, Percy?”

“Dunno,” he admitted.

“Marine science,” she suggested. “Oceanography?”

“Surfing?” he asked.

She laughed, and the sound sent a shock wave through the water. The wailing faded to background noise. Annabeth wondered if anyone had ever laughed in Tartarus before—just a pure, simple laugh of pleasure. She doubted it.

She used the last of her strength to reach the riverbank. Her feet dug into the sandy bottom. She and Percy hauled themselves ashore, shivering and gasping, and collapsed on the dark sand.

Annabeth wanted to curl up next to Percy and go to sleep. She wanted to shut her eyes, hope all of this was just a bad dream, and wake up to find herself back on the *Argo II*, safe with her friends (well...as safe as a demigod can ever be).

But, no. They were really in Tartarus. At their feet, the River Cocytus roared past, a flood of liquid wretchedness. The sulfurous air stung Annabeth’s lungs and prickled her skin. When she looked at her arms, she saw they were already covered with an angry rash. She tried to sit up and gasped in pain.

The beach wasn’t sand. They were sitting on a field of jagged black-glass chips, some of which were now embedded in Annabeth’s palms.

So the air was acid. The water was misery. The ground was broken glass. Everything here was designed to hurt and kill. Annabeth took a rattling breath and wondered if the voices in the Cocytus were right. Maybe fighting for survival was pointless. They would be dead within the hour.

Next to her, Percy coughed. “This place smells like my ex-stepfather.” Annabeth managed a weak smile. She’d never met Smelly Gabe, but she’d heard enough stories.

She loved Percy for trying to lift her spirits.

If she’d fallen into Tartarus by herself, Annabeth thought, she would have been doomed. After all she’d been through beneath Rome, finding the Athena Parthenos, this was simply too much. She would’ve curled up and cried until she became another ghost, melting into the Cocytus.

But she wasn’t alone. She had Percy. And that meant she couldn’t give up.

She forced herself to take stock. Her foot was still wrapped in its makeshift cast of board and Bubble Wrap, still tangled in cobwebs. But when she moved it, it didn’t hurt. The ambrosia she’d eaten in the tunnels under Rome must have finally mended her bones.

Her backpack was gone—lost during the fall, or maybe washed away in the river. She hated losing Daedalus’s laptop, with all its fantastic programs and data, but she had worse problems. Her Celestial bronze dagger was missing—the weapon she’d carried since she was seven years old.

The realization almost broke her, but she couldn’t let herself dwell on it. Time to grieve later.

What else did they have?

No food, no water...basically no supplies at all.

Yep. Off to a promising start.

Annabeth glanced at Percy. He looked pretty bad. His dark hair was plastered across his forehead, his T-shirt ripped to shreds. His fingers were scraped raw from holding on to that ledge before they fell. Most worrisome of all, he was

shivering and his lips were blue.

“We should keep moving or we’ll get hypothermia,” Annabeth said. “Can you stand?” He nodded. They both struggled to their feet.

Annabeth put her arm around his waist, though she wasn’t sure who was supporting whom. She scanned their surroundings. Above, she saw no sign of the tunnel they’d fallen down. She couldn’t even see the cavern roof—just blood-colored clouds floating in the hazy gray air. It was like staring through a thin mix of tomato soup and cement.

The black-glass beach stretched inland about fifty yards, then dropped off the edge of a cliff.

From where she stood, Annabeth couldn’t see what was below, but the edge flickered with red light as if illuminated by huge fires.

A distant memory tugged at her—something about Tartarus and fire. Before she could think too much about it, Percy inhaled sharply.

“Look.” He pointed downstream.

A hundred feet away, a familiar-looking baby-blue Italian car had crashed headfirst into the sand. It looked just like the Fiat that had smashed into Arachne and sent her plummeting into the pit.

Annabeth hoped she was wrong, but how many Italian sports cars could there be in Tartarus?

Part of her didn’t want to go anywhere near it, but she had to find out. She gripped Percy’s hand, and they stumbled toward the wreckage. One of the car’s tires had come off and was floating in a backwater eddy of the Cocytus. The Fiat’s windows had shattered, sending brighter glass like frosting across the dark beach. Under the crushed hood lay the tattered, glistening remains of a giant silk cocoon—the trap that Annabeth had tricked Arachne into weaving. It was unmistakably empty. Slash marks in the sand made a trail downriver...as if something heavy, with multiple legs, had scuttled into the darkness.

“She’s alive.” Annabeth was so horrified, so outraged by the unfairness of it all, she had to suppress the urge to throw up.

“It’s Tartarus,” Percy said. “Monster home court. Down here, maybe they can’t be killed.” He gave Annabeth an embarrassed look, as if realizing he wasn’t helping team morale. “Or maybe she’s badly wounded, and she crawled away to die.”

“Let’s go with that,” Annabeth agreed.

Percy was still shivering. Annabeth wasn’t feeling any warmer either, despite the hot, sticky air.

The glass cuts on her hands were still bleeding, which was unusual for her. Normally, she healed fast.

Her breathing got more and more labored.

“This place is killing us,” she said. “I mean, it’s *literally* going to kill us, unless...” *Tartarus. Fire.* That distant memory came into focus. She gazed inland toward the cliff, illuminated by flames from below.

It was an absolutely crazy idea. But it might be their only chance.

“Unless what?” Percy prompted. “You’ve got a brilliant plan, haven’t you?”

“It’s a plan,” Annabeth murmured. “I don’t know about brilliant. We need to find the River of Fire.”

V I I

ANNABETH

WHEN THEY REACHED THE LEDGE, Annabeth was sure she'd signed their death warrants.

The cliff dropped more than eighty feet. At the bottom stretched a nightmarish version of the Grand Canyon: a river of fire cutting a path through a jagged obsidian crevasse, the glowing red current casting horrible shadows across the cliff faces.

Even from the top of the canyon, the heat was intense. The chill of the River Cocytus hadn't left Annabeth's bones, but now her face felt raw and sunburned. Every breath took more effort, as if her chest was filled with Styrofoam peanuts. The cuts on her hands bled more rather than less. Annabeth's foot, which had been almost healed, seemed to be reinjuring itself. She'd taken off her makeshift cast, but now she regretted it. Each step made her wince.

Assuming they could make it down to the fiery river, which she doubted, her plan seemed certifiably insane.

"Uh..." Percy examined the cliff. He pointed to a tiny fissure running diagonally from the edge to the bottom. "We can try that ledge there. Might be able to climb down." He didn't say they'd be crazy to try. He managed to sound hopeful. Annabeth was grateful for that, but she also worried that she was leading him to his doom.

Of course if they stayed here, they would die anyway. Blisters had started to form on their arms from exposure to the Tartarus air. The whole environment was about as healthy as a nuclear blast zone.

Percy went first. The ledge was barely wide enough to allow a toehold. Their hands clawed for any crack in the glassy rock. Every time Annabeth put pressure on her bad foot, she wanted to yelp.

She'd ripped off the sleeves of her T-shirt and used the cloth to wrap her bloody palms, but her fingers were still slippery and weak.

A few steps below her, Percy grunted as he reached for another handhold. "So... what is this fire river called?"

"The Phlegethon," she said. "You should concentrate on going down."

"The *Phlegethon*?" He shinnied along the ledge. They'd made it roughly a third of the way down the cliff—still high enough up to die if they fell. "Sounds like a marathon for hawking spitballs."

"Please don't make me laugh," she said.

"Just trying to keep things light."

"Thanks," she grunted, nearly missing the ledge with her bad foot. "I'll have a smile on my face as I plummet to my death."

They kept going, one step at a time. Annabeth's eyes stung with sweat. Her arms trembled. But to her amazement, they finally made it to the bottom of the cliff.

When she reached the ground, she stumbled. Percy caught her. She was alarmed by how feverish his skin felt. Red boils had erupted on his face, so he looked like a smallpox victim.

Her own vision was blurry. Her throat felt blistered, and her stomach was clenched tighter than a fist.

We have to hurry, she thought.

"Just to the river," she told Percy, trying to keep the panic out of her voice. "We

can do this.” They staggered over slick glass ledges, around massive boulders, avoiding stalagmites that would’ve impaled them with any slip of the foot. Their tattered clothes steamed from the heat of the river, but they kept going until they crumpled to their knees at the banks of the Phlegethon.

“We have to drink,” Annabeth said.

Percy swayed, his eyes half-closed. It took him a three-count to respond. “Uh... drink fire?”

“The Phlegethon flows from Hades’s realm down into Tartarus.” Annabeth could barely talk.

Her throat was closing up from the heat and the acidic air. “The river is used to punish the wicked.

But also...some legends call it the River of Healing.”

“ *Some* legends?”

Annabeth swallowed, trying to stay conscious. “The Phlegethon keeps the wicked in one piece so that they can endure the torments of the Fields of Punishment. I think...it might be the Underworld equivalent of ambrosia and nectar.”

Percy winced as cinders sprayed from the river, curling around his face. “But it’s fire. How can we—”

“Like this.” Annabeth thrust her hands into the river.

Stupid? Yes, but she was convinced they had no choice. If they waited any longer, they would pass out and die. Better to try something foolish and hope it worked.

On first contact, the fire wasn’t painful. It felt cold, which probably meant it was so hot it was overloading Annabeth’s nerves. Before she could change her mind, she cupped the fiery liquid in her palms and raised it to her mouth.

She expected a taste like gasoline. It was so much worse. Once, at a restaurant back in San Francisco, she’d made the mistake of tasting a ghost chili pepper

that came with a plate of Indian food. After barely nibbling it, she thought her respiratory system was going to implode. Drinking from the Phlegethon was like gulping down a ghost chili smoothie. Her sinuses filled with liquid flame.

Her mouth felt like it was being deep-fried. Her eyes shed boiling tears, and every pore on her face popped. She collapsed, gagging and retching, her whole body shaking violently.

“Annabeth!” Percy grabbed her arms and just managed to stop her from rolling into the river.

The convulsions passed. She took a ragged breath and managed to sit up. She felt horribly weak and nauseous, but her next breath came more easily. The blisters on her arms were starting to fade.

“It worked,” she croaked. “Percy, you’ve got to drink.”

“I...” His eyes rolled up in his head, and he slumped against her.

Desperately, she cupped more fire in her palm. Ignoring the pain, she dripped the liquid into Percy’s mouth. He didn’t respond.

She tried again, pouring a whole handful down his throat. This time he spluttered and coughed.

Annabeth held him as he trembled, the magical fire coursing through his system. His fever disappeared. His boils faded. He managed to sit up and smack his lips.

“Ugh,” he said. “Spicy, yet disgusting.”

Annabeth laughed weakly. She was so relieved, she felt light-headed. “Yeah. That pretty much sums it up.”

“You saved us.”

“For now,” she said. “The problem is, we’re still in Tartarus.” Percy blinked. He looked around as if just coming to terms with where they were. “Holy Hera. I never thought...well, I’m not sure *what* I thought. Maybe that Tartarus was empty space, a pit with no bottom. But this is a *real* place.”

Annabeth recalled the landscape she'd seen while they fell—a series of plateaus leading ever downward into the gloom.

“We haven't seen all of it,” she warned. “This could be just the first tiny part of the abyss, like the front steps.”

“The welcome mat,” Percy muttered.

They both gazed up at the blood-colored clouds swirling in the gray haze. No way would they have the strength to climb back up that cliff, even if they wanted to. Now there were only two choices: downriver or upriver, skirting the banks of the Phlegethon.

“We'll find a way out,” Percy said. “The Doors of Death.” Annabeth shuddered. She remembered what Percy had said just before they fell into Tartarus.

He'd made Nico di Angelo promise to lead the *Argo II* to Epirus, to the mortal side of the Doors of Death.

We'll see you there, Percy had said.

That idea seemed even crazier than drinking fire. How could the two of them wander through Tartarus and find the Doors of Death? They'd barely been able to stumble a hundred yards in this poisonous place without dying.

“We have to,” Percy said. “Not just for us. For everybody we love. The Doors have to be closed on both sides, or the monsters will just keep coming through. Gaea's forces will overrun the world.” Annabeth knew he was right. Still...when she tried to imagine a plan that could succeed, the logistics overwhelmed her. They had no way of locating the Doors. They didn't know how much time it would take, or even if time flowed at the same speed in Tartarus. How could they possibly synchronize a meeting with their friends? And Nico had mentioned a legion of Gaea's strongest monsters guarding the Doors on the Tartarus side. Annabeth and Percy couldn't exactly launch a frontal assault.

She decided not to mention any of that. They both knew the odds were bad. Besides, after swimming in the River Cocytus, Annabeth had heard enough whining and moaning to last a lifetime.

She promised herself never to complain again.

“Well.” She took a deep breath, grateful at least that her lungs didn’t hurt. “If we stay close to the river, we’ll have a way to heal ourselves. If we go downstream —” It happened so fast, Annabeth would have been dead if she’d been on her own.

Percy’s eyes locked on something behind her. Annabeth spun as a massive dark shape hurtled down at her—a snarling, monstrous blob with spindly barbed legs and glinting eyes.

She had time to think: *Arachne*. But she was frozen in terror, her senses smothered by the sickly sweet smell.

Then she heard the familiar *SHINK* of Percy’s ballpoint pen transforming into a sword. His blade swept over her head in a glowing bronze arc. A horrible wail echoed through the canyon.

Annabeth stood there, stunned, as yellow dust—the remains of *Arachne*—rained around her like tree pollen.

“You okay?” Percy scanned the cliffs and boulders, alert for more monsters, but nothing else appeared. The golden dust of the spider settled on the obsidian rocks.

Annabeth stared at her boyfriend in amazement. Riptide’s Celestial bronze blade glowed even brighter in the gloom of Tartarus. As it passed through the thick hot air, it made a defiant hiss like a riled snake.

“She...she would’ve killed me,” Annabeth stammered.

Percy kicked the dust on the rocks, his expression grim and dissatisfied. “She died too easily, considering how much torture she put you through. She deserved worse.” Annabeth couldn’t argue with that, but the hard edge in Percy’s voice made her unsettled. She’d never seen someone get so angry or vengeful on her behalf. It almost made her glad *Arachne* had died quickly. “How did you move so fast?”

Percy shrugged. “Gotta watch each other’s backs, right? Now, you were saying...downstream?” Annabeth nodded, still in a daze. The yellow dust dissipated on the rocky shore, turning to steam.

At least now they knew monsters could be killed in Tartarus...though she had no idea how long Arachne would remain dead. Annabeth didn't plan on staying long enough to find out.

"Yeah, downstream," she managed. "If the river comes from the upper levels of the Underworld, it should flow deeper into Tartarus—"

"So it leads into more dangerous territory," Percy finished. "Which is probably where the Doors are. Lucky us."

V I I I

ANNABETH

THEY'D ONLY TRAVELED a few hundred yards when Annabeth heard voices.

Annabeth plodded along, half in a stupor, trying to form a plan. Since she was a daughter of Athena, plans were supposed to be her specialty; but it was hard to strategize with her stomach growling and her throat baking. The fiery water of the Phlegethon may have healed her and given her strength, but it didn't do anything for her hunger or thirst. The river wasn't about making you feel good, Annabeth guessed. It just kept you going so you could experience more excruciating pain.

Her head started to droop with exhaustion. Then she heard them—female voices having some sort of argument—and she was instantly alert.

She whispered, “Percy, down!”

She pulled him behind the nearest boulder, wedging herself so close against the riverbank that her shoes almost touched the river’s fire. On the other side, in the narrow path between the river and the cliffs, voices snarled, getting louder as they approached from upstream.

Annabeth tried to steady her breathing. The voices sounded vaguely human, but that meant nothing. She assumed anything in Tartarus was their enemy. She didn’t know how the monsters could have failed to spot them already. Besides, monsters could *smell* demigods—especially powerful ones like Percy, son of Poseidon. Annabeth doubted that hiding behind a boulder would do any good when the monsters caught their scent.

Still, as the monsters got nearer, their voices didn’t change in tone. Their uneven footsteps

— *scrap, clump, scrap, clump*—didn’t get any faster.

“Soon?” one of them asked in a raspy voice, as if she’d been gargling in the Phlegethon.

“Oh my gods!” said another voice. This one sounded much younger and much more human, like a teenaged mortal girl getting exasperated with her friends at the mall. For some reason, she sounded familiar to Annabeth. “You guys are *totally* annoying! I told you, it’s like three *days* from here.” Percy gripped Annabeth’s wrist. He looked at her with alarm, as if he recognized the mall girl’s voice too.

There was a chorus of growling and grumbling. The creatures—maybe half a dozen, Annabeth guessed—had paused just on the other side of the boulder, but still they gave no indication that they’d caught the demigods’ scent. Annabeth wondered if demigods didn’t smell the same in Tartarus, or if the other scents here were so powerful, they masked a demigod’s aura.

“I wonder,” said a third voice, gravelly and ancient like the first, “if perhaps you do not know the way, young one.”

“Oh, shut your fang hole, Serephone,” said the mall girl. “When’s the last time *you* escaped to the mortal world? I was there a couple of years ago. I know the

way! Besides, *I* understand what we're facing up there. You don't have a clue!"

"The Earth Mother did not make you boss!" shrieked a fourth voice.

More hissing, scuffling, and feral moans—like giant alley cats fighting. At last the one called Serephone yelled, "Enough!"

The scuffling died down.

"We will follow for now," Serephone said. "But if you do *not* lead us well, if we find you have *lied* about the summons of Gaea—"

"I don't lie!" snapped the mall girl. "Believe me, I've got good reason to get into this battle. I have some enemies to devour, and you'll feast on the blood of heroes. Just leave one special morsel for me—the one named Percy Jackson."

Annabeth fought down a snarl of her own. She forgot about her fear. She wanted to jump over the boulder and slash the monsters to dust with her knife...except she didn't have it anymore.

"Believe me," said the mall girl. "Gaea has called us, and we're going to have so much fun.

Before this war is over, mortals and demigods will tremble at the sound of my name—Kelli!" Annabeth almost yelled aloud. She glanced at Percy. Even in the red light of the Phlegethon, his face seemed waxy.

Empousai, she mouthed. *Vampires*.

Percy nodded grimly.

She remembered Kelli. Two years ago, at Percy's freshman orientation, he and their friend Rachel Dare had been attacked by *empousai* disguised as cheerleaders. One of them had been Kelli.

Later, the same *empousa* had attacked them in Daedalus's workshop. Annabeth had stabbed her in the back and sent her...here. To Tartarus.

The creatures shuffled off, their voices getting fainter. Annabeth crept to the edge of the boulder and risked a glimpse. Sure enough, five women staggered

along on mismatched legs—mechanical bronze on the left, shaggy and cloven-hooved on the right. Their hair was made of fire, their skin as white as bone. Most of them wore tattered Ancient Greek dresses, except for the one in the lead, Kelli, who wore a burned and torn blouse with a short pleated skirt...her cheerleader's outfit.

Annabeth gritted her teeth. She had faced a lot of bad monsters over the years, but she hated *empousai* more than most.

In addition to their nasty claws and fangs, they had a powerful ability to manipulate the Mist.

They could change shape and charmspeak, tricking mortals into letting down their guard. Men were especially susceptible. The *empousa's* favorite tactic was to make a guy fall in love with her, then drink his blood and devour his flesh. Not a great first date.

Kelli had almost killed Percy. She had manipulated Annabeth's oldest friend, Luke, urging him to commit darker and darker deeds in the name of Kronos.

Annabeth *really* wished she still had her dagger.

Percy rose. "They're heading for the Doors of Death," he murmured. "You know what that means?"

Annabeth didn't want to think about it, but sadly, this squad of flesh-eating horror-show women might be the closest thing to good luck they were going to get in Tartarus.

"Yeah," she said. "We need to follow them."

LEO

LEO SPENT THE NIGHT WRESTLING with a forty-foot-tall Athena.

Ever since they'd brought the statue aboard, Leo had been obsessed with figuring out how it worked. He was sure it had primo powers. There had to be a secret switch or a pressure plate or something.

He was supposed to be sleeping, but he just couldn't. He spent hours crawling over the statue, which took up most of the lower deck. Athena's feet stuck into sick bay, so you had to squeeze past her ivory toes if you wanted some Advil. Her body ran the length of the port corridor, her outstretched hand jutting into the engine room, offering the life-sized figure of Nike that stood in her palm, like, *Here, have some Victory!* Athena's serene face took up most of the aft pegasus stables, which were fortunately unoccupied. If Leo were a magic horse, he wouldn't have wanted to live in a stall with an oversized goddess of wisdom staring at him.

The statue was wedged tight in the corridor, so Leo had to climb over the top and wriggle under her limbs, searching for levers and buttons.

As usual, he found nothing.

He'd done some research on the statue. He knew it was made from a hollow wooden frame covered in ivory and gold, which explained why it was so light. It was in pretty good shape, considering it was more than two thousand years old,

had been pillaged from Athens, toted to Rome, and secretly stored in a spider's cavern for most of the past two millennia. Magic must've kept it intact, Leo figured, combined with really good craftsmanship.

Annabeth had said...well, he tried not to think about Annabeth. He still felt guilty about her and Percy falling into Tartarus. Leo knew it was *his* fault. He should have gotten everyone safely on board the *Argo II* before he started securing the statue. He should have realized the cavern floor was unstable.

Still, moping around wasn't going to get Percy and Annabeth back. He had to concentrate on fixing the problems he could fix.

Anyway, Annabeth had said the statue was the key to defeating Gaea. It could heal the rift between Greek and Roman demigods. Leo figured there had to be more to it than just symbolism.

Maybe Athena's eyes shot lasers, or the snake behind her shield could spit poison. Or maybe the smaller figure of Nike came to life and busted out some ninja moves.

Leo could think of all kinds of fun things the statue might do if *he* had designed it, but the more he examined it, the more frustrated he got. The Athena Parthenos radiated magic. Even *he* could feel that.

But it didn't seem to do anything except look impressive.

The ship careened to one side, taking evasive maneuvers. Leo resisted the urge to run to the helm. Jason, Piper, and Frank were on duty with Hazel now. They could handle whatever was going on. Besides, Hazel had insisted on taking the wheel to guide them through the secret pass that the magic goddess had told her about.

Leo hoped Hazel was right about the long detour north. He didn't trust this Hecate lady. He didn't see why such a creepy goddess would suddenly decide to be helpful.

Of course, he didn't trust magic in general. That's why he was having so much trouble with the Athena Parthenos. It had no moving parts. Whatever it did, it apparently operated on pure sorcery...

and Leo didn't appreciate that. He wanted it to make sense, like a machine.

Finally he got too exhausted to think straight. He curled up with a blanket in the engine room and listened to the soothing hum of the generators. Buford the mechanical table sat in the corner on sleep mode, making little steamy snores: *Shhh, pfft, shh, pfft.*

Leo liked his quarters okay, but he felt safest here in the heart of the ship—in a room filled with mechanisms he knew how to control. Besides, maybe if he spent more time close to the Athena Parthenos, he would eventually soak in its secrets.

“It's you or me, Big Lady,” he murmured as he pulled the blanket up to his chin. “You're gonna cooperate eventually.”

He closed his eyes and slept. Unfortunately, that meant dreams.

He was running for his life through his mother's old workshop, where she'd died in a fire when Leo was eight.

He wasn't sure what was chasing him, but he sensed it closing fast—something large and dark and full of hate.

He stumbled into workbenches, knocked over toolboxes, and tripped on electrical cords. He spotted the exit and sprinted toward it, but a figure loomed in front of him—a woman in robes of dry swirling earth, her face covered in a veil of dust.

Where are you going, little hero? Gaea asked. Stay, and meet my favorite son.

Leo darted to the left, but the Earth Goddess's laughter followed him.

The night your mother died, I warned you. I said the Fates would not allow me to kill you then. But now you have chosen your path. Your death is near, Leo Valdez.

He ran into a drafting table—his mother's old workstation. The wall behind it was decorated with Leo's crayon drawings. He sobbed in desperation and turned, but the thing pursuing him now stood in his path—a colossal being wrapped in shadows, its shape vaguely humanoid, its head almost scraping the

ceiling twenty feet above.

Leo's hands burst into flame. He blasted the giant, but the darkness consumed his fire. Leo reached for his tool belt. The pockets were sewn shut. He tried to speak—to say anything that would save his life—but he couldn't make a sound, as if the air had been stolen from his lungs.

My son will not allow any fires tonight, Gaea said from the depths of the warehouse. He is the void that consumes all magic, the cold that consumes all fire, the silence that consumes all speech.

Leo wanted to shout: *And I'm the dude that's all out of here!*

His voice didn't work, so he used his feet. He dashed to the right, ducking under the shadowy giant's grasping hands, and burst through the nearest doorway.

Suddenly, he found himself at Camp Half-Blood, except the camp was in ruins. The cabins were charred husks. Burned fields smoldered in the moonlight. The dining pavilion had collapsed into a pile of white rubble, and the Big House was on fire, its windows glowing like demon eyes.

Leo kept running, sure the shadow giant was still behind him.

He wove around the bodies of Greek and Roman demigods. He wanted to check if they were alive. He wanted to help them. But somehow he knew he was running out of time.

He jogged toward the only living people he saw—a group of Romans standing at the volleyball pit. Two centurions leaned casually on their javelins, chatting with a tall skinny blond guy in a purple toga. Leo stumbled. It was that freak Octavian, the augur from Camp Jupiter, who was always screaming for war.

Octavian turned to face him, but he seemed to be in a trance. His features were slack, his eyes closed. When he spoke, it was in Gaea's voice: *This cannot be prevented. The Romans move east from New York. They advance on your camp, and nothing can slow them down.*

Leo was tempted to punch Octavian in the face. Instead he kept running.

He climbed Half-Blood Hill. At the summit, lightning had splintered the giant

pine tree.

He faltered to a stop. The back of the hill was shorn away. Beyond it, the entire world was gone.

Leo saw nothing but clouds far below—a rolling silver carpet under the dark sky.

A sharp voice said, “Well?”

Leo flinched.

At the shattered pine tree, a woman knelt at a cave entrance that had cracked open between the tree’s roots.

The woman wasn’t Gaea. She looked more like a living Athena Parthenos, with the same golden robes and bare ivory arms. When she rose, Leo almost stumbled off the edge of the world.

Her face was regally beautiful, with high cheekbones, large dark eyes, and braided licorice-colored hair piled in a fancy Greek hairdo, set with a spiral of emeralds and diamonds so that it reminded Leo of a Christmas tree. Her expression radiated pure hatred. Her lip curled. Her nose wrinkled.

“The tinkerer god’s child,” she sneered. “You are no threat, but I suppose my vengeance must start somewhere. Make your choice.”

Leo tried to speak, but he was about to crawl out of his skin with panic. Between this hate queen and the giant chasing him, he had no idea what to do.

“He’ll be here soon,” the woman warned. “My dark friend will not give you the luxury of a choice. It’s the cliff or the cave, boy!”

Suddenly Leo understood what she meant. He was cornered. He could jump off the cliff, but that was suicide. Even if there was land under those clouds, he would die in the fall, or maybe he would just keep falling forever.

But the cave... He stared at the dark opening between the tree roots. It smelled of rot and death.

He heard bodies shuffling inside, voices whispering in the shadows.

The cave was the home of the dead. If he went down there, he would never come back.

“Yes,” the woman said. Around her neck hung a strange bronze-and-emerald pendant, like a circular labyrinth. Her eyes were so angry, Leo finally understood why *mad* was a word for *crazy*.

This lady had been driven nuts by hatred. “The House of Hades awaits. You will be the first puny rodent to die in my maze. You have only one chance to escape, Leo Valdez. Take it.” She gestured toward the cliff.

“You’re bonkers,” he managed.

That was the wrong thing to say. She seized his wrist. “Perhaps I should kill you now, before my dark friend arrives?”

Steps shook the hillside. The giant was coming, wrapped in shadows, huge and heavy and bent on murder.

“Have you heard of dying in a dream, boy?” the woman asked. “It is possible, at the hands of a sorceress!”

Leo’s arm started to smoke. The woman’s touch was acid. He tried to free himself, but her grip was like steel.

He opened his mouth to scream. The massive shape of the giant loomed over him, obscured by layers of black smoke.

The giant raised his fist, and a voice cut through the dream.

“Leo!” Jason was shaking his shoulder. “Hey, man, why are you hugging Nike?” Leo’s eyes fluttered open. His arms were wrapped around the human-sized statue in Athena’s hand. He must have been thrashing in his sleep. He clung to the victory goddess like he used to cling to his pillow when he had nightmares as a kid. (Man, that had been so embarrassing in the foster homes.)

He disentangled himself and sat up, rubbing his face.

“Nothing,” he muttered. “We were just cuddling. Um, what’s going on?” Jason didn’t tease him. That’s one thing Leo appreciated about his friend. Jason’s ice-blue eyes were level and serious. The little scar on his mouth twitched like it always did when he had bad news to share.

“We made it through the mountains,” he said. “We’re almost to Bologna. You should join us in the mess hall. Nico has new information.”

X

LEO

LEO HAD DESIGNED the mess hall’s walls to show real-time scenes from Camp Half-Blood. At first he had thought that was a pretty awesome idea. Now he wasn’t so sure.

The scenes from back home—the campfire sing-alongs, dinners at the pavilion, volleyball games outside the Big House—just seemed to make his friends sad. The farther they got from Long Island, the worse it got. The time zones kept changing, making Leo *feel* the distance every time he looked at the walls. Here in Italy the sun had just come up. Back at Camp Half-Blood it was the middle of the night. Torches sputtered at the cabin doorways. Moonlight glittered on the waves of Long Island Sound. The beach was covered in footprints, as if a big crowd had just left.

With a start, Leo realized that yesterday—last night, whatever—had been the Fourth of July.

They'd missed Camp Half-Blood's annual party at the beach with awesome fireworks prepared by Leo's siblings in Cabin Nine.

He decided not to mention that to the crew, but he hoped their buddies back home had had a good celebration. They needed something to keep their spirits up, too.

He remembered the images he'd seen in his dream—the camp in ruins, littered with bodies; Octavian standing at the volleyball pit, casually talking in Gaea's voice.

He stared down at his eggs and bacon. He wished he could turn off the wall videos.

“So,” Jason said, “now that we're here...”

He sat at the head of the table, kind of by default. Since they'd lost Annabeth, Jason had done his best to act as the group's leader. Having been praetor back at Camp Jupiter, he was probably used to that; but Leo could tell his friend was stressed. His eyes were more sunken than usual. His blond hair was uncharacteristically messy, like he'd forgotten to comb it.

Leo glanced at the others around the table. Hazel was bleary-eyed, too, but of course she'd been up all night guiding the ship through the mountains. Her curly cinnamon-colored hair was tied back in a bandana, which gave her a commando look that Leo found kind of hot—and then immediately felt guilty about.

Next to her sat her boyfriend Frank Zhang, dressed in black workout pants and a Roman tourist T-shirt that said *CIAO!* (was that even a word?). Frank's old centurion badge was pinned to his shirt, despite the fact that the demigods of the *Argo II* were now Public Enemies Numbers 1 through 7 back at Camp Jupiter. His grim expression just reinforced his unfortunate resemblance to a sumo wrestler.

Then there was Hazel's half brother, Nico di Angelo. Dang, that kid gave Leo the freaky-deakies. He sat back in his leather aviator jacket, his black T-shirt and jeans, that wicked silver skull ring on his finger, and the Stygian sword at his side. His tufts of black hair stuck up in curls like baby bat wings.

His eyes were sad and kind of empty, as if he'd stared into the depths of Tartarus

—which he had.

The only absent demigod was Piper, who was taking her turn at the helm with Coach Hedge, their satyr chaperone.

Leo wished Piper were here. She had a way of calming things down with that Aphrodite charm of hers. After his dreams last night, Leo could use some calm.

On the other hand, it was probably good she was above deck chaperoning their chaperone. Now that they were in the ancient lands, they had to be constantly on guard. Leo was nervous about letting Coach Hedge fly solo. The satyr was a little trigger-happy, and the helm had plenty of bright, dangerous buttons that could cause the picturesque Italian villages below them to go BOOM!

Leo had zoned out so totally he didn't realize Jason was still talking.

“—the House of Hades,” he was saying. “Nico?”

Nico sat forward. “I communed with the dead last night.” He just tossed that line out there, like he was saying he got a text from a buddy.

“I was able to learn more about what we'll face,” Nico continued. “In ancient times, the House of Hades was a major site for Greek pilgrims. They would come to speak with the dead and honor their ancestors.”

Leo frowned. “Sounds like Día de los Muertos. My Aunt Rosa took that stuff seriously.” He remembered being dragged by her to the local cemetery in Houston, where they'd clean up their relatives' gravesites and put out offerings of lemonade, cookies, and fresh marigolds. Aunt Rosa would force Leo to stay for a picnic, as if hanging out with dead people were good for his appetite.

Frank grunted. “Chinese have that, too—ancestor worship, sweeping the graves in the springtime.” He glanced at Leo. “Your Aunt Rosa would've gotten along with my grandmother.” Leo had a terrifying image of his Aunt Rosa and some old Chinese woman in wrestlers' outfits, whaling on each other with spiked clubs.

“Yeah,” Leo said. “I'm sure they would've been best buds.” Nico cleared his throat. “A lot of cultures have seasonal traditions to honor the dead, but the House of Hades was open year-round. Pilgrims could actually *speak* to the

ghosts. In Greek, the place was called the Necromanteion, the Oracle of Death. You'd work your way through different levels of tunnels, leaving offerings and drinking special potions—"

"Special potions," Leo muttered. "Yum."

Jason flashed him a look like, *Dude, enough*. "Nico, go on."

"The pilgrims believed that each level of the temple brought you closer to the Underworld, until the dead would appear before you. If they were pleased with your offerings, they would answer your questions, maybe even tell you the future."

Frank tapped his mug of hot chocolate. "And if the spirits *weren't* pleased?"

"Some pilgrims found nothing," Nico said. "Some went insane, or died after leaving the temple.

Others lost their way in the tunnels and were never seen again."

"The point is," Jason said quickly, "Nico found some information that might help us."

"Yeah." Nico didn't sound very enthusiastic. "The ghost I spoke to last night... he was a former priest of Hecate. He confirmed what the goddess told Hazel yesterday at the crossroads. In the first war with the giants, Hecate fought for the gods. She slew one of the giants—one who'd been designed as the *anti*-Hecate. A guy named Clytius."

"Dark dude," Leo guessed. "Wrapped in shadows."

Hazel turned toward him, her gold eyes narrowing. "Leo, how did you know that?"

"Kind of had a dream."

No one looked surprised. Most demigods had vivid nightmares about what was going on in the world.

His friends paid close attention as Leo explained. He tried not to look at the wall

images of Camp Half-Blood as he described the place in ruins. He told them about the dark giant, and the strange woman on Half-Blood Hill, offering him a multiple-choice death.

Jason pushed away his plate of pancakes. “So the giant is Clytius. I suppose he’ll be waiting for us, guarding the Doors of Death.”

Frank rolled up one of the pancakes and started munching—not a guy to let impending death stand in the way of a hearty breakfast. “And the woman in Leo’s dream?”

“She’s my problem.” Hazel passed a diamond between her fingers in a sleight of hand. “Hecate mentioned a formidable enemy in the House of Hades—a witch who couldn’t be defeated except by me, using magic.”

“Do you know magic?” Leo asked.

“Not yet.”

“Ah.” He tried to think of something hopeful to say, but he recalled the angry woman’s eyes, the way her steely grip made his skin smoke. “Any idea who she is?” Hazel shook her head. “Only that...” She glanced at Nico, and some sort of silent argument happened between them. Leo got the feeling that the two of them had had private conversations about the House of Hades, and they weren’t sharing all the details. “Only that she won’t be easy to defeat.”

“But there *is* some good news,” Nico said. “The ghost I talked to explained how Hecate defeated Clytius in the first war. She used her torches to set his hair on fire. He burned to death. In other words, fire is his weakness.”

Everybody looked at Leo.

“Oh,” he said. “Okay.”

Jason nodded encouragingly, like this was great news—like he expected Leo to walk up to a towering mass of darkness, shoot a few fireballs, and solve all their problems. Leo didn’t want to bring him down, but he could still hear Gaea’s voice: *He is the void that consumes all magic, the cold that consumes all fire, the silence that consumes all speech.*

Leo was pretty sure it would take more than a few matches to set that giant ablaze.

“It’s a good lead,” Jason insisted. “At least we know how to kill the giant. And this sorceress…”

well, if Hecate believes Hazel can defeat her, then so do I.” Hazel dropped her eyes. “Now we just have to reach the House of Hades, battle our way through Gaea’s forces—”

“Plus a bunch of ghosts,” Nico added grimly. “The spirits in that temple may not be friendly.”

“—and find the Doors of Death,” Hazel continued. “Assuming we can somehow arrive at the same time as Percy and Annabeth and rescue them.”

Frank swallowed a bite of pancake. “We can do it. We *have* to.” Leo admired the big guy’s optimism. He wished he shared it.

“So, with this detour,” Leo said, “I’m estimating four or five days to arrive at Epirus, assuming no delays for, you know, monster attacks and stuff.”

Jason smiled sourly. “Yeah. Those never happen.”

Leo looked at Hazel. “Hecate told you that Gaea was planning her big Wake Up party on August first, right? The Feast of Whatever?”

“Spes,” Hazel said. “The goddess of hope.”

Jason turned his fork. “Theoretically, that leaves us enough time. It’s only July fifth. We should be able to close the Doors of Death, then find the giants’ HQ and stop them from waking Gaea before August first.”

“Theoretically,” Hazel agreed. “But I’d still like to know how we make our way through the House of Hades without going insane or dying.”

Nobody volunteered any ideas.

Frank set down his pancake roll like it suddenly didn’t taste so good. “It’s July fifth. Oh, jeez, I hadn’t even thought of that…”

“Hey, man, it’s cool,” Leo said. “You’re Canadian, right? I didn’t expect you to get me an Independence Day present or anything...unless you wanted to.”

“It’s not that. My grandmother...she always told me that seven was an unlucky number. It was a *ghost* number. She didn’t like it when I told her there would be seven demigods on our quest. And July is the seventh month.”

“Yeah, but...” Leo tapped his fingers nervously on the table. He realized he was doing the Morse code for *I love you*, the way he used to do with his mom, which would have been pretty embarrassing if his friends understood Morse code. “But that’s just coincidence, right?” Frank’s expression didn’t reassure him.

“Back in China,” Frank said, “in the old days, people called the seventh month the *ghost month*.”

That’s when the spirit world and the human world were closest. The living and the dead could go back and forth. Tell me it’s a coincidence we’re searching for the Doors of Death during the ghost month.”

No one spoke.

Leo wanted to think that an old Chinese belief couldn’t have anything to do with the Romans and the Greeks. Totally different, right? But Frank’s existence was proof that the cultures were tied together. The Zhang family went all the way back to Ancient Greece. They’d found their way through Rome and China and finally to Canada.

Also, Leo kept thinking about his meeting with the revenge goddess Nemesis at the Great Salt Lake. Nemesis had called him the *seventh wheel*, the odd man out on the quest. She didn’t mean seventh as in *ghost*, did she?

Jason pressed his hands against the arms of his chair. “Let’s focus on the things we can deal with. We’re getting close to Bologna. Maybe we’ll get more answers once we find these dwarfs that Hecate—”

The ship lurched as if it had hit an iceberg. Leo’s breakfast plate slid across the table. Nico fell backward out of his chair and banged his head against the sideboard. He collapsed on the floor, with a dozen magic goblets and platters crashing down on top of him.

“Nico!” Hazel ran to help him.

“What—?” Frank tried to stand, but the ship pitched in the other direction. He stumbled into the table and went face-first into Leo’s plate of scrambled eggs.

“Look!” Jason pointed at the walls. The images of Camp Half-Blood were flickering and changing.

“Not possible,” Leo murmured.

No way those enchantments could show anything other than scenes from camp, but suddenly a huge, distorted face filled the entire port-side wall: crooked yellow teeth, a scraggly red beard, a warty nose, and two mismatched eyes—one much larger and higher than the other. The face seemed to be trying to eat its way into the room.

The other walls flickered, showing scenes from above deck. Piper stood at the helm, but something was wrong. From the shoulders down she was wrapped in duct tape, her mouth gagged and her legs bound to the control console.

At the mainmast, Coach Hedge was similarly bound and gagged, while a bizarre-looking creature—a sort of gnome/chimpanzee combo with poor fashion sense—danced around him, doing the coach’s hair in tiny pigtails with pink rubber bands.

On the port-side wall, the huge ugly face receded so that Leo could see the entire creature—

another gnome chimp, in even crazier clothes. This one began leaping around the deck, stuffing things in a burlap bag—Piper’s dagger, Leo’s Wii controllers. Then he pried the Archimedes sphere out of the command console.

“No!” Leo yelled.

“Uhhh,” Nico groaned from the floor.

“Piper!” Jason cried.

“Monkey!” Frank yelled.

“Not monkeys,” Hazel grumbled. “I think those are dwarfs.”

“Stealing my stuff!” Leo yelled, and he ran for the stairs.

X I

LEO

LEO WAS VAGUELY AWARE OF HAZEL SHOUTING, “Go! I’ll take care of Nico!” As if Leo was going to turn back. Sure, he hoped di Angelo was okay, but he had headaches of his own.

Leo bounded up the steps, with Jason and Frank behind him.

The situation on deck was even worse than he’d feared.

Coach Hedge and Piper were struggling against their duct tape bonds while one of the demon monkey dwarfs danced around the deck, picking up whatever wasn’t tied down and sticking it in his bag. He was maybe four feet tall, even shorter than Coach Hedge, with bowed legs and chimp-like feet, his clothes so loud they gave Leo vertigo. His green-plaid pants were pinned at the cuffs, and held up with bright-red suspenders over a striped pink-and-black woman’s blouse. He wore half a dozen gold watches on each arm, and a zebra-patterned cowboy hat with a price tag dangling from the brim. His skin was covered with patches of scraggly red fur, though ninety percent of his body hair seemed to be concentrated in his magnificent eyebrows.

Leo was just forming the thought *Where’s the other dwarf?* when he heard a

click behind him and realized he'd led his friends into a trap.

"Duck!" He hit the deck as the explosion blasted his eardrums.

Note to self, Leo thought groggily. Do not leave boxes of magic grenades where dwarfs can reach them.

At least he was alive. Leo had been experimenting with all sorts of weapons based on the Archimedes sphere that he'd recovered in Rome. He'd built grenades that could spray acid, fire, shrapnel, or freshly buttered popcorn. (Hey, you never knew when you'd get hungry in battle.) Judging from the ringing in Leo's ears, the dwarf had detonated the flash-bang grenade, which Leo had filled with a rare vial of Apollo's music, pure liquid extract. It didn't kill, but it left Leo feeling like he'd just done a belly flop off the deep end.

He tried to get up. His limbs were useless. Someone was tugging at his waist, maybe a friend trying to help him up? No. His friends didn't smell like heavily perfumed monkey cages.

He managed to turn over. His vision was out of focus and tinted pink, like the world had been submerged in strawberry jelly. A grinning, grotesque face loomed over him. The brown-furred dwarf was dressed even worse than his friend, in a green bowler hat like a leprechaun's, dangly diamond earrings, and a white-and-black referee's shirt. He showed off the prize he'd just stolen—Leo's tool belt—then danced away.

Leo tried to grab him, but his fingers were numb. The dwarf frolicked over to the nearest ballista, which his red-furred friend was priming to launch.

The brown-furred dwarf jumped onto the projectile like it was a skateboard, and his friend shot him into the sky.

Red Fur pranced over to Coach Hedge. He gave the satyr a big smack on the cheek, then skipped to the rail. He bowed to Leo, doffing his zebra cowboy hat, and did a backflip over the side.

Leo managed to get up. Jason was already on his feet, stumbling and running into things. Frank had turned into a silverback gorilla (why, Leo wasn't sure; maybe to commune with the monkey dwarfs?) but the flash grenade had hit him hard. He was sprawled on the deck with his tongue hanging out and his gorilla

eyes rolled up in his head.

“Piper!” Jason staggered to the helm and carefully pulled the gag out of her mouth.

“Don’t waste your time on me!” she said. “Go after *them!*” At the mast, Coach Hedge mumbled, “HHHmmmmmm-hmmm!”

Leo figured that meant: “KILL THEM!” Easy translation, since most of the coach’s sentences involved the word *kill*.

Leo glanced at the control console. His Archimedes sphere was gone. He put his hand to his waist, where his tool belt should have been. His head started to clear, and his sense of outrage came to a boil. Those dwarfs had attacked his ship. They’d stolen his most precious possessions.

Below him spread the city of Bologna—a jigsaw puzzle of red-tiled buildings in a valley hemmed by green hills. Unless Leo could find the dwarfs somewhere in that maze of streets...Nope.

Failure wasn’t an option. Neither was waiting for his friends to recover.

He turned to Jason. “You feeling good enough to control the winds? I need a lift.” Jason frowned. “Sure, but—”

“Good,” Leo said. “We’ve got some monkey dudes to catch.” Jason and Leo touched down in a big piazza lined with white marble government buildings and outdoor cafés. Bikes and Vespas clogged the surrounding streets, but the square itself was empty except for pigeons and a few old men drinking espresso.

None of the locals seemed to notice the huge Greek warship hovering over the piazza, or the fact that Jason and Leo had just flown down, Jason wielding a gold sword, and Leo...well, Leo pretty much empty-handed.

“Where to?” Jason asked.

Leo stared at him. “Well, I dunno. Let me pull my dwarf-tracking GPS out of my tool belt.... Oh, wait! I don’t have a dwarf-tracking GPS—or my tool belt!”

“Fine,” Jason grumbled. He glanced up at the ship as if to get his bearings, then

pointed across the piazza. “The ballista fired the first dwarf in *that* direction, I think. Come on.” They waded through a lake of pigeons, then maneuvered down a side street of clothing stores and gelato shops. The sidewalks were lined with white columns covered in graffiti. A few panhandlers asked for change (Leo didn’t know Italian, but he got the message loud and clear).

He kept patting his waist, hoping his tool belt would magically reappear. It didn’t. He tried not to freak, but he’d come to depend on that belt for almost everything. He felt like somebody had stolen one of his hands.

“We’ll find it,” Jason promised.

Usually, Leo would have felt reassured. Jason had a talent for staying levelheaded in a crisis, and he’d gotten Leo out of plenty of bad scrapes. Today, though, all Leo could think about was the stupid fortune cookie he had opened in Rome. The goddess Nemesis had promised him help, and he’d gotten it: the code to activate the Archimedes sphere. At the time, Leo had had no choice but to use it if he wanted to save his friends—but Nemesis had warned that her help came with a price.

Leo wondered if that price would ever be paid. Percy and Annabeth were gone. The ship was hundreds of miles off course, heading toward an impossible challenge. Leo’s friends were counting on him to beat a terrifying giant. And now he didn’t even have his tool belt or his Archimedes sphere.

He was so absorbed with feeling sorry for himself that he didn’t notice where they were until Jason grabbed his arm. “Check it out.”

Leo looked up. They’d arrived in a smaller piazza. Looming over them was a huge bronze statue of a buck-naked Neptune.

“Ah, jeez.” Leo averted his eyes. He really didn’t need to see a godly groin this early in the morning.

The sea god stood on a big marble column in the middle of a fountain that wasn’t working (which seemed kind of ironic). On either side of Neptune, little winged Cupid dudes were sitting, kind of chillin’, like, *What’s up?* Neptune himself (avoid the groin) was throwing his hip to one side in an Elvis Presley move. He gripped his trident loosely in his right hand and stretched his left hand out like he was blessing Leo, or possibly attempting to levitate him.

“Some kind of clue?” Leo wondered.

Jason frowned. “Maybe, maybe not. There are statues of the gods all over the place in Italy. I’d just feel better if we ran across Jupiter. Or Minerva. Anybody but Neptune, really.” Leo climbed into the dry fountain. He put his hand on the statue’s pedestal, and a rush of impressions surged through his fingertips. He sensed Celestial bronze gears, magical levers, springs, and pistons.

“It’s mechanical,” he said. “Maybe a doorway to the dwarfs’ secret lair?”

“Ooooo!” shrieked a nearby voice. “Secret lair?”

“I want a secret lair!” yelled another voice from above.

Jason stepped back, his sword ready. Leo almost got whiplash trying to look in two places at once. The red-furred dwarf in the cowboy hat was sitting about thirty feet away at the nearest café table, sipping an espresso held by his monkey-like foot. The brown-furred dwarf in the green bowler was perched on the marble pedestal at Neptune’s feet, just above Leo’s head.

“If we had a secret lair,” said Red Fur, “I would want a firehouse pole.”

“And a waterslide!” said Brown Fur, who was pulling random tools out of Leo’s belt, tossing aside wrenches, hammers, and staple guns.

“Stop that!” Leo tried to grab the dwarf’s feet, but he couldn’t reach the top of the pedestal.

“Too short?” Brown Fur sympathized.

“You’re calling *me* short?” Leo looked around for something to throw, but there was nothing but pigeons, and he doubted he could catch one. “Give me my belt, you stupid—”

“Now, now!” said Brown Fur. “We haven’t even introduced ourselves. I’m Akmon. And my brother over there—”

“—is the handsome one!” The red-furred dwarf lifted his espresso. Judging from his dilated eyes and his maniacal grin, he didn’t need any more caffeine. “Passalos! Singer of songs! Drinker of coffee! Stealer of shiny stuff!”

“Please!” shrieked his brother, Akmon. “I steal *much* better than you.” Passalos snorted. “Stealing naps, maybe!” He took out a knife—Piper’s knife—and started picking his teeth with it.

“Hey!” Jason yelled. “That’s my girlfriend’s knife!”

He lunged at Passalos, but the red-furred dwarf was too quick. He sprang from his chair, bounced off Jason’s head, did a flip, and landed next to Leo, his hairy arms around Leo’s waist.

“Save me?” the dwarf pleaded.

“Get off!” Leo tried to shove him away, but Passalos did a backward somersault and landed out of reach. Leo’s pants promptly fell around his knees.

He stared at Passalos, who was now grinning and holding a small zigzaggy strip of metal.

Somehow, the dwarf had stolen the zipper right off Leo’s pants.

“Give—stupid—zipper!” Leo stuttered, trying to shake his fist and hoist up his pants at the same time.

“Eh, not shiny enough.” Passalos tossed it away.

Jason lunged with his sword. Passalos launched himself straight up and was suddenly sitting on the statue’s pedestal next to his brother.

“Tell me I don’t have moves,” Passalos boasted.

“Okay,” Akmon said. “You don’t have moves.”

“Bah!” Passalos said. “Give me the tool belt. I want to see.”

“No!” Akmon elbowed him away. “You got the knife and the shiny ball.”

“Yes, the shiny ball is nice.” Passalos took off his cowboy hat. Like a magician producing a rabbit, he pulled out the Archimedes sphere and began tinkering with the ancient bronze dials.

“Stop!” Leo yelled. “That’s a delicate machine.”

Jason came to his side and glared up at the dwarfs. “Who *are* you two, anyway?”

“The Kerkopes!” Akmon narrowed his eyes at Jason. “I bet you’re a son of Jupiter, eh? I can always tell.”

“Just like Black Bottom,” Passalos agreed.

“Black Bottom?” Leo resisted the urge to jump at the dwarfs’ feet again. He was sure Passalos was going to ruin the Archimedes sphere any second now.

“Yes, you know.” Akmon grinned. “Hercules. We called him Black Bottom because he used to go around without clothes. He got so tan that his backside, well—”

“At least he had a sense of humor!” Passalos said. “He was going to kill us when we stole from him, but he let us go because he liked our jokes. Not like you two. Grumpy, grumpy!”

“Hey, I’ve got a sense of humor,” Leo snarled. “Give me back our stuff, and I’ll tell you a joke with a good punch line.”

“Nice try!” Akmon pulled a ratchet wrench from the tool belt and spun it like a noisemaker. “Oh, very nice! I’m definitely keeping this! Thanks, Blue Bottom!” *Blue Bottom?*

Leo glanced down. His pants had slipped around his ankles again, revealing his blue undershorts. “That’s it!” he shouted. “My stuff. Now. Or I’ll show you how funny a flaming dwarf is.” His hands caught fire.

“Now we’re talking.” Jason thrust his sword into the sky. Dark clouds began to gather over the piazza. Thunder boomed.

“Oh, scary!” Akmon shrieked.

“Yes,” Passalos agreed. “If only we had a secret lair to hide in.”

“Alas, this statue isn’t the doorway to a secret lair,” Akmon said. “It has a different purpose.” Leo’s gut twisted. The fires died in his hands, and he realized something was very wrong. He yelled, “Trap!” and dove out of the fountain. Unfortunately, Jason was too busy summoning his storm.

Leo rolled on his back as five golden cords shot from the Neptune statue's fingers. One barely missed Leo's feet. The rest homed in on Jason, wrapping him like a rodeo calf and yanking him upside down.

A bolt of lightning blasted the tines of Neptune's trident, sending arcs of electricity up and down the statue, but the Kerkopes had already disappeared.

"Bravo!" Akmon applauded from a nearby café table. "You make a wonderful piñata, son of Jupiter!"

"Yes!" Passalos agreed. "Hercules hung us upside down once, you know. Oh, revenge is sweet!" Leo summoned a fireball. He lobbed it at Passalos, who was trying to juggle two pigeons and the Archimedes sphere.

"Eek!" The dwarf jumped free of the explosion, dropping the sphere and letting the pigeons fly.

"Time to leave!" Akmon decided.

He tipped his bowler and sprang away, jumping from table to table. Passalos glanced at the Archimedes sphere, which had rolled between Leo's feet.

Leo summoned another fireball. "Try me," he snarled.

"Bye!" Passalos did a backflip and ran after his brother.

Leo scooped up the Archimedes sphere and ran over to Jason, who was still hanging upside down, thoroughly hog-tied except for his sword arm. He was trying to cut the cords with his gold blade but having no luck.

"Hold on," Leo said. "If I can find a release switch—"

"Just go!" Jason growled. "I'll follow you when I get out of this."

"But—"

"Don't lose them!"

The last thing Leo wanted was some alone time with the monkey dwarfs, but the Kerkopes were already disappearing around the far corner of the piazza. Leo left

Jason hanging and ran after them.

X I I

LEO

THE DWARFS DIDN'T TRY VERY HARD TO LOSE HIM, which made Leo suspicious. They stayed just at the edge of his vision, scampering over red-tiled rooftops, knocking over window boxes, whooping and hollering and leaving a trail of screws and nails from Leo's tool belt—almost as if they *wanted* Leo to follow.

He jogged after them, cursing every time his pants fell down. He turned a corner and saw two ancient stone towers jutting into the sky, side by side, much taller than anything else in the neighborhood—maybe medieval watchtowers? They leaned in different directions like gearshifts on a race car.

The Kerkopes scaled the tower on the right. When they reached the top, they climbed around the back and disappeared.

Had they gone inside? Leo could see some tiny windows at the top, covered with metal grates; but he doubted those would stop the dwarfs. He watched for a minute, but the Kerkopes didn't reappear. Which meant Leo had to get up there and look for them.

“Great,” he muttered. No flying friend to carry him up. The ship was too far away to call for help. He could jury-rig the Archimedes sphere into some sort of flying device, maybe, but only if he had his tool belt—which he didn't. He

scanned the neighborhood, trying to think. Half a block down, a set of double glass doors opened and an old lady hobbled out, carrying plastic shopping bags.

A grocery store? Hmm...

Leo patted his pockets. To his amazement, he still had some euro notes from his time in Rome.

Those stupid dwarfs had taken everything *except* his money.

He ran for the store as fast as his zipperless pants allowed.

Leo scoured the aisles, looking for things he could use. He didn't know the Italian for *Hello, where are your dangerous chemicals, please?* But that was probably just as well. He didn't want to end up in an Italian jail.

Fortunately, he didn't need to read labels. He could tell just from picking up a toothpaste tube whether it contained potassium nitrate. He found charcoal. He found sugar and baking soda. The store sold matches, and bug spray, and aluminum foil. Pretty much everything he needed, plus a laundry cord he could use as a belt. He added some Italian junk food to the basket, just to sort of disguise his more suspicious purchases, then dumped his stuff at the register. A wide-eyed checkout lady asked him some questions he didn't understand, but he managed to pay, get a bag, and race out.

He ducked into the nearest doorway where he could keep an eye on the towers. He started to work, summoning fire to dry out materials and do a little cooking that otherwise would have taken days to complete.

Every once in a while he sneaked a look at the tower, but there was no sign of the dwarfs. Leo could only hope they were still up there. Making his arsenal took just a few minutes—he was *that* good—but it felt like hours.

Jason didn't show. Maybe he was still tangled at the Neptune fountain, or scouring the streets looking for Leo. No one else from the ship came to help. Probably it was taking them a long time to get all those pink rubber bands out of Coach Hedge's hair.

That meant Leo had only himself, his bag of junk food, and a few highly improvised weapons made from sugar and toothpaste. Oh, and the Archimedes

sphere. That was kind of important. He hoped he hadn't ruined it by filling it with chemical powder.

He ran to the tower and found the entrance. He started up the winding stairs inside, only to be stopped at a ticket booth by some caretaker who yelled at him in Italian.

"Seriously?" Leo asked. "Look, man, you've got dwarfs in your belfry. I'm the exterminator." He held up his can of bug spray. "See? Exterminator *Molto Buono*. Squirt, squirt. Ahhh!" He pantomimed a dwarf melting in terror, which for some reason the Italian didn't seem to understand.

The guy just held out his palm for money.

"Dang, man," Leo grumbled, "I just spent all my cash on homemade explosives and whatnot." He dug around in his grocery bag. "Don't suppose you'd accept... uh...whatever these are?" Leo held up a yellow-and-red bag of junk food called Fonzies. He assumed they were some kind of chips. To his surprise, the caretaker shrugged and took the bag. "*Avanti!*" Leo kept climbing, but he made a mental note to stock up on Fonzies. Apparently they were better than cash in Italy.

The stairs went on, and on, and on. The whole tower seemed to be nothing but an excuse to build a staircase.

He stopped on a landing and slumped against a narrow barred window, trying to catch his breath. He was sweating like crazy, and his heart thumped against his ribs. Stupid Kerkopes. Leo figured that as soon as he reached the top, they would jump away before he could use his weapons; but he had to try.

He kept climbing.

Finally, his legs feeling like overcooked noodles, he reached the summit.

The room was about the size of a broom closet, with barred windows on all four walls. Shoved in the corners were sacks of treasure, shiny goodies spilling all over the floor. Leo spotted Piper's knife, an old leather-bound book, a few interesting-looking mechanical devices, and enough gold to give Hazel's horse a stomachache.

At first, he thought the dwarfs had left. Then he looked up. Akmon and Passalos were hanging upside down from the rafters by their chimp feet, playing antigravity poker. When they saw Leo, they threw their cards like confetti and broke out in applause.

“I told you he’d do it!” Akmon shrieked in delight.

Passalos shrugged and took off one of his gold watches and handed it to his brother. “You win. I didn’t think he was that dumb.”

They both dropped to the floor. Akmon was wearing Leo’s tool belt—he was so close that Leo had to resist the urge to lunge for it.

Passalos straightened his cowboy hat and kicked open the grate on the nearest window. “What should we make him climb next, brother? The dome of San Luca?” Leo wanted to throttle the dwarfs, but he forced a smile. “Oh, that sounds fun! But before you guys go, you forgot something shiny.”

“Impossible!” Akmon scowled. “We were very thorough.”

“You sure?” Leo held up his grocery bag.

The dwarfs inched closer. As Leo had hoped, their curiosity was so strong that they couldn’t resist.

“Look.” Leo brought out his first weapon—a lump of dried chemicals wrapped in aluminum foil

—and lit it with his hand.

He knew enough to turn away when it popped, but the dwarfs were staring right at it. Toothpaste, sugar, and bug spray weren’t as good as Apollo’s music, but they made for a pretty decent flash-bang.

The Kerkopes wailed, clawing at their eyes. They stumbled toward the window, but Leo set off his homemade firecrackers—snapping them around the dwarfs’ bare feet to keep them off balance.

Then, for good measure, Leo turned the dial on his Archimedes sphere, which unleashed a plume of foul white fog that filled the room.

Leo wasn't bothered by smoke. Being immune to fire, he'd stood in smoky bonfires, endured dragon breath, and cleaned out blazing forges plenty of times. While the dwarfs were hacking and wheezing, he grabbed his tool belt from Akmon, calmly summoned some bungee cords, and tied up the dwarfs.

"My eyes!" Akmon coughed. "My tool belt!"

"My feet are on fire!" Passalos wailed. "Not shiny! Not shiny at all!" After making sure they were securely bound, Leo dragged the Kerkopes into one corner and began rifling through their treasures. He retrieved Piper's dagger, a few of his prototype grenades, and a dozen other odds and ends the dwarfs had taken from the *Argo II*.

"Please!" Akmon wailed. "Don't take our shinies!"

"We'll make you a deal!" Passalos suggested. "We'll cut you in for ten percent if you let us go!"

"Afraid not," Leo muttered. "It's all mine now."

"Twenty percent!"

Just then, thunder boomed overhead. Lightning flashed, and the bars on the nearest window burst into sizzling, melted stubs of iron.

Jason flew in like Peter Pan, electricity sparking around him and his gold sword steaming.

Leo whistled appreciatively. "Man, you just wasted an *awesome* entrance." Jason frowned. He noticed the hog-tied Kerkopes. "What the—"

"All by myself," Leo said. "I'm special that way. How did you find me?"

"Uh, the smoke," Jason managed. "And I heard popping noises. Were you having a gunfight in here?"

"Something like that." Leo tossed him Piper's dagger, then kept rummaging through the bags of dwarf shinies. He remembered what Hazel had said about finding a treasure that would help them with the quest, but he wasn't sure what he was looking for. There were coins, gold nuggets, jewelry, paper clips, foil

wrappers, cuff links.

He kept coming back to a couple of things that didn't seem to belong. One was an old bronze navigation device, like an astrolabe from a ship. It was badly damaged and seemed to be missing some pieces, but Leo still found it fascinating.

“Take it!” Passalos offered. “Odysseus made it, you know! Take it and let us go.”

“Odysseus?” Jason asked. “Like, *the* Odysseus?”

“Yes!” Passalos squeaked. “Made it when he was an old man in Ithaca. One of his last inventions, and we stole it!”

“How does it work?” Leo asked.

“Oh, it doesn't,” Akmon said. “Something about a missing crystal?” He glanced at his brother for help.

“My biggest what-if,” Passalos said. “‘Should've taken a crystal.’ That's what he kept muttering in his sleep, the night we stole it.” Passalos shrugged. “No idea what he meant. But the shiny is yours! Can we go now?”

Leo wasn't sure why he wanted the astrolabe. It was obviously broken, and he didn't get the sense that this was what Hecate meant for them to find. Still, he slipped it into one of his tool belt's magic pockets.

He turned his attention to the other strange piece of loot—the leather-bound book. Its title was in gold leaf, in a language Leo couldn't understand, but nothing else about the book seemed shiny. He didn't figure the Kerkopes for big readers.

“What's this?” He wagged it at the dwarfs, who were still teary-eyed from the smoke.

“Nothing!” Akmon said. “Just a book. It had a pretty gold cover, so we took it from him.”

“Him?” Leo asked.

Akmon and Passalos exchanged a nervous look.

“Minor god,” Passalos said. “In Venice. Really, it’s nothing.”

“Venice.” Jason frowned at Leo. “Isn’t that where we’re supposed to go next?”

“Yeah.” Leo examined the book. He couldn’t read the text, but it had lots of illustrations: scythes, different plants, a picture of the sun, a team of oxen pulling a cart. He didn’t see how any of that was important, but if the book had been stolen from a minor god in Venice—the next place Hecate had told them to visit—then this *had* to be what they were looking for.

“Where exactly can we find this minor god?” Leo asked.

“No!” Akmon shrieked. “You can’t take it back to him! If he finds out we stole it—”

“He’ll destroy you,” Jason guessed. “Which is what we’ll do if you don’t tell us, and we’re a *lot* closer.” He pressed the point of his sword against Akmon’s furry throat.

“Okay, okay!” the dwarf shrieked. “La Casa Nera! Calle Frezzeria!”

“Is that an address?” Leo asked.

The dwarfs both nodded vigorously.

“*Please* don’t tell him we stole it,” Passalos begged. “He isn’t nice at all!”

“Who is he?” Jason asked. “What god?”

“I—I can’t say,” Passalos stammered.

“You’d better,” Leo warned.

“No,” Passalos said miserably. “I mean, I *really* can’t say. I can’t pronounce it! Tr—tri—It’s too hard!”

“Truh,” Akmon said. “Tru-toh—Too many syllables!”

They both burst into tears.

Leo didn't know if the Kerkopes were telling them the truth, but it was hard to stay mad at weeping dwarfs, no matter how annoying and badly dressed they were.

Jason lowered his sword. "What do you want to do with them, Leo? Send them to Tartarus?"

"Please, no!" Akmon wailed. "It might take us weeks to come back."

"Assuming Gaea even lets us!" Passalos sniffled. "She controls the Doors of Death now. She'll be very cross with us."

Leo looked at the dwarfs. He'd fought lots of monsters before and never felt bad about dissolving them, but this was different. He had to admit he sort of admired these little guys. They played cool pranks and liked shiny things. Leo could relate. Besides, Percy and Annabeth were in Tartarus right now, hopefully still alive, trudging toward the Doors of Death. The idea of sending these twin monkey boys there to face the same nightmarish problem...well, it didn't seem right.

He imagined Gaea laughing at his weakness—a demigod too softhearted to kill monsters. He remembered his dream about Camp Half-Blood in ruins, Greek and Roman bodies littering the fields.

He remembered Octavian speaking with the Earth Goddess's voice: *The Romans move east from New York. They advance on your camp, and nothing can slow them down.*

"Nothing can slow them down," Leo mused. "I wonder..."

"What?" Jason asked.

Leo looked at the dwarfs. "I'll make you a deal."

Akmon's eyes lit up. "Thirty percent?"

"We'll leave you all your treasure," Leo said, "except the stuff that belongs to us, and the astrolabe, and this book, which we'll take back to the dude in Venice."

“But he’ll destroy us!” Passalos wailed.

“We won’t say where we got it,” Leo promised. “And we won’t kill you. We’ll let you go free.”

“Uh, Leo...?” Jason asked nervously.

Akmon squealed with delight. “I knew you were as smart as Hercules! I will call you Black Bottom, the Sequel!”

“Yeah, no thanks,” Leo said. “But in return for us sparing your lives, you have to do something for us. I’m going to send you somewhere to steal from some people, harass them, make life hard for them any way you can. You have to follow my directions exactly. You have to swear on the River Styx.”

“We swear!” Passalos said. “Stealing from people is our specialty!”

“I love harassment!” Akmon agreed. “Where are we going?” Leo grinned. “Ever heard of New York?”

X I I I

PERCY

PERCY HAD TAKEN HIS GIRLFRIEND on some romantic walks before. This wasn’t one of them.

They followed the River Phlegethon, stumbling over the glassy black terrain,

jumping crevices, and hiding behind rocks whenever the vampire girls slowed in front of them.

It was tricky to stay far enough back to avoid getting spotted but close enough to keep Kelli and her comrades in view through the dark hazy air. The heat from the river baked Percy's skin. Every breath was like inhaling sulfur-scented fiberglass. When they needed a drink, the best they could do was sip some refreshing liquid fire.

Yep. Percy definitely knew how to show a girl a good time.

At least Annabeth's ankle seemed to have healed. She was hardly limping at all. Her various cuts and scrapes had faded. She'd tied her blond hair back with a strip of denim torn from her pants leg, and in the fiery light of the river, her gray eyes flickered. Despite being beat-up, sooty, and dressed like a homeless person, she looked great to Percy.

So what if they were in Tartarus? So what if they stood a slim chance of surviving? He was so glad that they were together, he had the ridiculous urge to smile.

Physically, Percy felt better too, though his clothes looked like he'd been through a hurricane of broken glass. He was thirsty, hungry, and scared out of his mind (though he wasn't going to tell Annabeth that), but he'd shaken off the hopeless cold of the River Cocytus. And as nasty as the firewater tasted, it seemed to keep him going.

Time was impossible to judge. They trudged along, following the river as it cut through the harsh landscape. Fortunately the *empousai* weren't exactly speed walkers. They shuffled on their mismatched bronze and donkey legs, hissing and fighting with each other, apparently in no hurry to reach the Doors of Death.

Once, the demons sped up in excitement and swarmed something that looked like a beached carcass on the riverbank. Percy couldn't tell what it was—a fallen monster? An animal of some kind?

The *empousai* attacked it with relish.

When the demons moved on, Percy and Annabeth reached the spot and found nothing left except a few splintered bones and glistening stains drying in the heat

of the river. Percy had no doubt the *empousai* would devour demigods with the same gusto.

“Come on.” He led Annabeth gently away from the scene. “We don’t want to lose them.” As they walked, Percy thought about the first time he’d fought the *empousa* Kelli at Goode High School’s freshman orientation, when he and Rachel Elizabeth Dare got trapped in the band hall. At the time, it seemed like a hopeless situation. Now, he’d give anything to have a problem that simple. At least he’d been in the mortal world then. Here, there was nowhere to run.

Wow. When he started looking back on the war with Kronos as the good old days—that was sad.

He kept hoping things would get better for Annabeth and him, but their lives just got more and more dangerous, as if the Three Fates were up there spinning their futures with barbed wire instead of thread just to see how much two demigods could tolerate.

After a few more miles, the *empousai* disappeared over a ridge. When Percy and Annabeth caught up, they found themselves at the edge of another massive cliff. The River Phlegethon spilled over the side in jagged tiers of fiery waterfalls. The demon ladies were picking their way down the cliff, jumping from ledge to ledge like mountain goats.

Percy’s heart crept into his throat. Even if he and Annabeth reached the bottom of the cliff alive, they didn’t have much to look forward to. The landscape below them was a bleak, ash-gray plain bristling with black trees, like insect hair. The ground was pocked with blisters. Every once in a while, a bubble would swell and burst, disgorging a monster like a larva from an egg.

Suddenly Percy wasn’t hungry anymore.

All the newly formed monsters were crawling and hobbling in the same direction—toward a bank of black fog that swallowed the horizon like a storm front. The Phlegethon flowed in the same direction until about halfway across the plain, where it met another river of black water—maybe the Cocytus? The two floods combined in a steaming, boiling cataract and flowed on as one toward the black fog.

The longer Percy looked into that storm of darkness, the less he wanted to go

there. It could be hiding anything—an ocean, a bottomless pit, an army of monsters. But if the Doors of Death were in that direction, it was their only chance to get home.

He peered over the edge of the cliff.

“Wish we could fly,” he muttered.

Annabeth rubbed her arms. “Remember Luke’s winged shoes? I wonder if they’re still down here somewhere.”

Percy remembered. Those shoes had been cursed to drag their wearer into Tartarus. They’d almost taken his best friend, Grover. “I’d settle for a hang glider.”

“Maybe not a good idea.” Annabeth pointed. Above them, dark winged shapes spiraled in and out of the bloodred clouds.

“Furies?” Percy wondered.

“Or some other kind of demon,” Annabeth said. “Tartarus has thousands.”

“Including the kind that eats hang gliders,” Percy guessed. “Okay, so we climb.” He couldn’t see the *empousai* below them anymore. They’d disappeared behind one of the ridges, but that didn’t matter. It was clear where he and Annabeth needed to go. Like all the maggot monsters crawling over the plains of Tartarus, they should head toward the dark horizon. Percy was just brimming with enthusiasm for that.

X I V

PERCY

AS THEY STARTED DOWN THE CLIFF, Percy concentrated on the challenges at hand: keeping his footing, avoiding rockslides that would alert the *empousai* to their presence, and of course making sure he and Annabeth didn't plummet to their deaths.

About halfway down the precipice, Annabeth said, "Stop, okay? Just a quick break." Her legs wobbled so badly, Percy cursed himself for not calling a rest earlier.

They sat together on a ledge next to a roaring fiery waterfall. Percy put his arm around Annabeth, and she leaned against him, shaking from exhaustion.

He wasn't much better. His stomach felt like it had shrunk to the size of a gumdrop. If they came across any more monster carcasses, he was afraid he might pull an *empousa* and try to devour it.

At least he had Annabeth. They would find a way out of Tartarus. They *had* to. He didn't think much of fates and prophecies, but he did believe in one thing: Annabeth and he were supposed to be together. They hadn't survived so much just to get killed now.

"Things could be worse," Annabeth ventured.

"Yeah?" Percy didn't see how, but he tried to sound upbeat.

She snuggled against him. Her hair smelled of smoke, and if he closed his eyes, he could almost imagine they were at the campfire at Camp Half-Blood.

“We could’ve fallen into the River Lethe,” she said. “Lost all our memories.” Percy’s skin crawled just thinking about it. He’d had enough trouble with amnesia for one lifetime. Only last month, Hera had erased his memories to put him among the Roman demigods.

Percy had stumbled into Camp Jupiter with no idea who he was or where he came from. And a few years before that, he’d fought a Titan on the banks of the Lethe, near Hades’s palace. He’d blasted the Titan with water from that river and completely wiped his memory clean. “Yeah, the Lethe,” he muttered. “Not my favorite.”

“What was the Titan’s name?” Annabeth asked.

“Uh...Iapetus. He said it meant the *Impaler* or something.”

“No, the name you gave him after he lost his memory. Steve?”

“Bob,” Percy said.

Annabeth managed a weak laugh. “Bob the Titan.”

Percy’s lips were so parched, it hurt to smile. He wondered what had happened to Iapetus after they’d left him in Hades’s palace...if he was still content being Bob, friendly, happy, and clueless.

Percy hoped so, but the Underworld seemed to bring out the worst in everyone—monsters, heroes, and gods.

He gazed across the ashen plains. The other Titans were supposed to be here in Tartarus—

maybe bound in chains, or roaming aimlessly, or hiding in some of those dark crevices. Percy and his allies had destroyed the worst Titan, Kronos, but even *his* remains might be down here somewhere—

a billion angry Titan particles floating through the blood-colored clouds or lurking in that dark fog.

Percy decided not to think about that. He kissed Annabeth's forehead. "We should keep moving.

You want some more fire to drink?"

"Ugh. I'll pass."

They struggled to their feet. The rest of the cliff looked impossible to descend—nothing more than a crosshatching of tiny ledges—but they kept climbing down.

Percy's body went on autopilot. His fingers cramped. He felt blisters popping up on his ankles.

He got shaky from hunger.

He wondered if they would die of starvation, or if the firewater would keep them going. He remembered the punishment of Tantalus, who'd been permanently stuck in a pool of water under a fruit tree but couldn't reach either food or drink.

Jeez, Percy hadn't thought about Tantalus in years. That stupid guy had been paroled briefly to serve as director at Camp Half-Blood. Probably he was back in the Fields of Punishment. Percy had never felt sorry for the jerk before, but now he was starting to sympathize. He could imagine what it would be like, getting hungrier and hungrier for eternity but never being able to eat.

Keep climbing, he told himself.

Cheeseburgers, his stomach replied.

Shut up, he thought.

With fries, his stomach complained.

A billion years later, with a dozen new blisters on his feet, Percy reached the bottom. He helped Annabeth down, and they collapsed on the ground.

Ahead of them stretched miles of wasteland, bubbling with monstrous larvae and big insect-hair trees. To their right, the Phlegethon split into branches that etched the plain, widening into a delta of smoke and fire. To the north, along the main route of the river, the ground was riddled with cave entrances. Here and there,

spires of rock jutted up like exclamation points.

Under Percy's hand, the soil felt alarmingly warm and smooth. He tried to grab a handful, then realized that under a thin layer of dirt and debris, the ground was a single vast membrane...like skin.

He almost threw up, but forced himself not to. There was nothing in his stomach but fire.

He didn't mention it to Annabeth, but he started to feel like something was watching them—

something vast and malevolent. He couldn't zero in on it, because the presence was all around them.

Watching was the wrong word, too. That implied eyes, and this thing was simply aware of them. The ridges above them now looked less like steps and more like rows of massive teeth. The spires of rock looked like broken ribs. And if the ground was skin...

Percy forced those thoughts aside. This place was just freaking him out. That was all.

Annabeth stood, wiping soot from her face. She gazed toward the darkness on the horizon.

"We're going to be completely exposed, crossing this plain." About a hundred yards ahead of them, a blister burst on the ground. A monster clawed its way out...a glistening telkhine with slick fur, a seal-like body, and stunted human limbs. It managed to crawl a few yards before something shot out of the nearest cave, so fast that Percy could only register a dark green reptilian head. The monster snatched the squealing telkhine in its jaws and dragged it into the darkness.

Reborn in Tartarus for two seconds, only to be eaten. Percy wondered if that telkhine would pop up some other place in Tartarus, and how long it would take to re-form.

He swallowed down the sour taste of firewater. "Oh, yeah. This'll be fun." Annabeth helped him to his feet. He took one last look at the cliffs, but there was

no going back.

He would've given a thousand golden drachmas to have Frank Zhang with them right now—good old Frank, who always seemed to show up when needed and could turn into an eagle or a dragon to fly them across this stupid wasteland.

They started walking, trying to avoid the cave entrances, sticking close to the bank of the river.

They were just skirting one of the spires when a glint of movement caught Percy's eye—

something darting between the rocks to their right.

A monster following them? Or maybe it was just some random baddie, heading for the Doors of Death.

Suddenly he remembered why they'd started following this route, and he froze in his tracks.

“The *empousai*.” He grabbed Annabeth's arm. “Where are they?” Annabeth scanned a three-sixty, her gray eyes bright with alarm.

Maybe the demon ladies had been snapped up by that reptile in the cave. If the *empousai* were still ahead of them, they should've been visible somewhere on the plains.

Unless they were hiding...

Too late, Percy drew his sword.

The *empousai* emerged from the rocks all around them—five of them forming a ring. A perfect trap.

Kelli limped forward on her mismatched legs. Her fiery hair burned across her shoulders like a miniature Phlegethon waterfall. Her tattered cheerleader outfit was splattered with rusty-brown stains, and Percy was pretty sure they weren't ketchup. She fixed him with her glowing red eyes and bared her fangs.

“Percy Jackson,” she cooed. “How awesome! I don't even have to return to the

mortal world to destroy you!”

X V

PERCY

PERCY RECALLED HOW DANGEROUS Kelli had been the last time they’d fought in the Labyrinth.

Despite those mismatched legs, she could move fast when she wanted to. She’d dodged his sword strikes and would have eaten his face if Annabeth hadn’t stabbed her from behind.

Now she had four friends with her.

“And your friend *Annabeth* is with you!” Kelli hissed with laughter. “Oh, yeah, I totally remember her.”

Kelli touched her own sternum, where the tip of the knife had exited when Annabeth stabbed her in the back. “What’s the matter, daughter of Athena? Don’t have your weapon? Bummer. I’d use it to kill you.”

Percy tried to think. He and Annabeth stood shoulder to shoulder as they had many times before, ready to fight. But neither of them was in good shape for battle. Annabeth was empty-handed. They were hopelessly outnumbered. There was nowhere to run. No help coming.

Briefly Percy considered calling for Mrs. O’Leary, his hellhound friend who

could shadow-travel. Even if she heard him, could she make it into Tartarus? This was where monsters went when they died. Calling her here might kill her, or turn her back to her natural state as a fierce monster.

No...he couldn't do that to his dog.

So, no help. Fighting was a long shot.

That left Annabeth's favorite tactics: trickery, talk, delay.

"So..." he started, "I guess you're wondering what we're doing in Tartarus." Kelli snickered. "Not really. I just want to kill you."

That would've been it, but Annabeth chimed in.

"Too bad," she said. "Because you have no idea what's going on in the mortal world." The other *empousai* circled, watching Kelli for a cue to attack; but the ex-cheerleader only snarled, crouching out of reach of Percy's sword.

"We know enough," Kelli said. "Gaea has spoken."

"You're heading toward a major defeat." Annabeth sounded so confident, even Percy was impressed. She glanced at the other *empousai*, one by one, then pointed accusingly at Kelli. "This one claims she's leading you to a victory. She's lying. The last time she was in the mortal world, Kelli was in charge of keeping my friend Luke Castellan faithful to Kronos. In the end, Luke rejected him.

He gave his life to expel Kronos. The Titans lost because Kelli *failed*. Now Kelli wants to lead you to another disaster."

The other *empousai* muttered and shifted uneasily.

"Enough!" Kelli's fingernails grew into long black talons. She glared at Annabeth as if imagining her sliced into small pieces.

Percy was pretty sure Kelli had had a thing for Luke Castellan. Luke had that effect on girls—

even donkey-legged vampires—and Percy wasn't sure bringing up his name was

such a good idea.

“The girl lies,” Kelli said. “So the Titans lost. Fine! That was part of the plan to wake Gaea!

Now the Earth Mother and her giants will destroy the mortal world, and we will *totally* feast on demigods!”

The other vampires gnashed their teeth in a frenzy of excitement. Percy had been in the middle of a school of sharks when the water was full of blood. That wasn’t nearly as scary as *empousai* ready to feed.

He prepared to attack, but how many could he dispatch before they overwhelmed him? It wouldn’t be enough.

“The demigods have united!” Annabeth yelled. “You’d better think twice before you attack us.

Romans and Greeks will fight you together. You don’t stand a chance!” The *empousai* backed up nervously, hissing, “*Romani*.” Percy guessed they’d had experience with the Twelfth Legion before, and it hadn’t worked out well for them.

“Yeah, you bet *Romani*.” Percy bared his forearm and showed them the brand he’d gotten at Camp Jupiter—the SPQR mark, with the trident of Neptune. “You mix Greek and Roman, and you know what you get? You get *BAM!*”

He stomped his foot, and the *empousai* scrambled back. One fell off the boulder where she’d been perched.

That made Percy feel good, but they recovered quickly and closed in again.

“Bold talk,” Kelli said, “for two demigods lost in Tartarus. Lower your sword, Percy Jackson, and I’ll kill you quickly. Believe me, there are worse ways to die down here.”

“Wait!” Annabeth tried again. “Aren’t *empousai* the servants of Hecate?” Kelli curled her lip. “So?”

“So Hecate is on *our* side now,” Annabeth said. “She has a cabin at Camp Half-

Blood. Some of her demigod children are my friends. If you fight us, she'll be angry." Percy wanted to hug Annabeth, she was so brilliant.

One of the other *empousai* growled. "Is this true, Kelli? Has our mistress made peace with Olympus?"

"Shut up, Serephone!" Kelli screeched. " *Gods*, you're annoying!"

"I will not cross the Dark Lady."

Annabeth took the opening. "You'd all be better following Serephone. She's older and wiser."

"Yes!" Serephone shrieked. "Follow me!"

Kelli struck so fast, Percy didn't have the chance to raise his sword. Fortunately, she didn't attack him. Kelli lashed out at Serephone. For half a second, the two demons were a blur of slashing claws and fangs.

Then it was over. Kelli stood triumphant over a pile of dust. From her claws hung the tattered remains of Serephone's dress.

"Any more *issues*?" Kelli snapped at her sisters. "Hecate is the goddess of the Mist! Her ways are mysterious. Who knows which side she truly favors? She is also the goddess of the crossroads, and she expects us to make our own choices. I choose the path that will bring us the most demigod blood! I choose Gaea!"

Her friends hissed in approval.

Annabeth glanced at Percy, and he saw that she was out of ideas. She'd done what she could.

She'd gotten Kelli to eliminate one of her own. Now there was nothing left but to fight.

"For two years I churned in the void," Kelli said. "Do you know how completely *annoying* it is to be vaporized, Annabeth Chase? Slowly re-forming, fully conscious, in searing pain for months and years as your body regrows, then finally breaking the crust of this hellish place and clawing your way back to daylight? All because some *little girl* stabbed you in the back?" Her baleful eyes

held Annabeth's. "I wonder what happens if a demigod is killed in Tartarus. I doubt it's ever happened before. Let's find out."

Percy sprang, slashing Riptide in a huge arc. He cut one of the demons in half, but Kelli dodged and charged Annabeth. The other two *empousai* launched themselves at Percy. One grabbed his sword arm. Her friend jumped on his back.

Percy tried to ignore them and staggered toward Annabeth, determined to go down defending her if he had to; but Annabeth was doing pretty well. She tumbled to one side, evading Kelli's claws, and came up with a rock in her hand, which she smacked into Kelli's nose.

Kelli wailed. Annabeth scooped up gravel and flung it in the *empousa's* eyes.

Meanwhile Percy thrashed from side to side, trying to throw off his *empousa* hitchhiker, but her claws sank deeper into his shoulders. The second *empousa* held his arm, preventing him from using Riptide.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kelli lunge, raking her talons across Annabeth's arm.

Annabeth screamed and fell.

Percy stumbled in her direction. The vampire on his back sank her teeth into his neck. Searing pain coursed through his body. His knees buckled.

Stay on your feet, he told himself. *You have to beat them.*

Then the other vampire bit his sword arm, and Riptide clattered to the ground.

That was it. His luck had finally run out. Kelli loomed over Annabeth, savoring her moment of triumph. The other two *empousai* circled Percy, their mouths slavering, ready for another taste.

Then a shadow fell across Percy. A deep war cry bellowed from somewhere above, echoing across the plains of Tartarus, and a Titan dropped onto the battlefield.

PERCY

PERCY THOUGHT HE WAS HALLUCINATING. It just wasn't possible that a huge, silvery figure could drop out of the sky and stomp Kelli flat, trampling her into a mound of monster dust.

But that's exactly what happened. The Titan was ten feet tall, with wild silver Einstein hair, pure silver eyes, and muscular arms protruding from a ripped-up blue janitor's uniform. In his hand was a massive push broom. His name tag, incredibly, read BOB.

Annabeth yelped and tried to crawl away, but the giant janitor wasn't interested in her. He turned to the two remaining *empousai*, who stood over Percy.

One was foolish enough to attack. She lunged with the speed of a tiger, but she never stood a chance. A spearhead jutted from the end of Bob's broom. With a single deadly swipe, he cut her to dust. The last vampire tried to run. Bob threw his broom like a massive boomerang (was there such a thing as a broomerang?). It sliced through the vampire and returned to Bob's hand.

"SWEEP!" The Titan grinned with delight and did a victory dance. "Sweep, sweep, sweep!" Percy couldn't speak. He couldn't bring himself to believe that something good had actually happened. Annabeth looked just as shocked.

"H-how...?" she stammered.

“Percy called me!” the janitor said happily. “Yes, he did.” Annabeth crawled a little farther away. Her arm was bleeding badly. “Called you? He—wait.

You’re Bob? *The Bob?*”

The janitor frowned when he noticed Annabeth’s wounds. “Owie.” Annabeth flinched as he knelt next to her.

“It’s okay,” Percy said, still woozy with pain. “He’s friendly.” He remembered when he’d first met Bob. The Titan had healed a bad wound on Percy’s shoulder just by touching it. Sure enough, the janitor tapped Annabeth’s forearm and it mended instantly.

Bob chuckled, pleased with himself, then bounded over to Percy and healed his bleeding neck and arm. The Titan’s hands were surprisingly warm and gentle.

“All better!” Bob declared, his eerie silver eyes crinkling with pleasure. “I am Bob, Percy’s friend!”

“Uh...yeah,” Percy managed. “Thanks for the help, Bob. It’s *really* good to see you again.”

“Yes!” the janitor agreed. “Bob. That’s me. Bob, Bob, Bob.” He shuffled around, obviously pleased with his name. “I am helping. I heard my name. Upstairs in Hades’s palace, nobody calls for Bob unless there is a mess. Bob, sweep up these bones. Bob, mop up these tortured souls. Bob, a zombie exploded in the dining room.”

Annabeth gave Percy a puzzled look, but he had no explanation.

“Then I heard my friend call!” The Titan beamed. “Percy said, *Bob!*” He grabbed Percy’s arm and hoisted him to his feet.

“That’s awesome,” Percy said. “Seriously. But how did you—”

“Oh, time to talk later.” Bob’s expression turned serious. “We must go before they find you.

They are coming. Yes, indeed.”

“They?” Annabeth asked.

Percy scanned the horizon. He saw no approaching monsters—nothing but the stark gray wasteland.

“Yes,” Bob agreed. “But Bob knows a way. Come on, friends! We will have fun!”

XVII

FRANK

FRANK WOKE UP AS A PYTHON, which puzzled him.

Changing into an animal wasn’t confusing. He did that all the time. But he had never changed from one animal to another in his sleep before. He was pretty sure he hadn’t dozed off as a snake.

Usually, he slept like a dog.

He’d discovered that he got through the night much better if he curled up on his bunk in the shape of a bulldog. For whatever reason, his nightmares didn’t bother him as much. The constant screaming in his head almost disappeared.

He had no idea why he’d become a reticulated python, but it did explain his dream about slowly swallowing a cow. His jaw was still sore.

He braced himself and changed back to human form. Immediately, his splitting

headache returned, along with the voices.

Fight them! yelled Mars. *Take this ship! Defend Rome!*

The voice of Ares shouted back: *Kill the Romans! Blood and death! Large guns!*

His father's Roman and Greek personalities screamed back and forth in Frank's mind with the usual soundtrack of battle noises—explosions, assault rifles, roaring jet engines—all throbbing like a subwoofer behind Frank's eyes.

He sat up on his berth, dizzy with pain. As he did every morning, he took a deep breath and stared at the lamp on his desk—a tiny flame that burned night and day, fueled by magic olive oil from the supply room.

Fire...Frank's biggest fear. Keeping an open flame in his room terrified him, but it also helped him focus. The noise in his head faded to the background, allowing him to think.

He'd gotten better at this, but for days he'd been almost worthless. As soon as the fighting broke out at Camp Jupiter, the war god's two voices had started screaming nonstop. Ever since, Frank had been stumbling around in a daze, barely able to function. He'd acted like a fool, and he was sure his friends thought he'd lost his marbles.

He couldn't tell them what was wrong. There was nothing they could do, and from listening to them talk, Frank was pretty sure they didn't have the same problem with their godly parents yelling in their ears.

Just Frank's luck, but he *had* to pull it together. His friends *needed* him—especially now, with Annabeth gone.

Annabeth had been kind to him. Even when he was so distracted he'd acted like a buffoon, Annabeth had been patient and helpful. While Ares screamed that Athena's children couldn't be trusted, and Mars bellowed at him to kill all the Greeks, Frank had grown to respect Annabeth.

Now that they were without her, Frank was the next best thing the group had to a military strategist. They would need him for the trip ahead.

He rose and got dressed. Fortunately he'd managed to buy some new clothes in

Siena a couple of days ago, replacing the laundry that Leo had sent flying away on Buford the table. (Long story.) He tugged on some Levi's and an army-green T-shirt, then reached for his favorite pullover before remembering he didn't need it. The weather was too warm. More important, he didn't need the pockets anymore to protect the magical piece of firewood that controlled his life span. Hazel was keeping it safe for him.

Maybe that should have made him nervous. If the firewood burned, Frank died: end of story. But he trusted Hazel more than he trusted himself. Knowing she was safeguarding his big weakness made him feel better—like he'd fastened his seat belt for a high-speed chase.

He slung his bow and quiver over his shoulder. Immediately they morphed into a regular backpack. Frank loved that. He never would've known about the quiver's camouflage power if Leo hadn't figured it out for him.

Leo! Mars raged. He must die!

Throttle him! Ares cried. Throttle everyone! Who are we talking about again?

The two began shouting at each other again, over the sound of bombs exploding in Frank's skull.

He steadied himself against the wall. For days, Frank had listened to those voices demanding Leo Valdez's death.

After all, Leo had started the war with Camp Jupiter by firing a ballista into the Forum. Sure, he'd been possessed at the time; but still Mars demanded vengeance. Leo made things harder by constantly teasing Frank, and Ares demanded that Frank retaliate for every insult.

Frank kept the voices at bay, but it wasn't easy.

On their trip across the Atlantic, Leo had said something that still stuck in Frank's mind. When they'd learned that Gaea the evil earth goddess had put a bounty on their heads, Leo had wanted to know for how much.

I can understand not being as pricey as Jason or Percy, he'd said, but am I worth, like, two or three Franks?

Just another one of Leo's stupid jokes, but the comment hit a little too close to home. On the *Argo II*, Frank definitely felt like the LVP—Least Valuable Player. Sure, he could turn into animals. So what? His biggest claim to helpfulness so far had been changing into a weasel to escape from an underground workshop, and even *that* had been Leo's idea. Frank was better known for the Giant Goldfish Fiasco in Atlanta, and, just yesterday, for turning into a two-hundred-kilo gorilla only to get knocked senseless by a flash-bang grenade.

Leo hadn't made any gorilla jokes at his expense yet. But it was only a matter of time.

Kill him!

Torture him! Then kill him!

The two sides of the war god seemed to be kicking and punching each other inside Frank's head, using his sinuses as a wrestling mat.

Blood! Guns!

Rome! War!

Quiet down, Frank ordered.

Amazingly, the voices obeyed.

Okay, then, Frank thought.

Maybe he could finally get those annoying screaming mini-gods under control. Maybe today would be a good day.

That hope was shattered as soon as he climbed above deck.

"What *are* they?" Hazel asked.

The *Argo II* was docked at a busy wharf. On one side stretched a shipping channel about half a kilometer wide. On the other spread the city of Venice—red-tiled roofs, metal church domes, steeped towers, and sun-bleached buildings in all the colors of Valentine candy hearts—red, white, ochre, pink, and orange.

Everywhere there were statues of lions—on top of pedestals, over doorways, on the porticoes of the largest buildings. There were so many, Frank figured the lion must be the city’s mascot.

Where streets should have been, green canals etched their way through the neighborhoods, each one jammed with motorboats. Along the docks, the sidewalks were mobbed with tourists shopping at the T-shirt kiosks, overflowing from stores, and lounging across acres of outdoor café tables, like pods of sea lions. Frank had thought Rome was full of tourists. This place was insane.

Hazel and the rest of his friends weren’t paying attention to any of that, though. They had gathered at the starboard rail to stare at the dozens of weird shaggy monsters milling through the crowds.

Each monster was about the size of a cow, with a bowed back like a broken-down horse, matted gray fur, skinny legs, and black cloven hooves. The creatures’ heads seemed much too heavy for their necks. Their long, anteater-like snouts drooped to the ground. Their overgrown gray manes completely covered their eyes.

Frank watched as one of the creatures lumbered across the promenade, snuffling and licking the pavement with its long tongue. The tourists parted around it, unconcerned. A few even petted it. Frank wondered how the mortals could be so calm. Then the monster’s appearance flickered. For a moment it turned into an old, fat beagle.

Jason grunted. “The mortals think they’re stray dogs.”

“Or pets roaming around,” Piper said. “My dad shot a film in Venice once. I remember him telling me there were dogs everywhere. Venetians love dogs.” Frank frowned. He kept forgetting that Piper’s dad was Tristan McLean, A-list movie star. She didn’t talk about him much. She seemed pretty down-to-earth for a kid raised in Hollywood. That was fine with Frank. The last thing they needed on this quest was paparazzi taking pictures of all Frank’s epic fails.

“But what are they?” he asked, repeating Hazel’s question. “They look like... starving, shaggy cows with sheepdog hair.”

He waited for someone to enlighten him. Nobody volunteered any information.

“Maybe they’re harmless,” Leo suggested. “They’re ignoring the mortals.”

“Harmless!” Gleeson Hedge laughed. The satyr wore his usual gym shorts, sports shirt, and coach’s whistle. His expression was as gruff as ever, but he still had one pink rubber band stuck in his hair from the prankster dwarfs in Bologna. Frank was kind of scared to mention it to him. “Valdez, how many *harmless* monsters have we met? We should just aim the ballistae and see what happens!”

“Uh, no,” Leo said.

For once, Frank agreed with Leo. There were too many monsters. It would be impossible to target one without causing collateral damage in the crowds of tourists. Besides, if those creatures panicked and stampeded...

“We’ll have to walk through them and hope they’re peaceful,” Frank said, hating the idea already. “It’s the only way we’re going to track down the owner of that book.” Leo pulled the leather-bound manual from underneath his arm. He’d slapped a sticky note on the cover with the address the dwarfs in Bologna had given him.

“*La Casa Nera*,” he read. “*Calle Frezzeria*.”

“The Black House,” Nico di Angelo translated. “Calle Frezzeria is the street.” Frank tried not to flinch when he realized Nico was at his shoulder. The guy was so quiet and brooding, he almost seemed to dematerialize when he wasn’t speaking. Hazel might have been the one who came back from the dead, but Nico was *way* more ghostlike.

“You speak Italian?” Frank asked.

Nico shot him a warning look, like: *Watch the questions*. He spoke calmly, though. “Frank is right. We have to find that address. The only way to do it is to walk the city. Venice is a maze. We’ll have to risk the crowds and those... whatever they are.”

Thunder rumbled in the clear summer sky. They’d passed through some storms the night before.

Frank had thought they were over, but now he wasn’t sure. The air felt as thick and warm as sauna steam.

Jason frowned at the horizon. “Maybe I should stay on board. Lots of *venti* in that storm last night. If they decide to attack the ship again...”

He didn’t need to finish. They’d all had experiences with angry wind spirits. Jason was the only one who had much luck fighting them.

Coach Hedge grunted. “Well, I’m out, too. If you softhearted cupcakes are going to stroll through Venice without even whacking those furry animals on the head, forget it. I don’t like *boring* expeditions.”

“It’s okay, Coach.” Leo grinned. “We still have to repair the foremast. Then I need your help in the engine room. I’ve got an idea for a new installation.” Frank didn’t like the gleam in Leo’s eye. Since Leo had found that Archimedes sphere, he’d been trying out a lot of “new installations.” Usually, they exploded or sent smoke billowing upstairs into Frank’s cabin.

“Well...” Piper shifted her feet. “Whoever goes should be good with animals. I, uh...I’ll admit I’m not great with cows.”

Frank figured there was a story behind that comment, but he decided not to ask.

“I’ll go,” he said.

He wasn’t sure why he volunteered—maybe because he was anxious to be useful for a change.

Or maybe he didn’t want anyone beating him to the punch. *Animals? Frank can turn into animals!*

Send him!

Leo patted him on shoulder and handed him the leather-bound book. “Awesome. If you pass a hardware store, could you get me some two-by-fours and a gallon of tar?”

“Leo,” Hazel chided, “it’s not a shopping trip.”

“I’ll go with Frank,” Nico offered.

Frank’s eye started twitching. The war gods’ voices rose to a crescendo in his

head: *Kill him!*

Graecus scum!

No! I love Graecus scum!

“Uh...you’re good with animals?” he asked.

Nico smiled without humor. “Actually, most animals hate me. They can sense death. But there’s something about this city...” His expression turned grim. “Lots of death. Restless spirits. If I go, I may be able to keep them at bay. Besides, as you noticed, I speak Italian.” Leo scratched his head. “Lots of death, huh? Personally, I’m trying to avoid lots of death, but you guys have fun!”

Frank wasn’t sure what scared him more: shaggy-cow monsters, hordes of restless ghosts, or going somewhere alone with Nico di Angelo.

“I’ll go too.” Hazel slipped her arm through Frank’s. “Three is the best number for a demigod quest, right?”

Frank tried not to look too relieved. He didn’t want to offend Nico. But he glanced at Hazel and told her with his eyes: *Thank you thank you thank you.*

Nico stared at the canals, as if wondering what new and interesting forms of evil spirits might be lurking there. “All right, then. Let’s go find the owner of that book.”

XVIII

FRANK

FRANK MIGHT HAVE LIKED VENICE if it hadn't been summertime and tourist season, and if the city wasn't overrun with large hairy creatures. Between the rows of old houses and the canals, the sidewalks were already too narrow for the crowds jostling one another and stopping to take pictures.

The monsters made things worse. They shuffled around with their heads down, bumping into mortals and sniffing the pavement.

One seemed to find something it liked at the edge of a canal. It nibbled and licked at a crack between the stones until it dislodged some sort of greenish root. The monster sucked it up happily and shambled along.

"Well, they're plant-eaters," Frank said. "That's good news." Hazel slipped her hand into his. "Unless they supplement their diet with demigods. Let's hope not."

Frank was so pleased to be holding her hand, the crowds and the heat and the monsters suddenly didn't seem so bad. He felt *needed*—useful.

Not that Hazel required his protection. Anybody who'd seen her charging on Arion with her sword drawn would know she could take care of herself. Still, Frank liked being next to her, imagining he was her bodyguard. If any of these monsters tried to hurt her, Frank would gladly turn into a rhinoceros and push them into the canal.

Could he do a rhino? Frank had never tried that before.

Nico stopped. “There.”

They’d turned onto a smaller street, leaving the canal behind. Ahead of them was a small plaza lined with five-story buildings. The area was strangely deserted—as if the mortals could sense it wasn’t safe. In the middle of the cobblestone courtyard, a dozen shaggy cow creatures were sniffing around the mossy base of an old stone well.

“A lot of cows in one place,” Frank said.

“Yeah, but look,” Nico said. “Past that archway.”

Nico’s eyes must’ve been better than his. Frank squinted. At the far end of the plaza, a stone archway carved with lions led into a narrow street. Just past the arch, one of the town houses was painted black—the only black building Frank had seen so far in Venice.

“La Casa Nera,” he guessed.

Hazel’s grip tightened on his fingers. “I don’t like that plaza. It feels...cold.” Frank wasn’t sure what she meant. He was still sweating like crazy.

But Nico nodded. He studied the town-house windows, most of which were covered with wooden shutters. “You’re right, Hazel. This neighborhood is filled with *lemures*. ”

“Lemurs?” Frank asked nervously. “I’m guessing you don’t mean the furry little guys from Madagascar?”

“Angry ghosts,” Nico said. “*Lemures* go back to Roman times. They hang around a lot of Italian cities, but I’ve never felt so many in one place. My mom told me...” He hesitated. “She used to tell me stories about the ghosts of Venice.”

Again Frank wondered about Nico’s past, but he was afraid to ask. He caught Hazel’s eye.

Go ahead, she seemed to be saying. Nico needs practice talking to people.

The sounds of assault rifles and atom bombs got louder in Frank's head. Mars and Ares were trying to outsing each other with "Dixie" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Frank did his best to push that aside.

"Nico, your mom was Italian?" he guessed. "She was from Venice?" Nico nodded reluctantly. "She met Hades here, back in the 1930s. As World War Two got closer, she fled to the U.S. with my sister and me. I mean...Bianca, my other sister. I don't remember much about Italy, but I can still speak the language."

Frank tried to think of a response. *Oh, that's nice* didn't seem to cut it.

He was hanging out with not one but *two* demigods who'd been pulled out of time. They were both, technically, about seventy years older than he was.

"Must've been hard on your mom," Frank said. "I guess we'll do anything for someone we love."

Hazel squeezed his hand appreciatively. Nico stared at the cobblestones. "Yeah," he said bitterly. "I guess we will."

Frank wasn't sure what Nico was thinking. He had a hard time imagining Nico di Angelo acting out of love for anybody, except maybe Hazel. But Frank decided he'd gone as far as he dared with the personal questions.

"So, the *lemures*..." He swallowed. "How do we avoid them?"

"I'm already on it," Nico said. "I'm sending out the message that they should stay away and ignore us. Hopefully that's enough. Otherwise...things could get messy." Hazel pursed her lips. "Let's get going," she suggested.

Halfway across the piazza, everything went wrong; but it had nothing to do with ghosts.

They were skirting the well in the middle of the square, trying to give the cow monsters some distance, when Hazel stumbled on a loose piece of cobblestone. Frank caught her. Six or seven of the big gray beasts turned to look at them. Frank glimpsed a glowing green eye under one's mane, and instantly he was hit with a wave of nausea, the way he felt when he ate too much cheese or ice cream.

The creatures made deep throbbing sounds in their throats like angry foghorns.

“Nice cows,” Frank murmured. He put himself between his friends and the monsters. “Guys, I’m thinking we should back out of here slowly.”

“I’m such a klutz,” Hazel whispered. “Sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Nico said. “Look at your feet.”

Frank glanced down and caught his breath.

Under their shoes, the paving stones were moving—spiky plant tendrils were pushing up from the cracks.

Nico stepped back. The roots snaked out in his direction, trying to follow. The tendrils got thicker, exuding a steamy green vapor that smelled of boiled cabbage.

“These roots seem to like demigods,” Frank noted.

Hazel’s hand drifted to her sword hilt. “And the cow creatures like the roots.” The entire herd was now looking their direction, making foghorn growls and stamping their hooves. Frank understood animal behavior well enough to get the message: *You are standing on our food. That makes you enemies.*

Frank tried to think. There were too many monsters to fight. Something about their eyes hidden under those shaggy manes...Frank had gotten sick from the barest glimpse. He had a bad feeling that if those monsters made direct eye contact, he might get a lot worse than nauseous.

“Don’t meet their eyes,” Frank warned. “I’ll distract them. You two back up slowly toward that black house.”

The creatures tensed, ready to attack.

“Never mind,” Frank said. “Run!”

As it turned out, Frank could *not* turn into a rhino, and he lost valuable time trying.

Nico and Hazel bolted for the side street. Frank stepped in front of the monsters, hoping to keep their attention. He yelled at the top of his lungs, imagining himself as a fearsome rhinoceros, but with Ares and Mars screaming in his head, he couldn't concentrate. He remained regular-old Frank.

Two of the cow monsters peeled off from the herd to chase Nico and Hazel.

“No!” Frank yelled after them. “Me! I'm the rhino!”

The rest of the herd surrounded Frank. They growled, emerald-green gas billowing from their nostrils. Frank stepped back to avoid the stuff, but the stench nearly knocked him over.

Okay, so not a rhino. Something else. Frank knew he had only seconds before the monsters trampled or poisoned him, but he couldn't think. He couldn't hold the image of any animal long enough to change form.

Then he glanced up at one of the town-house balconies and saw a stone carving—the symbol of Venice.

The next instant, Frank was a full-grown lion. He roared in challenge, then sprang from the middle of the monster herd and landed eight meters away, on top of the old stone well.

The monsters growled in reply. Three of them sprang at once, but Frank was ready. His lion reflexes were built for speed in combat.

He slashed the first two monsters into dust with his claws, then sank his fangs into the third one's throat and tossed it aside.

There were seven left, plus the two chasing his friends. Not great odds, but Frank had to keep the bulk of herd focused on him. He roared at the monsters, and they edged away.

They outnumbered him, yes. But Frank was a top-of-the-chain predator. The herd monsters knew it. They had also just watched him send three of their friends to Tartarus.

He pressed his advantage and leaped off the well, still baring his fangs. The herd backed off.

If he could just maneuver around them, then turn and run after his friends...

He was doing all right, until he took his first backward step toward the arch. One of cows, either the bravest or the stupidest, took that as a sign of weakness. It charged and blasted Frank in the face with green gas.

He slashed the monster to dust, but the damage was already done. He forced himself not to breathe. Regardless, he could feel the fur burning off his snout. His eyes stung. He staggered back, half-blind and dizzy, dimly aware of Nico screaming his name.

“Frank! *Frank!*”

He tried to focus. He was back in human form, retching and stumbling. His face felt like it was peeling off. In front of him, the green cloud of gas floated between him and the herd. The remaining cow monsters eyed him warily, probably wondering if Frank had any more tricks up his sleeve.

He glanced behind him. Under the stone arch, Nico di Angelo was holding his black Stygian iron sword, gesturing at Frank to hurry. At Nico’s feet, two puddles of darkness stained the pavement—no doubt the remains of the cow monsters that had chased them.

And Hazel...she was propped against the wall behind her brother. She wasn’t moving.

Frank ran toward them, forgetting about the monster herd. He rushed past Nico and grabbed Hazel’s shoulders. Her head slumped against her chest.

“She got a blast of green gas right in the face,” Nico said miserably. “I—I wasn’t fast enough.” Frank couldn’t tell if she was breathing. Rage and despair battled inside him. He’d always been scared of Nico. Now he wanted to drop-kick the son of Hades into the nearest canal. Maybe that wasn’t fair, but Frank didn’t care. Neither did the war gods screaming in his head.

“We need to get her back to the ship,” Frank said.

The cow monster herd prowled cautiously just beyond the archway. They bellowed their foghorn cries. From nearby streets, more monsters answered. Reinforcements would soon have the demigods surrounded.

“We’ll never make it on foot,” Nico said. “Frank, turn into a giant eagle. Don’t worry about me.

Get her back to the *Argo II!*”

With his face burning and the voices screaming in his mind, Frank wasn’t sure he could change shape; but he was about to try when a voice behind them said, “Your friends can’t help you. They don’t know the cure.”

Frank spun. Standing in the threshold of the Black House was a young man in jeans and a denim shirt. He had curly black hair and a friendly smile, though Frank doubted he was friendly. Probably he wasn’t even human.

At the moment, Frank didn’t care.

“Can you cure her?” he asked.

“Of course,” the man said. “But you’d better hurry inside. I think you’ve angered every *katobleps* in Venice.”

X I X

FRANK

THEY BARELY MADE IT INSIDE.

As soon as their host threw the bolts, the cow monsters bellowed and slammed into the door, making it shudder on its hinges.

“Oh, they can’t get in,” the man in denim promised. “You’re safe now!”

“Safe?” Frank demanded. “Hazel is dying!”

Their host frowned as if he didn’t appreciate Frank ruining his good mood. “Yes, yes. Bring her this way.”

Frank carried Hazel as they followed the man farther into the building. Nico offered to help, but Frank didn’t need it. Hazel weighed nothing, and Frank’s body hummed with adrenaline. He could feel Hazel shivering, so at least he knew she was alive; but her skin was cold. Her lips had taken on a greenish tinge—or was that just Frank’s blurry vision?

His eyes still burned from the monster’s breath. His lungs felt like he’d inhaled a flaming cabbage. He didn’t know why the gas had affected him less than it had Hazel. Maybe she’d gotten more of it in her lungs. He would have given anything to change places if it meant saving her.

The voices of Mars and Ares yelled in his head, urging him to kill Nico and the man in denim and anyone else he could find, but Frank forced down the noise.

The house’s front room was some sort of greenhouse. The walls were lined with tables of plant trays under fluorescent lights. The air smelled of fertilizer solution. Maybe Venetians did their gardening inside, since they were surrounded by water instead of soil? Frank wasn’t sure, but he didn’t spend much time worrying about it.

The back room looked like a combination garage, college dorm, and computer lab. Against the left wall glowed a bank of servers and laptops, their screen savers flashing pictures of plowed fields and tractors. Against the right wall sat a single bed, a messy desk, and an open wardrobe filled with extra denim clothes and a stack of farm implements, like pitchforks and rakes.

The back wall was a huge garage door. Parked next to it was a red-and-gold chariot with an open carriage and a single axle, like the chariots Frank had raced at Camp Jupiter. Sprouting from the sides of the driver’s box were giant feathery wings. Wrapped around the rim of the left wheel, a spotted python snored loudly.

Frank hadn’t known that pythons could snore. He hoped he hadn’t done that

himself in python form last night.

“Set your friend here,” said the man in denim.

Frank placed Hazel gently on the bed. He removed her sword and tried to make her comfortable, but she was as limp as a scarecrow. Her complexion definitely had a greenish tint.

“What were those cow things?” Frank demanded. “What did they do to her?”

“*Katoblepones*,” said their host. “Singular: *katobleps*. In English, it means *down-looker*. Called that because—”

“They’re always looking down.” Nico smacked his forehead. “Right. I remember reading about them.”

Frank glared at him. “Now you remember?”

Nico hung his head almost as low as a *katobleps*. “I, uh...used to play this stupid card game when I was younger. Mythomagic. The *katobleps* was one of the monster cards.” Frank blinked. “I played Mythomagic. I never saw that card.”

“It was in the *Africanus Extreme* expansion deck.”

“Oh.”

Their host cleared his throat. “Are you two done, ah, *geeking out*, as they say?”

“Right, sorry,” Nico muttered. “Anyway, *katoblepones* have poison breath and a poison gaze. I thought they only lived in Africa.”

The man in denim shrugged. “That’s their native land. They were accidentally imported to Venice hundreds of years ago. You’ve heard of Saint Mark?” Frank wanted to scream with frustration. He didn’t see how any of this was relevant, but if their host could heal Hazel, Frank decided maybe it would be best not to make him angry. “Saints? They’re not part of Greek mythology.”

The man in denim chuckled. “No, but Saint Mark is the patron saint of this city. He died in Egypt, oh, a long time ago. When the Venetians became powerful... well, the relics of saints were a big tourist attraction back in the Middle Ages.

The Venetians decided to steal Saint Mark's remains and bring them to their big church of San Marco. They smuggled out his body in a barrel of pickled pig parts."

"That's...disgusting," Frank said.

"Yes," the man agreed with a smile. "The point is, you can't do something like that and not have consequences. The Venetians unintentionally smuggled something *else* out of Egypt—the *katoblepones*. They came here aboard that ship and have been breeding like rats ever since. They love the magical poison roots that grow here—swampy, foul-smelling plants that creep up from the canals. It makes their breath even more poisonous! Usually the monsters ignore mortals, but demigods...especially demigods who get in their way—"

"Got it," Frank snapped. "Can you cure her?"

The man shrugged. "Possibly."

"*Possibly?*" Frank had to use all his willpower not to throttle the guy.

He put his hand under Hazel's nose. He couldn't feel her breath. "Nico, please tell me she's doing that death-trance thing, like you did in the bronze jar." Nico grimaced. "I don't know if Hazel can do that. Her dad is technically Pluto, not Hades, so

—"

"Hades!" cried their host. He backed away, staring at Nico with distaste. "So *that's* what I smell. Children of the Underworld? If I'd known *that*, I would never have let you in!" Frank rose. "Hazel's a good person. You promised you would *help* her!"

"I did *not* promise."

Nico drew his sword. "She's my sister," he growled. "I don't know who you are, but if you can cure her, you have to, or so help me by the River Styx—"

"Oh, blah, blah, blah!" The man waved his hand. Suddenly where Nico di Angelo had been standing was a potted plant about five feet tall, with drooping green leaves, tufts of silk, and half a dozen ripe yellow ears of corn.

“There,” the man huffed, wagging his finger at the corn plant. “Children of Hades can’t order me around! You should talk less and listen more. Now at least you have *ears*.” Frank stumbled against the bed. “What did you—why—?”

The man raised an eyebrow. Frank made a squeaky noise that wasn’t very courageous. He’d been so focused on Hazel, he’d forgotten what Leo had told them about the guy they were looking for.

“You’re a god,” he remembered.

“Triptolemus.” The man bowed. “My friends call me Trip, so don’t call me that. And if you’re another child of Hades—”

“Mars!” Frank said quickly. “Child of Mars!”

Triptolemus sniffed. “Well...not much better. But perhaps you deserve to be something better than a corn plant. Sorghum? Sorghum is very nice.”

“Wait!” Frank pleaded. “We’re here on a friendly mission. We brought a gift.” Very slowly, he reached into his backpack and brought out the leather-bound book. “This belongs to you?”

“My almanac!” Triptolemus grinned and seized the book. He thumbed through the pages and started bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Oh, this is fabulous! Where did you find it?”

“Um, Bologna. There were these”—Frank remembered that he wasn’t supposed to mention the dwarfs—“terrible monsters. We risked our lives, but we knew this was important to you. So could you maybe, you know, turn Nico back to normal and heal Hazel?”

“Hmm?” Trip looked up from his book. He’d been happily reciting lines to himself—something about turnip-planting schedules. Frank wished that Ella the harpy were here. She would get along great with this guy.

“Oh, *heal* them?” Triptolemus clucked disapprovingly. “I’m grateful for the book, of course. I can definitely let *you* go free, son of Mars. But I have a long-standing problem with Hades. After all, I owe my godly powers to Demeter!”

Frank racked his brain, but it was hard with the voices screaming in his head and

the *katobleps* poison making him dizzy.

“Uh, Demeter,” he said, “the plant goddess. She—she didn’t like Hades because...” Suddenly he recalled an old story he’d heard at Camp Jupiter. “Her daughter, Proserpine—”

“Persephone,” Trip corrected. “I prefer the Greek, if you don’t mind.” *Kill him!* Mars screamed.

I love this guy! Ares yelled back. *Kill him anyway!*

Frank decided not to take offense. He didn’t want to get turned into a sorghum plant. “Okay.

Hades kidnapped Persephone.”

“Exactly!” Trip said.

“So...Persephone was a friend of yours?”

Trip snorted. “I was just a mortal prince back then. Persephone wouldn’t have noticed me. But when her mother, Demeter, went searching for her, scouring the whole earth, not many people would help her. Hecate lit her way at night with her torches. And I...well, when Demeter came to my part of Greece, I gave her a place to stay. I comforted her, gave her a meal, and offered my assistance. I didn’t know she was a goddess at the time, but my good deed paid off. Later, Demeter rewarded me by making me a god of farming!”

“Wow,” Frank said. “Farming. Congratulations.”

“I know! Pretty awesome, right? Anyway, Demeter never got along with Hades. So naturally, you know, I have to side with my patron goddess. Children of Hades—forget it! In fact, one of them—

this Scythian king named Lynkos? When I tried to teach his countrymen about farming, he killed my right python!”

“Your...right python?”

Trip marched over to his winged chariot and hopped in. He pulled a lever, and

the wings began to flap. The spotted python on the left wheel opened his eyes. He started to writhe, coiling around the axle like a spring. The chariot whirred into motion, but the right wheel stayed in place, so Triptolemus spun in circles, the chariot beating its wings and bouncing up and down like a defective merry-go-round.

“You see?” he said as he spun. “No good! Ever since I lost my right python, I haven’t been able to spread the word about farming—at least not in person. Now I have to resort to giving online courses.”

“What?” As soon as he said it, Frank was sorry he’d asked.

Trip hopped off the chariot while it was still spinning. The python slowed to a stop and went back to snoring. Trip jogged over to the line of computers. He tapped the keyboards and the screens woke up, displaying a Web site in maroon and gold, with a picture of a happy farmer in a toga and a John Deere cap, standing with his bronze scythe in a field of wheat.

“Triptolemus Farming University!” he announced proudly. “In just six weeks, you can get your bachelor’s degree in the exciting and vibrant career of the future—farming!” Frank felt a bead of sweat trickle down his cheek. He didn’t care about this crazy god or his snake-powered chariot or his online degree program. But Hazel was turning greener by the moment.

Nico was a corn plant. And he was alone.

“Look,” he said. “We *did* bring you the almanac. And my friends are really nice. They’re not like those other children of Hades you’ve met. So if there’s any way ___”

“Oh!” Trip snapped his fingers. “I see where you’re going!”

“Uh...you do?”

“Absolutely! If I cure your friend Hazel and return the other one, Nicholas—”

“Nico.”

“—if I return him to normal...”

Frank hesitated. “Yes?”

“Then in exchange, you stay with me and take up farming! A child of Mars as my apprentice? It’s perfect! What a spokesman you’ll be. We can beat swords into plowshares and have so much fun!”

“Actually...” Frank tried frantically to come up with a plan. Ares and Mars screamed in his head, *Swords! Guns! Massive ka-booms!*

If he declined Trip’s offer, Frank figured he would offend the guy and end up as sorghum or wheat or some other cash crop.

If it was the only way to save Hazel, then sure, he could agree to Trip’s demands and become a farmer. But that *couldn’t* be the only way. Frank refused to believe he’d been chosen by the Fates to go on this quest just so he could take online courses in turnip cultivation.

Frank’s eyes wandered to the broken chariot. “I have a better offer,” he blurted out. “I can fix that.”

Trip’s smile melted. “Fix...my chariot?”

Frank wanted to kick himself. What was he *thinking*? He wasn’t Leo. He couldn’t even figure out a stupid pair of Chinese handcuffs. He could barely change the batteries in a TV remote. He couldn’t fix a magical chariot!

But something told him it was his only chance. That chariot was the one thing Triptolemus might really want.

“I’ll go find a way to fix the chariot,” he said. “In return, you fix Nico and Hazel. Let us go in peace. And—and give us whatever aid you can to defeat Gaea’s forces.” Triptolemus laughed. “What makes you think I can aid you with *that*?”

“Hecate told us so,” Frank said. “She sent us here. She—she decided Hazel is one of her favorites.”

The color drained from Trip’s face. “Hecate?”

Frank hoped he wasn’t overstating things. He didn’t need Hecate mad at him

too. But if Triptolemus and Hecate were both friends of Demeter, maybe that would convince Trip to help.

“The goddess guided us to your almanac in Bologna,” Frank said. “She wanted us to return it to you, because...well, she must’ve known you had some knowledge that would help us get through the House of Hades in Epirus.”

Trip nodded slowly. “Yes. I see. I know why Hecate sent you to me. Very well, son of Mars. Go find a way to fix my chariot. If you succeed, I will do all you ask. If not—”

“I know,” Frank grumbled. “My friends die.”

“Yes,” Trip said cheerfully. “And you’ll make a lovely patch of sorghum!”

X X

FRANK

FRANK STUMBLED OUT OF THE BLACK HOUSE. The door shut behind him, and he collapsed against the wall, overcome with guilt. Fortunately the *katoblepones* had cleared off, or he might have just sat there and let them trample him. He deserved nothing better. He’d left Hazel inside, dying and defenseless, at the mercy of a crazy farmer god.

Kill farmers! Ares screamed in his head.

Return to the legion and fight Greeks! Mars said. *What are we doing here?*

Killing farmers! Ares screamed back.

“Shut up!” Frank yelled aloud. “Both of you!”

A couple of old ladies with shopping bags shuffled past. They gave Frank a strange look, muttered something in Italian, and kept going.

Frank stared miserably at Hazel’s cavalry sword, lying at his feet next to his backpack. He could run back to the *Argo II* and get Leo. Maybe Leo could fix the chariot.

But Frank somehow knew this wasn’t a problem for Leo. It was Frank’s task. He had to prove himself. Besides, the chariot wasn’t exactly broken. There was no mechanical problem. It was missing a serpent.

Frank could turn himself into a python. When he’d woken up that morning as a giant snake, perhaps it had been a sign from the gods. He didn’t want to spend the rest of his life turning the wheel of a farmer’s chariot, but if it meant saving Hazel...

No. There had to be another way.

Serpents, Frank thought. Mars.

Did his father have some connection to snakes? Mars’s sacred animal was the wild boar, not the serpent. Still, Frank was sure he’d heard something once....

He could think of only one person to ask. Reluctantly, he opened his mind to the voices of the war god.

I need a snake, he told them. *How?*

Ha, ha! Ares screamed. *Yes, the serpent!*

Like that vile Cadmus, Mars said. *We punished him for killing our dragon!*

They both started yelling, until Frank thought his brain would split in half.

“Okay! Stop!”

The voices quieted.

“Cadmus,” Frank muttered. “Cadmus...”

The story came back to him. The demigod Cadmus had slain a dragon that happened to be a child of Ares. How Ares had ended up with a dragon for a son, Frank didn't want to know; but as punishment for the dragon's death, Ares turned Cadmus into a snake.

“So you can turn your enemies into snakes,” Frank said. “That's what I need. I need to find an enemy. Then I need you to turn him into a snake.”

You think I would do that for you? Ares roared. You have not proven your worth!

Only the greatest hero could ask such a boon, Mars said. A hero like Romulus!

Too Roman! Ares shouted. Diomedes!

Never! Mars shouted back. That coward fell to Heracles!

Horatius, then, Ares suggested.

Mars went silent. Frank sensed a grudging agreement.

“Horatius,” Frank said. “Fine. If that's what it takes, I'll prove I'm as good as Horatius. Uh...

what did he do?”

Images flooded into Frank's mind. He saw a lone warrior standing on a stone bridge, facing an entire army massed on the far side of the Tiber River.

Frank remembered the legend. Horatius, the Roman general, had single-handedly held off a horde of invaders, sacrificing himself on that bridge to keep the barbarians from crossing the Tiber.

By giving his fellow Romans time to finish their defenses, he'd saved the Republic.

Venice is overrun, Mars said, as Rome was about to be. Cleanse it!

Destroy them all! Ares said. Put them to the sword!

Frank pushed the voices to the back of his mind. He looked at his hands and was amazed they weren't trembling.

For the first time in days, his thoughts were clear. He knew exactly what he needed to do. He didn't know how he would pull it off. The odds of dying were excellent, but he had to try. Hazel's life depended on him.

He strapped Hazel's sword to his belt, morphed his backpack into a quiver and bow, and raced toward the piazza where he'd fought the cow monsters.

The plan had three phases: dangerous, really dangerous, and insanely dangerous.

Frank stopped at the old stone well. No *katoblepones* in sight. He drew Hazel's sword and used it to pry up some cobblestones, unearthing a big tangle of spiky roots. The tendrils unfurled, exuding their stinky green fumes as they crept toward Frank's feet.

In the distance, a *katobleps's* foghorn moan filled the air. Others joined in from all different directions. Frank wasn't sure how the monsters could tell he was harvesting their favorite food—

maybe they just had an excellent sense of smell.

He had to move fast now. He sliced off a long cluster of vines and laced them through one of his belt loops, trying to ignore the burning and itching in his hands. Soon he had a glowing, stinking lasso of poisonous weeds. Hooray.

The first few *katoblepones* lumbered into the piazza, bellowing in anger. Green eyes glowed under their manes. Their long snouts blew clouds of gas, like furry steam engines.

Frank nocked an arrow. He had a momentary pang of guilt. These were not the worst monsters he'd met. They were basically grazing animals that happened to be poisonous.

Hazel is dying because of them, he reminded himself.

He let the arrow fly. The nearest *katobleps* collapsed, crumbling to dust. He nocked a second arrow, but the rest of the herd was almost on top of him. More were charging into the square from the opposite direction.

Frank turned into a lion. He roared defiantly and leaped toward the archway, straight over the heads of the second herd. The two groups of *katoblepones* slammed into each other, but quickly recovered and ran after him.

Frank hadn't been sure the roots would still smell when he changed form. Usually his clothes and possessions just sort of melted into his animal shape, but apparently he still smelled like a yummy poison dinner. Each time he raced past a *katobleps*, it roared with outrage and joined the *Kill Frank!*

Parade.

He turned onto a larger street and pushed through the crowds of tourists. What the mortals saw, he had no idea—a cat being chased by a pack of dogs? People cursed at Frank in about twelve different languages. Gelato cones went flying. A woman spilled a stack of carnival masks. One dude toppled into the canal.

When Frank glanced back, he had at least two dozen monsters on his tail, but he needed more.

He needed *all* the monsters in Venice, and he had to keep the ones behind him enraged.

He found an open spot in the crowd and turned back into a human. He drew Hazel's *spatha*—

never his preferred weapon, but he was big enough and strong enough that the heavy cavalry sword didn't bother him. In fact he was glad for the extra reach. He slashed the golden blade, destroying the first *katobleps* and letting the others bunch up in front of him.

He tried to avoid their eyes, but he could feel their gaze burning into him. He figured that if all these monsters breathed on him at once, their combined noxious cloud would be enough to melt him into a puddle. The monsters crowded forward and slammed into one another.

Frank yelled, "You want my poison roots? Come and get them!" He turned into a dolphin and jumped into the canal. He hoped *katoblepones* couldn't swim. At the very least, they seemed reluctant to follow him in, and he couldn't blame them. The canal was disgusting—smelly and salty and as warm as soup—but Frank forged through it, dodging gondolas and speedboats, pausing occasionally to chitter dolphin insults at the monsters who followed him on the sidewalks. When he reached the nearest gondola dock, Frank turned back into a human again, stabbed a few more *katoblepones* to keep them angry, and took off running.

So it went.

After a while, Frank fell into a kind of daze. He attracted more monsters, scattered more crowds of tourists, and led his now massive following of *katoblepones* through the winding streets of the old city. Whenever he needed a quick escape, he dove into a canal as a dolphin, or turned into an eagle and soared overhead, but he never got too far ahead of his pursuers.

Whenever he felt like the monsters might be losing interest, he stopped on a rooftop and drew his bow, picking off a few of the *katoblepones* in the center of the herd. He shook his lasso of poison vines and insulted the monsters' bad breath, stirring them into a fury. Then he continued the race.

He backtracked. He lost his way. Once he turned a corner and ran into the tail end of his own monster mob. He should have been exhausted, yet somehow he found the strength to keep going—

which was good. The hardest part was yet to come.

He spotted a couple of bridges, but they didn't look right. One was elevated and completely covered; no way could he get the monsters to funnel through it. Another was too crowded with tourists. Even if the monsters ignored the mortals, that noxious gas couldn't be good for anyone to breathe. The bigger the monster herd got, the more mortals would get pushed aside, knocked into the water, or trampled.

Finally Frank saw something that would work. Just ahead, past a big piazza, a wooden bridge spanned one of the widest canals. The bridge itself was a latticed arc of timber, like an old-fashioned roller coaster, about fifty meters long.

From above, in eagle form, Frank saw no monsters on the far side. Every *katobleps* in Venice seemed to have joined the herd and was pushing through the streets behind him as tourists screamed and scattered, maybe thinking they were caught in the midst of a stray dog stampede.

The bridge was empty of foot traffic. It was perfect.

Frank dropped like a stone and turned back to human form. He ran to the middle of the bridge—a natural choke point—and threw his bait of poisonous roots on the deck behind him.

As the front of the *katobleps* herd reached the base of the bridge, Frank drew Hazel's golden *spatha*.

"Come on!" he yelled. "You want to know what Frank Zhang is worth? Come on!" He realized he wasn't just shouting at the monsters. He was venting weeks of fear, rage, and resentment. The voices of Mars and Ares screamed right along with him.

The monsters charged. Frank's vision turned red.

Later, he couldn't remember the details clearly. He sliced through monsters until he was ankle-deep in yellow dust. Whenever he got overwhelmed and the clouds of gas began to choke him, he changed shape—became an elephant, a dragon, a lion—and each transformation seemed to clear his lungs, giving him a fresh burst of energy. His shape-shifting became so fluid, he could start an attack in human form with his sword and finish as a lion, raking his claws across a

katobleps's snout.

The monsters kicked with their hooves. They breathed noxious gas and glared straight at Frank with their poisonous eyes. He should have died. He should have been trampled. But somehow, he stayed on his feet, unharmed, and unleashed a hurricane of violence.

He didn't feel any sort of pleasure in this, but he didn't hesitate, either. He stabbed one monster and beheaded another. He turned into a dragon and bit a *katobleps* in half, then changed into an elephant and trampled three at once under his feet. His vision was still tinted red, and he realized his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. He was actually glowing—surrounded by a rosy aura.

He didn't understand why, but he kept fighting until there was only one monster left.

Frank faced it with his sword drawn. He was out of breath, sweaty, and caked in monster dust, but he was unharmed.

The *katobleps* snarled. It must not have been the smartest monster. Despite the fact that several hundred of its brethren had just died, it did not back down.

“Mars!” Frank yelled. “I've proven myself. Now I need a snake!” Frank doubted anyone had ever shouted those words before. It was kind of a weird request. He got no answer from the skies. For once, the voices in his head were silent.

The *katobleps* lost patience. It launched itself at Frank and left him no choice. He slashed upward. As soon as his blade hit the monster, the *katobleps* disappeared in a flash of blood-red light.

When Frank's vision cleared, a mottled brown Burmese python was coiled at his feet.

“Well done,” said a familiar voice.

Standing a few feet away was his dad, Mars, wearing a red beret and olive fatigues with the insignia of the Italian Special Forces, an assault rifle slung over his shoulder. His face was hard and angular, his eyes covered with dark sunglasses.

“Father,” Frank managed.

He couldn’t believe what he’d just done. The terror started to catch up to him. He felt like sobbing, but he guessed that would not be a good idea in front of Mars.

“It’s natural to feel fear.” The war god’s voice was surprisingly warm, full of pride. “All great warriors are afraid. Only the stupid and the delusional are not. But you faced your fear, my son. You did what you had to do, like Horatius. This was your bridge, and you defended it.”

“I—” Frank wasn’t sure what to say. “I...I just needed a snake.” A tiny smile tugged at Mars’s mouth. “Yes. And now you have one. Your bravery has united my forms, Greek and Roman, if only for a moment. Go. Save your friends. But hear me, Frank. Your greatest test is yet to come. When you face the armies of Gaea at Epirus, your leadership—” Suddenly the god doubled over, clutching his head. His form flickered. His fatigues turned into a toga, then a biker’s jacket and jeans. His rifle changed into a sword and then a rocket launcher.

“Agony!” Mars bellowed. “Go! Hurry!”

Frank didn’t ask questions. Despite his exhaustion, he turned into a giant eagle, snatched up the python in his massive claws, and launched himself into the air.

When he glanced back, a miniature mushroom cloud erupted from the middle of the bridge, rings of fire washing outward, and a pair of voices—Mars and Ares—screamed, “Noooo!” Frank wasn’t sure what had just happened, but he had no time to think about it. He flew over the city—now completely empty of monsters—and headed for the house of Triptolemus.

“You found one!” the farmer god exclaimed.

Frank ignored him. He stormed into La Casa Nera, dragging the python by its tail like a very strange Santa Claus bag, and dropped it next to the bed.

He knelt at Hazel’s side.

She was still alive—green and shivering, barely breathing, but alive. As for Nico, he was still a corn plant.

“Heal them,” Frank said. “Now.”

Triptolemus crossed his arms. “How do I know the snake will work?” Frank gritted his teeth. Since the explosion on the bridge, the voices of the war god had gone silent in his head, but he still felt their combined anger churning inside him. He felt physically different, too. Had Triptolemus gotten shorter?

“The snake is a gift from Mars,” Frank growled. “It will work.” As if on cue, the Burmese python slithered over to the chariot and wrapped itself around the right wheel. The other snake woke up. The two serpents checked each other out, touching noses, then turned their wheels in unison. The chariot inched forward, its wings flapping.

“You see?” Frank said. “Now, heal my friends!”

Triptolemus tapped his chin. “Well, thank you for the snake, but I’m not sure I like your tone, demigod. Perhaps I’ll turn you into—”

Frank was faster. He lunged at Trip and slammed him into the wall, his fingers locked around the god’s throat.

“Think about your next words,” Frank warned, deadly calm. “Or instead of beating my sword into a plowshare, I will beat it into your head.”

Triptolemus gulped. “You know...I think I’ll heal your friends.”

“Swear it on the River Styx.”

“I swear it on the River Styx.”

Frank released him. Triptolemus touched his throat, as if making sure it was still there. He gave Frank a nervous smile, edged around him, and scurried off to the front room. “Just—just gathering herbs!”

Frank watched as the god picked leaves and roots and crushed them in a mortar. He rolled a pill-sized ball of green goop and jogged to Hazel’s side. He placed the gunk ball under Hazel’s tongue.

Instantly, she shuddered and sat up, coughing. Her eyes flew open. The greenish tint in her skin disappeared.

She looked around, bewildered, until she saw Frank. “What—?” Frank tackled her in a hug. “You’re going to be fine,” he said fiercely. “Everything is fine.”

“But...” Hazel gripped his shoulders and stared at him in amazement. “Frank, what *happened* to you?”

“To *me*?” He stood, suddenly self-conscious. “I don’t...” He looked down and realized what she meant. Triptolemus hadn’t gotten shorter. Frank was taller. His gut had shrunk. His chest seemed bulkier.

Frank had had growth spurts before. Once he’d woken up two centimeters taller than when he’d gone to sleep. But this was nuts. It was as if some of the dragon and lion had stayed with him when he’d turned back to human.

“Uh...I don’t...Maybe I can fix it.”

Hazel laughed with delight. “Why? You look amazing!”

“I—I do?”

“I mean, you were handsome before! But you look older, and taller, and so distinguished—” Triptolemus heaved a dramatic sigh. “Yes, obviously some sort of blessing from Mars.

Congratulations, blah, blah, blah. Now, if we’re done here...?” Frank glared at him. “We’re not done. Heal Nico.”

The farm god rolled his eyes. He pointed at the corn plant, and BAM! Nico di Angelo appeared in an explosion of corn silk.

Nico looked around in a panic. “I—I had the weirdest nightmare about popcorn.” He frowned at Frank. “Why are you *taller*?”

“Everything’s fine,” Frank promised. “Triptolemus was about to tell us how to survive the House of Hades. Weren’t you, Trip?”

The farm god raised his eyes to the ceiling, like, *Why me, Demeter?*

“Fine,” Trip said. “When you arrive at Epirus, you will be offered a chalice to drink from.”

“Offered by whom?” Nico asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Trip snapped. “Just know that it is filled with deadly poison.” Hazel shuddered. “So you’re saying that we shouldn’t drink it.”

“No!” Trip said. “You *must* drink it, or you’ll never be able to make it through the temple. The poison connects you to the world of the dead, lets you pass into the lower levels. The secret to surviving is”—his eyes twinkled— “*barley*.”

Frank stared at him. “Barley.”

“In the front room, take some of my special barley. Make it into little cakes. Eat these before you step into the House of Hades. The barley will absorb the worst of the poison, so it will *affect* you, but not kill you.”

“That’s it?” Nico demanded. “Hecate sent us halfway across Italy so you could tell us to eat barley?”

“Good luck!” Triptolemus sprinted across the room and hopped in his chariot. “And, Frank Zhang, I forgive you! You’ve got spunk. If you ever change your mind, my offer is open. I’d love to see you get a degree in farming!”

“Yeah,” Frank muttered. “Thanks.”

The god pulled a lever on his chariot. The snake-wheels turned. The wings flapped. At the back of the room, the garage doors rolled open.

“Oh, to be mobile again!” Trip cried. “So many ignorant lands in need of my knowledge. I will teach them the glories of tilling, irrigation, fertilizing!” The chariot lifted off and zipped out of the house, Triptolemus shouting to the sky, “Away, my serpents! Away!”

“That,” Hazel said, “was very strange.”

“The glories of fertilizing.” Nico brushed some corn silk off his shoulder. “Can we get out of here now?”

Hazel put her hand on Frank’s shoulder. “Are you okay, really? You bartered for our lives. What did Triptolemus make you do?”

Frank tried to hold it together. He scolded himself for feeling so weak. He could face an army of monsters, but as soon as Hazel showed him kindness, he wanted to break down and cry. “Those cow monsters...the *katoblepones* that poisoned you...I had to destroy them.”

“That was brave,” Nico said. “There must have been, what, six or seven left in that herd.”

“No.” Frank cleared his throat. “All of them. I killed *all* of them in the city.” Nico and Hazel stared at him in stunned silence. Frank was afraid they might doubt him, or start to laugh. How many monsters had he killed on that bridge—two hundred? Three hundred?

But he saw in their eyes that they believed him. They were children of the Underworld. Maybe they could sense the death and carnage he’d unleashed.

Hazel kissed his cheek. She had to stand on her tiptoes to do it now. Her eyes were incredibly sad, as if she realized something had changed in Frank—something much more important than the physical growth spurt.

Frank knew it too. He would never be the same. He just wasn’t sure if that was a good thing.

“Well,” Nico said, breaking the tension, “does anyone know what barley looks like?”

ANNABETH

ANNABETH DECIDED THE MONSTERS wouldn't kill her. Neither would the poisonous atmosphere, nor the treacherous landscape with its pits, cliffs, and jagged rocks.

Nope. Most likely she would die from an overload of *weirdness* that would make her brain explode.

First, she and Percy had had to drink fire to stay alive. Then they were attacked by a gaggle of vampires, led by a cheerleader Annabeth had killed two years ago. Finally, they were rescued by a Titan janitor named Bob who had Einstein hair, silver eyes, and wicked broom skills.

Sure. Why not?

They followed Bob through the wasteland, tracing the route of the Phlegethon as they approached the storm front of darkness. Every so often they stopped to drink firewater, which kept them alive, but Annabeth wasn't happy about it. Her throat felt like she was constantly gargling with battery acid.

Her only comfort was Percy. Every so often he would glance over and smile, or squeeze her hand. He had to be just as scared and miserable as she was, and she loved him for trying to make her feel better.

"Bob knows what he's doing," Percy promised.

“You have interesting friends,” Annabeth murmured.

“Bob is interesting!” The Titan turned and grinned. “Yes, thank you!” The big guy had good ears. Annabeth would have to remember that.

“So, Bob...” She tried to sound casual and friendly, which wasn’t easy with a throat scorched by firewater. “How did you get to Tartarus?”

“I jumped,” he said, like it was obvious.

“You jumped into Tartarus,” she said, “because Percy said your name?”

“He needed me.” Those silver eyes gleamed in the darkness. “It is okay. I was tired of sweeping the palace. Come along! We are almost at a rest stop.”

A rest stop.

Annabeth couldn’t imagine what those words meant in Tartarus. She remembered all the times she, Luke, and Thalia had relied on highway rest stops when they were homeless demigods, trying to survive.

Wherever Bob was taking them, she hoped it had clean restrooms and a snack machine. She repressed the giggles. Yes, she was definitely losing it.

Annabeth hobbled along, trying to ignore the rumble in her stomach. She stared at Bob’s back as he led them toward the wall of darkness, now only a few hundred yards away. His blue janitor’s coveralls were ripped between the shoulder blades, as if someone had tried to stab him. Cleaning rags stuck out of his pocket. A squirt bottle swung from his belt, the blue liquid inside sloshing hypnotically.

Annabeth remembered Percy’s story about meeting the Titan. Thalia Grace, Nico di Angelo, and Percy had worked together to defeat Bob on the banks of the Lethe. After wiping his memory, they didn’t have the heart to kill him. He became so gentle and sweet and cooperative that they left him at the palace of Hades, where Persephone promised he would be looked after.

Apparently, the Underworld king and queen thought “looking after” someone meant giving him a broom and having him sweep up their messes. Annabeth wondered how even Hades could be so callous. She’d never felt sorry for a Titan

before, but it didn't seem right taking a brainwashed immortal and turning him into an unpaid janitor.

He's not your friend, she reminded herself.

She was terrified that Bob would suddenly remember himself. Tartarus was where monsters came to regenerate. What if it healed his memory? If he became Iapetus again...well, Annabeth had seen the way he had dealt with those *empousai*. Annabeth had no weapon. She and Percy were in no condition to fight a Titan.

She glanced nervously at Bob's broom handle, wondering how long it would be before that hidden spearhead jutted out and got pointed at her.

Following Bob through Tartarus was a crazy risk. Unfortunately, she couldn't think of a better plan.

They picked their way across the ashen wasteland as red lightning flashed overhead in the poisonous clouds. Just another lovely day in the dungeon of creation. Annabeth couldn't see far in the hazy air, but the longer they walked, the more certain she became that the entire landscape was a downward curve.

She'd heard conflicting descriptions of Tartarus. It was a bottomless pit. It was a fortress surrounded by brass walls. It was nothing but an endless void.

One story described it as the inverse of the sky—a huge, hollow, upside-down dome of rock.

That seemed the most accurate, though if Tartarus was a dome, Annabeth guessed it was like the sky

—with no real bottom but made of multiple layers, each one darker and less hospitable than the last.

And even *that* wasn't the full, horrible truth....

They passed a blister in the ground—a writhing, translucent bubble the size of a minivan. Curled inside was the half-formed body of a drakon. Bob speared the blister without a second thought. It burst in a geyser of steaming yellow slime, and the drakon dissolved into nothing.

Bob kept walking.

Monsters are zits on the skin of Tartarus, Annabeth thought. She shuddered. Sometimes she wished she didn't have such a good imagination, because now she was certain they were walking across a living thing. This whole twisted landscape—the dome, pit, or whatever you called it—was the body of the god Tartarus—the most ancient incarnation of evil. Just as Gaea inhabited the surface of the earth, Tartarus inhabited the pit.

If that god noticed them walking across his skin, like fleas on a dog...Enough. No more thinking.

“Here,” Bob said.

They stopped at the top of a ridge. Below them, in a sheltered depression like a moon crater, stood a ring of broken black marble columns surrounding a dark stone altar.

“Hermes's shrine,” Bob explained.

Percy frowned. “A Hermes shrine in *Tartarus*?”

Bob laughed in delight. “Yes. It fell from somewhere long ago. Maybe mortal world. Maybe Olympus. Anyway, monsters steer clear. Mostly.”

“How did you know it was here?” Annabeth asked.

Bob's smile faded. He got a vacant look in his eyes. “Can't remember.”

“That's okay,” Percy said quickly.

Annabeth felt like kicking herself. Before Bob became Bob, he had been Iapetus the Titan. Like all his brethren, he'd been imprisoned in Tartarus for eons. Of *course* he knew his way around. If he remembered this shrine, he might start recalling other details of his old prison and his old life. That would *not* be good.

They climbed into the crater and entered the circle of columns. Annabeth collapsed on a broken slab of marble, too exhausted to take another step. Percy stood over her protectively, scanning their surroundings. The inky storm front was less than a hundred feet away now, obscuring everything ahead of them.

The crater's rim blocked their view of the wasteland behind. They'd be well hidden here, but if monsters *did* stumble across them, they would have no warning.

"You said someone was chasing us," Annabeth said. "Who?" Bob swept his broom around the base of the altar, occasionally crouching to study the ground as if looking for something. "They are following, yes. They know you are here. Giants and Titans. The defeated ones. They know."

The defeated ones...

Annabeth tried to control her fear. How many Titans and giants had she and Percy fought over the years? Each one had seemed like an impossible challenge. If *all* of them were down here in Tartarus, and if they were actively hunting Percy and Annabeth...

"Why are we stopping, then?" she said. "We should keep moving."

"Soon," Bob said. "But mortals need rest. Good place here. Best place for...oh, long, long way.

I will guard you."

Annabeth glanced at Percy, sending him the silent message: *Uh, no*. Hanging out with a Titan was bad enough. Going to sleep while the Titan guarded you...she didn't need to be a daughter of Athena to know that was one hundred percent unwise.

"You sleep," Percy told her. "I'll keep the first watch with Bob." Bob rumbled in agreement. "Yes, good. When you wake, food should be here!" Annabeth's stomach did a rollover at the mention of food. She didn't see how Bob could summon food in the midst of Tartarus. Maybe he was a caterer as well as a janitor.

She didn't want to sleep, but her body betrayed her. Her eyelids turned to lead. "Percy, wake me for second watch. Don't be a hero."

He gave her that smirk she'd come to love. "Who, me?"

He kissed her, his lips parched and feverishly warm. "Sleep." Annabeth felt like

she was back in the Hypnos cabin at Camp Half-Blood, overcome with drowsiness. She curled up on the hard ground and closed her eyes.

X X I I

ANNABETH

LATER, SHE MADE A RESOLUTION: Never *EVER* sleep in Tartarus.

Demigod dreams were always bad. Even in the safety of her bunk at camp, she'd had horrible nightmares. In Tartarus, they were a thousand times more vivid.

First, she was a little girl again, struggling to climb Half-Blood Hill. Luke Castellan held her hand, pulling her along. Their satyr guide Grover Underwood pranced nervously at the summit, yelling, "Hurry! Hurry!"

Thalia Grace stood behind them, holding back an army of hellhounds with her terror-invoking shield, Aegis.

From the top of the hill, Annabeth could see the camp in the valley below—the warm lights of the cabins, the possibility of sanctuary. She stumbled, twisting her ankle, and Luke scooped her up to carry her. When they looked back, the monsters were only a few yards away—dozens of them surrounding Thalia.

"Go!" Thalia yelled. "I'll hold them off."

She brandished her spear, and forked lightning slashed through the monsters' ranks; but as the hellhounds fell, more took their place.

“We have to run!” Grover cried.

He led the way into camp. Luke followed, with Annabeth crying, beating at his chest, and screaming that they couldn’t leave Thalia alone. But it was too late.

The scene shifted.

Annabeth was older, climbing to the summit of Half-Blood Hill. Where Thalia had made her last stand, a tall pine tree now rose. Overhead a storm was raging.

Thunder shook the valley. A blast of lightning split the tree down to its roots, opening a smoking crevice. In the darkness below stood Reyna, the praetor of New Rome. Her cloak was the color of blood fresh from a vein. Her gold armor glinted. She stared up, her face regal and distant, and spoke directly into Annabeth’s mind.

You have done well, Reyna said, but the voice was Athena’s. *The rest of my journey must be on the wings of Rome.*

The praetor’s dark eyes turned as gray as storm clouds.

I must stand here, Reyna told her. *The Roman must bring me.*

The hill shook. The ground rippled as the grass became folds of silk—the dress of a massive goddess. Gaea rose over Camp Half-Blood—her sleeping face as large as a mountain.

Hellhounds poured over the hills. Giants, six-armed Earthborn, and wild Cyclopes charged from the beach, tearing down the dining pavilion, setting fire to the cabins and the Big House.

Hurry, said the voice of Athena. *The message must be sent.*

The ground split at Annabeth’s feet and she fell into darkness.

Her eyes flew open. She cried out, grasping Percy’s arms. She was still in Tartarus, at the shrine of Hermes.

“It’s okay,” Percy promised. “Bad dreams?”

Her body tingled with dread. “Is it—is it my turn to watch?”

“No, no. We’re good. I let you sleep.”

“Percy!”

“Hey, it’s fine. Besides, I was too excited to sleep. Look.” Bob the Titan sat cross-legged by the altar, happily munching a piece of pizza.

Annabeth rubbed her eyes, wondering if she was still dreaming. “Is that... pepperoni?”

“Burnt offerings,” Percy said. “Sacrifices to Hermes from the mortal world, I guess. They appeared in a cloud of smoke. We’ve got half a hot dog, some grapes, a plate of roast beef, and a package of peanut M&M’s.”

“M&M’s for Bob!” Bob said happily. “Uh, that okay?”

Annabeth didn’t protest. Percy brought her the plate of roast beef, and she wolfed it down. She’d never tasted anything so good. The brisket was still hot, with exactly the same spicy sweet glaze as the barbecue at Camp Half-Blood.

“I know,” said Percy, reading her expression. “I think it *is* from Camp Half-Blood.” The idea made Annabeth giddy with homesickness. At every meal, the campers would burn a portion of their food to honor their godly parents. The smoke supposedly pleased the gods, but Annabeth had never thought about where the food went when it was burned. Maybe the offerings reappeared on the gods’ altars in Olympus...or even here, in the middle of Tartarus.

“Peanut M&M’s,” Annabeth said. “Connor Stoll always burned a pack for his dad at dinner.” She thought about sitting in the dining pavilion, watching the sunset over Long Island Sound. That was the first place she and Percy had truly kissed. Her eyes smarted.

Percy put his hand on her shoulder. “Hey, this is *good*. Actual food from home, right?” She nodded. They finished eating in silence.

Bob chomped down the last of his M&M’s. “Should go now. They will be here in a few minutes.”

“A few *minutes*?” Annabeth reached for her dagger, then remembered she didn’t have it.

“Yes...well, I *think* minutes...” Bob scratched his silvery hair. “Time is hard in Tartarus. Not the same.”

Percy crept to the edge of the crater. He peered back the way they’d come. “I don’t see anything, but that doesn’t mean much. Bob, which giants are we talking about? Which Titans?” Bob grunted. “Not sure of names. Six, maybe seven. I can sense them.”

“*Six or seven?*” Annabeth wasn’t sure her barbecue would stay down. “And can they sense *you*?”

“Don’t know.” Bob smiled. “Bob is different! But they can smell demigods, yes. You two smell very strong. Good strong. Like...hmm. Like buttery bread!”

“Buttery bread,” Annabeth said. “Well, that’s great.”

Percy climbed back to the altar. “Is it possible to kill a giant in Tartarus? I mean, since we don’t have a god to help us?”

He looked at Annabeth as if she actually had an answer.

“Percy, I don’t know. Traveling in Tartarus, fighting monsters here...it’s never been done before. Maybe Bob could help us kill a giant? Maybe a Titan would count as a god? I just don’t know.”

“Yeah,” Percy said. “Okay.”

She could see the worry in his eyes. For years, he’d depended on her for answers. Now, when he needed her most, she couldn’t help. She hated being so clueless, but nothing she’d ever learned at camp had prepared her for Tartarus. There was only one thing she was sure of: they had to keep moving. They couldn’t be caught by six or seven hostile immortals.

She stood, still disoriented from her nightmares. Bob started cleaning up, collecting their trash in a little pile, using his squirt bottle to wipe off the altar.

“Where to now?” Annabeth asked.

Percy pointed at the stormy wall of darkness. “Bob says that way. Apparently the Doors of Death

—”

“You *told* him?” Annabeth didn’t mean it to come out so harsh, but Percy winced.

“While you were asleep,” he admitted. “Annabeth, Bob can help. We need a guide.”

“Bob helps!” Bob agreed. “Into the Dark Lands. The Doors of Death...hmm, walking straight to them would be bad. Too many monsters gathered there. Even Bob could not sweep that many. They would kill Percy and Annabeth in about two seconds.” The Titan frowned. “I *think* seconds. Time is hard in Tartarus.”

“Right,” Annabeth grumbled. “So is there another way?”

“Hiding,” said Bob. “The Death Mist could hide you.”

“Oh...” Annabeth suddenly felt very small in the shadow of the Titan. “Uh, what is Death Mist?”

“It is dangerous,” Bob said. “But if the lady will give you Death Mist, it might hide you. If we can avoid Night. The lady is *very* close to Night. That is bad.”

“The lady,” Percy repeated.

“Yes.” Bob pointed ahead of them into the inky blackness. “We should go.” Percy glanced at Annabeth, obviously hoping for guidance, but she had none. She was thinking about her nightmare—Thalia’s tree splintered by lightning, Gaea rising on the hillside and unleashing her monsters on Camp Half-Blood.

“Okay, then,” Percy said. “I guess we’ll see a lady about some Death Mist.”

“Wait,” Annabeth said.

Her mind was buzzing. She thought of her dream about Luke and Thalia. She recalled the stories Luke had told her about his father, Hermes—god of travelers, guide to the spirits of the dead, god of communication.

She stared at the black altar.

“Annabeth?” Percy sounded concerned.

She walked to the pile of trash and picked out a reasonably clean paper napkin.

She remembered her vision of Reyna, standing in the smoking crevice beneath the ruins of Thalia’s pine tree, speaking with the voice of Athena:

I must stand here. The Roman must bring me.

Hurry. The message must be sent.

“Bob,” she said, “offerings burned in the mortal world appear on this altar, right?” Bob frowned uncomfortably, like he wasn’t ready for a pop quiz. “Yes?”

“So what happens if I burn something on the altar here?”

“Uh...”

“That’s all right,” Annabeth said. “You don’t know. Nobody knows, because it’s never been done.”

There was a chance, she thought, just the slimmest chance that an offering burned on this altar might appear at Camp Half-Blood.

Doubtful, but if it *did* work...

“Annabeth?” Percy said again. “You’re planning something. You’ve got that *I’m-planning-something* look.”

“I don’t have an *I’m-planning-something* look.”

“Yeah, you totally do. Your eyebrows knit and your lips press together and—”

“Do you have a pen?” she asked him.

“You’re kidding, right?” He brought out Riptide.

“Yes, but can you actually write with it?”

“I—I don’t know,” he admitted. “Never tried.”

He uncapped the pen. As usual, it sprang into a full-sized sword. Annabeth had watched him do this hundreds of times. Normally when he fought, Percy simply discarded the cap. It always appeared in his pocket later, as needed. When he touched the cap to the point of the sword, it would turn back into a ballpoint pen.

“What if you touch the cap to the other end of the sword?” Annabeth said. “Like where you’d put the cap if you were actually going to write with the pen.”

“Uh...” Percy looked doubtful, but he touched the cap to the hilt of the sword. Riptide shrank back into a ballpoint pen, but now the writing point was exposed.

“May I?” Annabeth plucked it from his hand. She flattened the napkin against the altar and began to write. Riptide’s ink glowed Celestial bronze.

“What are you doing?” Percy asked.

“Sending a message,” Annabeth said. “I just hope Rachel gets it.”

“Rachel?” Percy asked. “You mean *our* Rachel? Oracle of Delphi Rachel?”

“That’s the one.” Annabeth suppressed a smile.

Whenever she brought up Rachel’s name, Percy got nervous. At one point, Rachel had been interested in dating Percy. That was ancient history. Rachel and Annabeth were good friends now. But Annabeth didn’t mind making Percy a little uneasy. You had to keep your boyfriend on his toes.

Annabeth finished her note and folded the napkin. On the outside, she wrote:
Connor,

Give this to Rachel. Not a prank. Don’t be a moron.

Love,

Annabeth

She took a deep breath. She was asking Rachel Dare to do something ridiculously dangerous, but it was the only way she could think of to

communicate with the Romans—the only way that might avoid bloodshed.

“Now I just need to burn it,” she said. “Anybody got a match?” The point of Bob’s spear shot from his broom handle. It sparked against the altar and erupted in silvery fire.

“Uh, thanks.” Annabeth lit the napkin and set it on the altar. She watched it crumble to ash and wondered if she was crazy. Could the smoke really make it out of Tartarus?

“We should go now,” Bob advised. “Really, really go. Before we are killed.” Annabeth stared at the wall of blackness in front of them. Somewhere in there was a lady who dispensed a Death Mist that *might* hide them from monsters—a plan recommended by a Titan, one of their bitterest enemies. Another dose of weirdness to explode her brain.

“Right,” she said. “I’m ready.”

X X I I I

ANNABETH

ANNABETH LITERALLY STUMBLED over the second Titan.

After entering the storm front, they plodded on for what seemed like hours, relying on the light of Percy’s Celestial bronze blade, and on Bob, who glowed faintly in the dark like some sort of crazy janitor angel.

Annabeth could only see about five feet in front of her. In a strange way, the Dark Lands reminded her of San Francisco, where her dad lived—on those summer afternoons when the fog bank rolled in like cold, wet packing material and swallowed Pacific Heights. Except here in Tartarus, the fog was made of ink.

Rocks loomed out of nowhere. Pits appeared at their feet, and Annabeth barely avoided falling in. Monstrous roars echoed in the gloom, but Annabeth couldn't tell where they came from. All she could be certain of was that the terrain was still sloping down.

Down seemed to be the only direction allowed in Tartarus. If Annabeth backtracked even a step, she felt tired and heavy, as if gravity were increasing to discourage her. Assuming that the entire pit *was* the body of Tartarus, Annabeth had a nasty feeling they were marching straight down his throat.

She was so preoccupied with that thought, she didn't notice the ledge until it was too late.

Percy yelled, "Whoa!" He grabbed for her arm, but she was already falling.

Fortunately, it was only a shallow depression. Most of it was filled with a monster blister. She had a soft landing on a warm bouncy surface and was feeling lucky—until she opened her eyes and found herself staring through a glowing gold membrane at another, much larger face.

She screamed and flailed, toppling sideways off the mound. Her heart did a hundred jumping jacks.

Percy helped her to her feet. "You okay?"

She didn't trust herself to answer. If she opened her mouth, she might scream again, and that would be undignified. She was a daughter of Athena, not some shrill girlie victim in a horror movie.

But gods of Olympus... Curled in the membrane bubble in front of her was a fully formed Titan in golden armor, his skin the color of polished pennies. His eyes were closed, but he scowled so deeply he appeared to be on the verge of a bloodcurdling war cry. Even through the blister, Annabeth could feel the heat radiating from his body.

“Hyperion,” Percy said. “I hate that guy.”

Annabeth’s shoulder suddenly ached from an old wound. During the Battle of Manhattan, Percy had fought this Titan at the Reservoir—water against fire. It had been the first time Percy had summoned a hurricane—which wasn’t something Annabeth would ever forget. “I thought Grover turned this guy into a maple tree.”

“Yeah,” Percy agreed. “Maybe the maple tree died, and he wound up back here?” Annabeth remembered how Hyperion had summoned fiery explosions, and how many satyrs and nymphs he’d destroyed before Percy and Grover stopped him.

She was about to suggest that they burst Hyperion’s bubble before he woke up. He looked ready to pop out at any moment and start charbroiling everything in his path.

Then she glanced at Bob. The silvery Titan was studying Hyperion with a frown of concentration

—maybe recognition. Their faces looked so much alike....

Annabeth bit back a curse. Of course they looked alike. Hyperion was his *brother*. Hyperion was the Titan lord of the east. Iapetus, Bob, was the lord of the west. Take away Bob’s broom and his janitor’s clothes, put him in armor and cut his hair, change his color scheme from silver to gold, and Iapetus would have been almost indistinguishable from Hyperion.

“Bob,” she said, “we should go.”

“Gold, not silver,” Bob murmured. “But he looks like me.”

“Bob,” Percy said. “Hey, buddy, over here.”

The Titan reluctantly turned.

“Am I your friend?” Percy asked.

“Yes.” Bob sounded dangerously uncertain. “We are friends.”

“You know that some monsters are good,” Percy said. “And some are bad.”

“Hmm,” Bob said. “Like...the pretty ghost ladies who serve Persephone are good. Exploding zombies are bad.”

“Right,” Percy said. “And some mortals are good, and some are bad. Well, the same thing is true for Titans.”

“Titans...” Bob loomed over them, glowering. Annabeth was pretty sure her boyfriend had just made a big mistake.

“That’s what you are,” Percy said calmly. “Bob the Titan. You’re good. You’re awesome, in fact. But some Titans are not. This guy here, Hyperion, is full-on bad. He tried to kill me...tried to kill a lot of people.”

Bob blinked his silver eyes. “But he looks...his face is so—”

“He looks like you,” Percy agreed. “He’s a Titan, like you. But he’s not good like you are.”

“Bob is good.” His fingers tightened on his broom handle. “Yes. There is always at least one good one—monsters, Titans, giants.”

“Uh...” Percy grimaced. “Well, I’m not sure about the giants.”

“Oh, yes.” Bob nodded earnestly.

Annabeth sensed they’d already been in this place too long. Their pursuers would be closing in.

“We should go,” she urged. “What do we do about...?”

“Bob,” Percy said, “it’s your call. Hyperion is your kind. We could leave him alone, but if he wakes up—”

Bob’s broom-spear swept into motion. If he’d been aiming at Annabeth or Percy, they would’ve been cut in half. Instead, Bob slashed through the monstrous blister, which burst in a geyser of hot golden mud.

Annabeth wiped the Titan sludge out of her eyes. Where Hyperion had been,

there was nothing but a smoking crater.

“Hyperion is a bad Titan,” Bob announced, his expression grim. “Now he can’t hurt my friends.

He will have to re-form somewhere else in Tartarus. Hopefully it will take a long time.” The Titan’s eyes seemed brighter than usual, as if he were about to cry quicksilver.

“Thank you, Bob,” Percy said.

How was he keeping his cool? The way he talked to Bob left Annabeth awestruck...and maybe a little uneasy, too. If Percy had been serious about leaving the choice to Bob, then she didn’t like how much he trusted the Titan. If he’d been manipulating Bob into making that choice...well, then, Annabeth was stunned that Percy could be so calculating.

He met her eyes, but she couldn’t read his expression. That bothered her too.

“We’d better keep going,” he said.

She and Percy followed Bob, the golden mud flecks from Hyperion’s burst bubble glowing on his janitor’s uniform.

X X I V

ANNABETH

AFTER A WHILE, Annabeth's feet felt like Titan mush. She marched along, following Bob, listening to the monotonous slosh of liquid in his cleaning bottle.

Stay alert, she told herself, but it was hard. Her thoughts were as numb as her legs. From time to time, Percy took her hand or made an encouraging comment; but she could tell the dark landscape was getting to him as well. His eyes had a dull sheen—like his spirit was being slowly extinguished.

He fell into Tartarus to be with you, said a voice in her head. *If he dies, it will be your fault.*

“Stop it,” she said aloud.

Percy frowned. “What?”

“No, not you.” She tried for a reassuring smile, but she couldn't quite muster one. “Talking to myself. This place...it's messing with my mind. Giving me dark thoughts.” The worry lines deepened around Percy's sea-green eyes. “Hey, Bob, where exactly are we heading?”

“The lady,” Bob said. “Death Mist.”

Annabeth fought down her irritation. “But what does that mean? Who is this lady?”

“Naming her?” Bob glanced back. “Not a good idea.”

Annabeth sighed. The Titan was right. Names had power, and speaking them here in Tartarus was probably very dangerous.

“Can you at least tell us how far?” she asked.

“I do not know,” Bob admitted. “I can only feel it. We wait for the darkness to get darker. Then we go sideways.”

“Sideways,” Annabeth muttered. “Naturally.”

She was tempted to ask for a rest, but she didn't want to stop. Not here in this cold, dark place.

The black fog seeped into her body, turning her bones into moist Styrofoam.

She wondered if her message would get to Rachel Dare. If Rachel could somehow carry her proposal to Reyna without getting killed in the process...

A ridiculous hope, said the voice in her head. You have only put Rachel in danger. Even if she finds the Romans, why should Reyna trust you after all that has happened?

Annabeth was tempted to shout back at the voice, but she resisted. Even if she were going crazy, she didn't want to *look* like she was going crazy.

She desperately needed something to lift her spirits. A drink of actual water. A moment of sunlight. A warm bed. A kind word from her mother.

Suddenly Bob stopped. He raised his hand: *Wait*.

"What?" Percy whispered.

"Shh," Bob warned. "Ahead. Something moves."

Annabeth strained her ears. From somewhere in the fog came a deep thrumming noise, like the idling engine of a large construction vehicle. She could feel the vibrations through her shoes.

"We will surround it," Bob whispered. "Each of you, take a flank." For the millionth time, Annabeth wished she had her dagger. She picked up a chunk of jagged black obsidian and crept to the left. Percy went right, his sword ready.

Bob took the middle, his spearhead glowing in the fog.

The humming got louder, shaking the gravel at Annabeth's feet. The noise seemed to be coming from immediately in front of them.

"Ready?" Bob murmured.

Annabeth crouched, preparing to spring. "On three?"

"One," Percy whispered. "Two—"

A figure appeared in the fog. Bob raised his spear.

“Wait!” Annabeth shrieked.

Bob froze just in time, the point of his spear hovering an inch above the head of a tiny calico kitten.

“Row?” said the kitten, clearly unimpressed by their attack plan. It butted its head against Bob’s foot and purred loudly.

It seemed impossible, but the deep rumbling sound was coming from the kitten. As it purred, the ground vibrated and pebbles danced. The kitten fixed its yellow, lamp-like eyes on one particular rock, right between Annabeth’s feet, and pounced.

The cat could’ve been a demon or a horrible Underworld monster in disguise. But Annabeth couldn’t help it. She picked it up and cuddled it. The little thing was bony under its fur, but otherwise it seemed perfectly normal.

“How did...?” She couldn’t even form the question. “What is a kitten doing...?” The cat grew impatient and squirmed out of her arms. It landed with a thump, padded over to Bob, and started purring again as it rubbed against his boots.

Percy laughed. “Somebody likes you, Bob.”

“It must be a good monster.” Bob looked up nervously. “Isn’t it?” Annabeth felt a lump in her throat. Seeing the huge Titan and this tiny kitten together, she suddenly felt insignificant compared to the vastness of Tartarus. This place had no respect for anything—good or bad, small or large, wise or unwise. Tartarus swallowed Titans and demigods and kittens indiscriminately.

Bob knelt down and scooped up the cat. It fit perfectly in Bob’s palm, but it decided to explore.

It climbed the Titan’s arm, made itself at home on his shoulder, and closed its eyes, purring like an earthmover. Suddenly its fur shimmered. In a flash, the kitten became a ghostly skeleton, as if it had stepped behind an X-ray machine. Then it was a regular kitten again.

Annabeth blinked. “Did you see—?”

“Yeah.” Percy knit his eyebrows. “Oh, man...I *know* that kitten. It’s one of the

ones from the Smithsonian.”

Annabeth tried to make sense of that. She’d never been to the Smithsonian with Percy.... Then she recalled several years ago, when the Titan Atlas had captured her. Percy and Thalia had led a quest to rescue her. Along the way, they’d watched Atlas raise some skeleton warriors from dragon teeth in the Smithsonian Museum.

According to Percy, the Titan’s first attempt went wrong. He’d planted saber-toothed tiger teeth by mistake, and raised a batch of skeleton kittens from the soil.

“*That’s* one of them?” Annabeth asked. “How did it get here?” Percy spread his hands helplessly. “Atlas told his servants to take the kittens away. Maybe they destroyed the cats and they were reborn in Tartarus? I don’t know.”

“It’s cute,” Bob said, as the kitten sniffed his ear.

“But is it safe?” Annabeth asked.

The Titan scratched the kitten’s chin. Annabeth didn’t know if it was a good idea, carrying around a cat grown from a prehistoric tooth; but obviously it didn’t matter now. The Titan and the cat had bonded.

“I will call him Small Bob,” said Bob. “He is a good monster.” End of discussion. The Titan hefted his spear and they continued marching into the gloom.

Annabeth walked in a daze, trying not to think about pizza. To keep herself distracted, she watched Small Bob the kitten pacing across Bob’s shoulders and purring, occasionally turning into a glowing kitty skeleton and then back to a calico fuzz-ball.

“Here,” Bob announced.

He stopped so suddenly, Annabeth almost ran into him.

Bob stared off to their left, as if deep in thought.

“Is this the place?” Annabeth asked. “Where we go *sideways*?”

“Yes,” Bob agreed. “Darker, then sideways.”

Annabeth couldn't tell if it was actually darker, but the air did seem colder and thicker, as if they'd stepped into a different microclimate. Again she was reminded of San Francisco, where you could walk from one neighborhood to the next and the temperature might drop ten degrees. She wondered if the Titans had built their palace on Mount Tamalpais because the Bay Area reminded them of Tartarus.

What a depressing thought. Only Titans would see such a beautiful place as a potential outpost of the abyss—a hellish home away from home.

Bob struck off to the left. They followed. The air definitely got colder. Annabeth pressed against Percy for warmth. He put his arm around her. It felt good being close to him, but she couldn't relax.

They'd entered some sort of forest. Towering black trees soared into the gloom, perfectly round and bare of branches, like monstrous hair follicles. The ground was smooth and pale.

With our luck, Annabeth thought, we're marching through the armpit of Tartarus.

Suddenly her senses were on high alert, as if somebody had snapped a rubber band against the base of her neck. She rested her hand on the trunk of the nearest tree.

“What is it?” Percy raised his sword.

Bob turned and looked back, confused. “We are stopping?” Annabeth held up her hand for silence. She wasn't sure what had set her off. Nothing looked different. Then she realized the tree trunk was quivering. She wondered momentarily if it was the kitten's purr; but Small Bob had fallen asleep on Large Bob's shoulder.

A few yards away, another tree shuddered.

“Something's moving above us,” Annabeth whispered. “Gather up.” Bob and Percy closed ranks with her, standing back to back.

Annabeth strained her eyes, trying to see above them in the dark, but nothing moved.

She had almost decided she was being paranoid when the first monster dropped to the ground only five feet away.

Annabeth's first thought: *The Furies*.

The creature looked almost exactly like one: a wrinkled hag with batlike wings, brass talons, and glowing red eyes. She wore a tattered dress of black silk, and her face was twisted and ravenous, like a demonic grandmother in the mood to kill.

Bob grunted as another one dropped in front of him, and then another in front of Percy. Soon there were half a dozen surrounding them. More hissed in the trees above.

They couldn't be Furies, then. There were only *three* of those, and these winged hags didn't carry whips. That didn't comfort Annabeth. The monsters' talons looked plenty dangerous.

"What are you?" she demanded.

The arai , hissed a voice. *The curses!*

Annabeth tried to locate the speaker, but none of the demons had moved their mouths. Their eyes looked dead; their expressions were frozen, like a puppet's. The voice simply floated overhead like a movie narrator's, as if a single mind controlled all the creatures.

"What—what do you want?" Annabeth asked, trying to maintain a tone of confidence.

The voice cackled maliciously. *To curse you, of course! To destroy you a thousand times in the name of Mother Night!*

"Only a thousand times?" Percy murmured. "Oh, good...I thought we were in trouble." The circle of demon ladies closed in.

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HAZEL

EVERYTHING SMELLED LIKE POISON. Two days after leaving Venice, Hazel still couldn't get the noxious scent of *eau de cow monster* out of her nose.

The seasickness didn't help. The *Argo II* sailed down the Adriatic, a beautiful glittering expanse of blue; but Hazel couldn't appreciate it, thanks to the constant rolling of the ship. Above deck, she tried to keep her eyes fixed on the horizon—the white cliffs that always seemed just a mile or so to the east. What country was that, Croatia? She wasn't sure. She just wished she were on solid ground again.

The thing that nauseated her most was the weasel.

Last night, Hecate's pet Gale had appeared in her cabin. Hazel woke from a nightmare, thinking, What is that smell? She found a furry rodent propped on her chest, staring at her with its beady black eyes.

Nothing like waking up screaming, kicking off your covers, and dancing around your cabin while a weasel scampers between your feet, screeching and farting.

Her friends rushed to her room to see if she was okay. The weasel was difficult to explain.

Hazel could tell that Leo was trying hard not to make a joke.

In the morning, once the excitement died down, Hazel decided to visit Coach Hedge, since he could talk to animals.

She'd found his cabin door ajar and heard the coach inside, talking as if he were on the phone with someone—except they had no phones on board. Maybe he was sending a magical Iris-message?

Hazel had heard that the Greeks used those a lot.

“Sure, hon,” Hedge was saying. “Yeah, I know, baby. No, it’s great news, but —” His voice broke with emotion. Hazel suddenly felt horrible for eavesdropping.

She would’ve backed away, but Gale squeaked at her heels. Hazel knocked on the coach’s door.

Hedge poked his head out, scowling as usual, but his eyes were red.

“What?” he growled.

“Um...sorry,” Hazel said. “Are you okay?”

The coach snorted and opened his door wide. “Kinda question is that?” There was no one else in the room.

“I—” Hazel tried to remember why she was there. “I wondered if you could talk to my weasel.” The coach’s eyes narrowed. He lowered his voice. “Are we speaking in code? Is there an intruder aboard?”

“Well, sort of.”

Gale peeked out from behind Hazel’s feet and started chattering.

The coach looked offended. He chattered back at the weasel. They had what sounded like a very intense argument.

“What did she say?” Hazel asked.

“A lot of rude things,” grumbled the satyr. “The gist of it: she’s here to see how it goes.”

“How *what* goes?”

Coach Hedge stomped his hoof. “How am I supposed to know? She’s a polecat! They *never* give a straight answer. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got, uh, stuff...” He closed the door in her face.

After breakfast, Hazel stood at the port rail, trying to settle her stomach. Next to her, Gale ran up and down the railing, passing gas; but the strong wind off the Adriatic helped whisk it away.

Hazel wondered what was wrong with Coach Hedge. He must have been using an Iris-message to talk with someone, but if he’d gotten great news, why had he looked so devastated? She’d never seen him so shaken up. Unfortunately, she doubted the coach would ask for help if he needed it. He wasn’t exactly the warm and open type.

She stared at the white cliffs in the distance and thought about why Hecate had sent Gale the polecat.

She’s here to see how it goes.

Something was about to happen. Hazel would be tested.

She didn’t understand how she was supposed to learn magic with no training. Hecate expected her to defeat some super-powerful sorceress—the lady in the gold dress, whom Leo had described from his dream. But *how*?

Hazel had spent all her free time trying to figure that out. She’d stared at her *spatha*, trying to make it look like a walking stick. She’d tried to summon a cloud to hide the full moon. She’d concentrated until her eyes crossed and her ears popped, but nothing happened. She couldn’t manipulate the Mist.

The last few nights, her dreams had gotten worse. She found herself back in the Fields of Asphodel, drifting aimlessly among the ghosts. Then she was in Gaea’s cave in Alaska, where Hazel and her mother had died as the ceiling collapsed and the voice of the Earth Goddess wailed in anger.

She was on the stairs of her mother’s apartment building in New Orleans, face-to-face with her father, Pluto. His cold fingers gripped her arm. The fabric of his black wool suit writhed with imprisoned souls. He fixed her with his dark angry

eyes and said: *The dead see what they believe they will see.*

So do the living. That is the secret.

He'd never said that to her in real life. She had no idea what it meant.

The worst nightmares seemed like glimpses of the future. Hazel was stumbling through a dark tunnel while a woman's laughter echoed around her.

Control this if you can, child of Pluto, the woman taunted.

And always, Hazel dreamed about the images she'd seen at Hecate's crossroads: Leo falling through the sky; Percy and Annabeth lying unconscious, possibly dead, in front of black metal doors; and a shrouded figure looming above them—the giant Clytius wrapped in darkness.

Next to her on the rail, Gale the weasel chittered impatiently. Hazel was tempted to push the stupid rodent into the sea.

I can't even control my own dreams, she wanted to scream. *How am I supposed to control the Mist?*

She was so miserable, she didn't notice Frank until he was standing at her side.

"Feeling any better?" he asked.

He took her hand, his fingers completely covering hers. She couldn't believe how much taller he'd gotten. He had changed into so many animals, she wasn't sure why one more transformation should amaze her...but suddenly he'd grown into his weight. No one could call him pudgy or cuddly anymore. He looked like a football player, solid and strong, with a new center of gravity. His shoulders had broadened. He walked with more confidence.

What Frank had done on that bridge in Venice...Hazel was still in awe. None of them had actually seen the battle, but no one doubted it. Frank's whole bearing had changed. Even Leo had stopped making jokes at his expense.

"I'm—I'm all right," Hazel managed. "You?"

He smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "I'm, uh, *taller*. Otherwise, yeah.

I'm good. I haven't really, you know, changed inside...."

His voice held a little of the old doubt and awkwardness—the voice of *her* Frank, who always worried about being a klutz and messing up.

Hazel felt relieved. She *liked* that part of him. At first, his new appearance had shocked her.

She'd been worried that his personality had changed as well.

Now she was starting to relax about that. Despite all his strength, Frank was the same sweet guy.

He was still vulnerable. He still trusted her with his biggest weakness—the piece of magical firewood she carried in her coat pocket, next to her heart.

"I know, and I'm glad." She squeezed his hand. "It's...it's actually not *you* I'm worried about." Frank grunted. "How's Nico doing?"

She'd been thinking about *herself*, not Nico, but she followed Frank's gaze to the top of the foremast, where Nico was perched on the yardarm.

Nico claimed that he liked to keep watch because he had good eyes. Hazel knew that wasn't the reason. The top of the mast was one of the few places on board where Nico could be alone. The others had offered him the use of Percy's cabin, since Percy was...well, absent. Nico adamantly refused. He spent most of his time up in the rigging, where he didn't have to talk with the rest of the crew.

Since he'd been turned into a corn plant in Venice, he'd only gotten more reclusive and morose.

"I don't know," Hazel admitted. "He's been through a lot. Getting captured in Tartarus, being held prisoner in that bronze jar, watching Percy and Annabeth fall..."

"And promising to lead us to Epirus." Frank nodded. "I get the feeling Nico doesn't play well with others."

Frank stood up straight. He was wearing a beige T-shirt with a picture of a horse and the words *PALIO DI SIENA*. He'd only bought it a couple of days ago, but

now it was too small. When he stretched, his midriff was exposed.

Hazel realized she was staring. She quickly looked away, her face flushed.

“Nico is my only relative,” she said. “He’s not easy to like, but...thanks for being kind to him.” Frank smiled. “Hey, you put up with my grandmother in Vancouver. Talk about *not easy to like*. ”

“I loved your grandmother!”

Gale the polecat scampered up to them, farted, and ran away.

“Ugh.” Frank waved away the smell. “Why is that thing here, anyway?” Hazel was almost glad she wasn’t on dry land. As agitated as she felt, gold and gems would probably be popping up all around her feet.

“Hecate sent Gale to observe,” she said.

“Observe what?”

Hazel tried to take comfort in Frank’s presence, his new aura of solidity and strength.

“I don’t know,” she said at last. “Some kind of test.”

Suddenly the boat lurched forward.

HAZEL

HAZEL AND FRANK TUMBLED OVER EACH OTHER. Hazel accidentally gave herself the Heimlich maneuver with the pommel of her sword and curled on the deck, moaning and coughing up the taste of *katobleps* poison.

Through a fog of pain, she heard the ship's figurehead, Festus the bronze dragon, creaking in alarm and shooting fire.

Dimly, Hazel wondered if they'd hit an iceberg—but in the Adriatic, in the middle of summer?

The ship rocked to port with a massive commotion, like telephone poles snapping in half.

“Gahh!” Leo yelled somewhere behind her. “It’s eating the oars!” *What is?* Hazel wondered. She tried to stand, but something large and heavy was pinning her legs. She realized it was Frank, grumbling as he tried to extract himself from a pile of loose rope.

Everyone else was scrambling. Jason jumped over them, his sword drawn, and raced toward the stern. Piper was already on the quarterdeck, shooting food from her cornucopia and yelling, “Hey!

HEY! Eat this, ya stupid turtle!”

Turtle?

Frank helped Hazel to her feet. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Hazel lied, clutching her stomach. “Go!”

Frank sprinted up the steps, slinging off his backpack, which instantly transformed into a bow and quiver. By the time he reached the helm, he had already fired one arrow and was nocking the second.

Leo frantically worked the ship’s controls. “Oars won’t retract. Get it away! Get it away!” Up in the rigging, Nico’s face was slack with shock.

“Styx—it’s huge!” he yelled. “Port! Go port!”

Coach Hedge was the last one on deck. He compensated for that with enthusiasm. He bounded up the steps, waving his baseball bat, and without hesitation goat-galoped to the stern and leaped over the rail with a gleeful “Ha-HA!”

Hazel staggered toward the quarterdeck to join her friends. The boat shuddered. More oars snapped, and Leo yelled, “No, no, no! Dang slimy-shelled son of a mother!” Hazel reached the stern and couldn’t believe what she saw.

When she heard the word *turtle*, she thought of a cute little thing the size of a jewelry box, sitting on a rock in the middle of a fishpond. When she heard *huge*, her mind tried to adjust—okay, perhaps it was like the Galapagos tortoise she’d seen in the zoo once, with a shell big enough to ride on.

She did *not* envision a creature the size of an island. When she saw the massive dome of craggy black and brown squares, the word *turtle* simply did not compute. Its shell was more like a landmass

—hills of bone, shiny pearl valleys, kelp and moss forests, rivers of seawater trickling down the grooves of its carapace.

On the ship’s starboard side, another part of the monster rose from the water like a submarine.

Lares of Rome...was that its *head*?

Its gold eyes were the size of wading pools, with dark sideways slits for pupils. Its skin glistened like wet army camouflage—brown flecked with green and yellow. Its red, toothless mouth could've swallowed the Athena Parthenos in one bite.

Hazel watched as it snapped off half a dozen oars.

“Stop that!” Leo wailed.

Coach Hedge clambered around the turtle's shell, whacking at it uselessly with his baseball bat and yelling, “Take that! And that!”

Jason flew from the stern and landed on the creature's head. He stabbed his golden sword straight between its eyes, but the blade slipped sideways, as if the turtle's skin were greased steel.

Frank shot arrows at the monster's eyes with no success. The turtle's filmy inner eyelids blinked with uncanny precision, deflecting each shot. Piper shot cantaloupes into the water, yelling, “Fetch, ya stupid turtle!” But the turtle seemed fixated on eating the *Argo II*.

“How did it get so close?” Hazel demanded.

Leo threw his hands up in exasperation. “Must be that shell. Guess it's invisible to sonar. It's a freaking stealth turtle!”

“Can the ship fly?” Piper asked.

“With half our oars broken off?” Leo punched some buttons and spun his Archimedes sphere.

“I'll have to try something else.”

“There!” Nico yelled from above. “Can you get us to those straits?” Hazel looked where he was pointing. About half a mile to the east, a long strip of land ran parallel to the coastal cliffs. It was hard to be sure from a distance, but the stretch of water between them looked to be only twenty or thirty yards across—possibly wide enough for the *Argo II* to slip through, but definitely not wide enough for the giant turtle's shell.

“Yeah. Yeah.” Leo apparently understood. He turned the Archimedes sphere. “Jason, get away from that thing’s head! I have an idea!”

Jason was still hacking away at the turtle’s face, but when he heard Leo say *I have an idea*, he made the only smart choice. He flew away as fast as possible.

“Coach, come on!” Jason said.

“No, I got this!” Hedge said, but Jason grabbed him around the waist and took off. Unfortunately, the coach struggled so much that Jason’s sword fell out of his hand and splashed into the sea.

“Coach!” Jason complained.

“What?” Hedge said. “I was softening him up!”

The turtle head-butted the hull, almost tossing the whole crew off the port side. Hazel heard a cracking sound, like the keel had splintered.

“Just another minute,” Leo said, his hands flying over the console.

“We might not be here in another minute!” Frank fired his last arrow.

Piper yelled at the turtle, “Go away!”

For a moment, it actually worked. The turtle turned from the ship and dipped its head underwater. But then it came right back and rammed them even harder.

Jason and Coach Hedge landed on the deck.

“You all right?” Piper asked.

“Fine,” Jason muttered. “Without a weapon, but fine.”

“Fire in the shell!” Leo cried, spinning his Wii controller.

Hazel thought the stern had exploded. Jets of fire blasted out behind them, washing over the turtle’s head. The ship shot forward and threw Hazel to the deck again.

She hauled herself up and saw that the ship was bouncing over the waves at

incredible speed, trailing fire like a rocket. The turtle was already a hundred yards behind them, its head charred and smoking.

The monster bellowed in frustration and started after them, its paddle feet scooping through the water with such power that it actually started to gain on them. The entrance to the straits was still a quarter mile ahead.

“A distraction,” Leo muttered. “We’ll never make it unless we get a distraction.”

“A distraction,” Hazel repeated.

She concentrated and thought: *Arion!*

She had no idea whether it would work. But instantly, Hazel spotted something on the horizon—

a flash of light and steam. It streaked across the surface of the Adriatic. In a heartbeat, Arion stood on the quarterdeck.

Gods of Olympus, Hazel thought. I love this horse.

Arion snorted as if to say, *Of course you do. You’re not stupid.*

Hazel climbed on his back. “Piper, I could use that charmspeak of yours.”

“Once upon a time, I liked turtles,” Piper muttered, accepting a hand up. “Not anymore!” Hazel spurred Arion. He leaped over the side of the boat, hitting the water at a full gallop.

The turtle was a fast swimmer, but it couldn’t match Arion’s speed. Hazel and Piper zipped around the monster’s head, Hazel slicing with her sword, Piper shouting random commands like,

“Dive! Turn left! Look behind you!”

The sword did no damage. Each command only worked for a moment, but they were making the turtle very annoyed. Arion whinnied derisively as the turtle snapped at him, only to get a mouthful of horse vapor.

Soon the monster had completely forgotten the *Argo II*. Hazel kept stabbing at

its head. Piper kept yelling commands and using her cornucopia to bounce coconuts and roasted chickens off the turtle's eyeballs.

As soon as the *Argo II* had passed into the straits, Arion broke off his harassment. They sped after the ship, and a moment later were back on deck.

The rocket fire had extinguished, though smoking bronze exhaust vents still jutted from the stern.

The *Argo II* limped forward under sail power, but their plan had paid off. They were safely harbored in the narrow waters, with a long, rocky island to starboard and the sheer white cliffs of the mainland to port. The turtle stopped at the entrance to the straits and glared at them balefully, but it made no attempt to follow. Its shell was obviously much too wide.

Hazel dismounted and got a big hug from Frank. "Nice work out there!" he said.

Her face flushed. "Thanks."

Piper slid down next to her. "Leo, since when do we have *jet* propulsion?"

"Aw, you know..." Leo tried to look modest and failed. "Just a little something I whipped up in my spare time. Wish I could give you more than a few seconds of burn, but at least it got us out of there."

"And roasted the turtle's head," Jason said appreciatively. "So what now?"

"Kill it!" Coach said. "You even have to ask? We got enough distance. We got ballistae. Lock and load, demigods!"

Jason frowned. "Coach, first of all, you made me lose my sword."

"Hey! I didn't ask for an evac!"

"Second, I don't think the ballistae will do any good. That shell is like Nemean Lion skin. Its head isn't any softer."

"So we chuck one right down its throat," Coach said, "like you guys did with that shrimp monster thing in the Atlantic. Light it up from the inside." Frank scratched his head. "Might work. But then you've got a five-million-kilo turtle

carcass blocking the entrance to the straits. If we can't fly with the oars broken, how do we get the ship out?"

"You wait and fix the oars!" Coach said. "Or just sail the other direction, you big galoot." Frank looked confused. "What's a galoot?"

"Guys!" Nico called down from the mast. "About sailing the other direction? I don't think that's going to work."

He pointed past the prow.

A quarter mile ahead of them, the long rocky strip of land curved in and met the cliffs. The channel ended in a narrow V.

"We're not in a strait," Jason said. "We're in a dead end." Hazel got a cold feeling in her fingers and toes. On the port rail, Gale the weasel sat up on her haunches, staring at Hazel expectantly.

"This is a trap," Hazel said.

The others looked at her.

"Nah, it's fine," Leo said. "Worse that happens, we make repairs. Might take overnight, but I can get the ship flying again."

At the mouth of the inlet, the turtle roared. It didn't appear interested in leaving.

"Well..." Piper shrugged. "At least the turtle can't get us. We're safe here." That was something no demigod should ever say. The words had barely left Piper's mouth when an arrow sank into the mainmast, six inches from her face.

The crew scattered for cover, except for Piper, who stood frozen in place, gaping at the arrow that had almost pierced her nose the hard way.

"Piper, duck!" Jason whispered harshly.

But no other missiles rained down.

Frank studied the angle of the bolt in the mast and pointed toward the top of the cliffs.

“Up there,” he said. “Single shooter. See him?”

The sun was in her eyes, but Hazel spotted a tiny figure standing at the top of the ledge. His bronze armor glinted.

“Who the heck is he?” Leo demanded. “Why is he firing at us?”

“Guys?” Piper’s voice was thin and watery. “There’s a note.” Hazel hadn’t seen it before, but a parchment scroll was tied to the arrow shaft. She wasn’t sure why, but that made her angry. She stormed over and untied it.

“Uh, Hazel?” Leo said. “You sure that’s safe?”

She read the note out loud. “First line: *Stand and deliver.*”

“What does that mean?” Coach Hedge complained. “We *are* standing. Well, crouching, anyway.

And if that guy is expecting a pizza delivery, forget it!”

“There’s more,” Hazel said. “*This is a robbery. Send two of your party to the top of the cliff with all your valuables. No more than two. Leave the magic horse. No flying. No tricks. Just climb.*”

“Climb *what?*” Piper asked.

Nico pointed. “There.”

A narrow set of steps was carved into the cliff, leading to the top. The turtle, the dead-end channel, the cliff...Hazel got the feeling this was not the first time the letter writer had ambushed a ship here.

She cleared her throat and kept reading aloud: “*I do mean all your valuables. Otherwise my turtle and I will destroy you. You have five minutes.*”

“Use the catapults!” cried the coach.

“P.S.,” Hazel read, “*Don’t even think about using your catapults.*”

“Curse it!” said the coach. “This guy is good.”

“Is the note signed?” Nico asked.

Hazel shook her head. She’d heard a story back at Camp Jupiter, something about a robber who worked with a giant turtle; but as usual, as soon as she needed the information, it sat annoyingly in the back of her memory, just out of reach.

The weasel Gale watched her, waiting to see what she would do.

The test hasn’t happened yet, Hazel thought.

Distracting the turtle hadn’t been enough. Hazel hadn’t proven anything about how she could manipulate the Mist...mostly because she *couldn’t* manipulate the Mist.

Leo studied the cliff top and muttered under his breath. “That’s not a good trajectory. Even if I could arm the catapult before that guy pincushioned us with arrows, I don’t think I could make the shot. That’s hundreds of feet, almost straight up.”

“Yeah,” Frank grumbled. “My bow is useless too. He’s got a huge advantage, being above us like that. I couldn’t reach him.”

“And, um...” Piper nudged the arrow that was stuck in the mast. “I have a feeling he’s a good shot. I don’t think he *meant* to hit me. But if he did...” She didn’t need to elaborate. Whoever that robber was, he could hit a target from hundreds of feet away. He could shoot them all before they could react.

“I’ll go,” Hazel said.

She hated the idea, but she was sure Hecate had set this up as some sort of twisted challenge.

This was Hazel’s test— *her* turn to save the ship. As if she needed confirmation, Gale scampered along the railing and jumped on her shoulder, ready to hitch a ride.

The others stared at her.

Frank gripped his bow. “Hazel—”

“No, listen,” she said, “this robber wants valuables. I can go up there, summon gold, jewels, whatever he wants.”

Leo raised an eyebrow. “If we pay him off, you think he’ll actually let us go?”

“We don’t have much choice,” Nico said. “Between that guy and the turtle...” Jason raised his hand. The others fell silent.

“I’ll go too,” he said. “The letter says two people. I’ll take Hazel up there and watch her back.

Besides, I don’t like the look of those steps. If Hazel falls...well, I can use the winds to keep us both from coming down the hard way.”

Arion whinnied in protest, as if to say, *You’re going without me? You’re kidding, right?*

“I have to, Arion,” Hazel said. “Jason...yes. I think you’re right. It’s the best plan.”

“Only wish I had my sword.” Jason glared at the coach. “It’s back there at the bottom of the sea, and we don’t have Percy to retrieve it.”

The name *Percy* passed over them like a cloud. The mood on deck got even darker.

Hazel stretched out her arm. She didn’t think about it. She just concentrated on the water and called for Imperial gold.

A stupid idea. The sword was much too far away, probably hundreds of feet underwater. But she felt a quick tug in her fingers, like a bite on a fishing line, and Jason’s blade flew out of the water and into her hand.

“Here,” she said, handing it over.

Jason’s eyes widened. “How... That was like half a mile!”

“I’ve been practicing,” she said, though it wasn’t true.

She hoped she hadn’t accidentally cursed Jason’s sword by summoning it, the

way she cursed jewels and precious metals.

Somehow, though, she thought, weapons were different. After all, she'd raised a bunch of Imperial gold equipment from Glacier Bay and distributed it to the Fifth Cohort. That had worked out okay.

She decided not to worry about it. She felt so angry at Hecate and so tired of being manipulated by the gods that she wasn't going to let any trifling problems stand in her way. "Now, if there are no other objections, we have a robber to meet."

XXVII

HAZEL

HAZEL LIKED THE GREAT OUTDOORS—but climbing a two-hundred-foot cliff on a stairway without rails, with a bad-tempered weasel on her shoulder? Not so much. Especially when she could have ridden Arion to the top in a matter of seconds.

Jason walked behind her so he could catch her if she fell. Hazel appreciated that, but it didn't make the sheer drop any less scary.

She glanced to her right, which was a mistake. Her foot almost slipped, sending a spray of gravel over the edge. Gale squeaked in alarm.

"You all right?" Jason asked.

“Yes.” Hazel’s heart jackhammered at her ribs. “Fine.”

She had no room to turn and look at him. She just had to trust he wouldn’t let her plummet to her death. Since he could fly, he was the only logical backup. Still, she wished it was Frank at her back, or Nico, or Piper, or Leo. Or even...well, okay, maybe not Coach Hedge. But still, Hazel couldn’t get a read on Jason Grace.

Ever since she’d arrived at Camp Jupiter, she’d heard stories about him. The campers spoke with reverence about the son of Jupiter who’d risen from the lowly ranks of the Fifth Cohort to become praetor, led them to victory in the Battle of Mount Tam, then disappeared. Even now, after all the events of the past couple of weeks, Jason seemed more like a legend than a person. She had a hard time warming up to him, with those icy blue eyes and that careful reserve, like he was calculating every word before he said it. Also, she couldn’t forget how he had been ready to write off her brother, Nico, when they’d learned he was a captive in Rome.

Jason had thought Nico was bait for a trap. He had been right. And maybe, now that Nico was safe, Hazel could see why Jason’s caution was a good idea. Still, she didn’t quite know what to think of the guy. What if they got themselves in trouble at the top of this cliff, and Jason decided that saving *Hazel* wasn’t in the best interest of the quest?

She glanced up. She couldn’t see the thief from here, but she sensed he was waiting. Hazel was confident she could produce enough gems and gold to impress even the greediest robber. She wondered if the treasures she summoned would still bring bad luck. She’d never been sure whether that curse had been broken when she had died the first time. This seemed like a good opportunity to find out. Anybody who robbed innocent demigods with a giant turtle deserved a few nasty curses.

Gale the weasel jumped off her shoulder and scampered ahead. She glanced back and barked eagerly.

“Going as fast as I can,” Hazel muttered.

She couldn’t shake the feeling that the weasel was anxious to watch her fail.

“This, uh, controlling the Mist,” Jason said. “Have you had any luck?”

“No,” Hazel admitted.

She didn’t like to think about her failures—the seagull she couldn’t turn into a dragon, Coach Hedge’s baseball bat stubbornly refusing to turn into a hot dog. She just couldn’t make herself believe any of it was possible.

“You’ll get it,” Jason said.

His tone surprised her. It wasn’t a throwaway comment just to be nice. He sounded truly convinced. She kept climbing, but she imagined him watching her with those piercing blue eyes, his jaw set with confidence.

“How can you be sure?” she asked.

“Just am. I’ve got a good instinct for what people can do—demigods, anyway. Hecate wouldn’t have picked you if she didn’t believe you had power.”

Maybe that should have made Hazel feel better. It didn’t.

She had a good instinct for people too. She understood what motivated most of her friends—

even her brother, Nico, who wasn’t easy to read.

But Jason? She didn’t have a clue. Everybody said he was a natural leader. She believed it.

Here he was, making her feel like a valued member of the team, telling her she was capable of anything. But what was *Jason* capable of?

She couldn’t talk to anyone about her doubts. Frank was in awe of the guy. Piper, of course, was head-over-heels. Leo was his best friend. Even Nico seemed to follow his lead without question.

But Hazel couldn’t forget that Jason had been Hera’s first move in the war against the giants. The Queen of Olympus had dropped Jason into Camp Half-Blood, which had started this entire chain of events to stop Gaea. Why Jason first? Something told Hazel he was the linchpin. Jason would be the final play, too.

To storm or fire the world must fall. That's what the prophecy said. As much as Hazel feared fire, she feared storms more. Jason Grace could cause some pretty huge storms.

She glanced up and saw the rim of the cliff only a few yards above her.

She reached the top, breathless and sweaty. A long sloping valley marched inland, dotted with scraggly olive trees and limestone boulders. There were no signs of civilization.

Hazel's legs trembled from the climb. Gale seemed anxious to explore. The weasel barked and farted and scampered into the nearest bushes. Far below, the *Argo II* looked like a toy boat in the channel. Hazel didn't understand how anyone could shoot an arrow accurately from this high up, accounting for the wind and the glare of the sun off the water. At the mouth of the inlet, the massive shape of the turtle's shell glinted like a burnished coin.

Jason joined her at the top, looking no worse for the climb.

He started to say, "Where—"

"Here!" said a voice.

Hazel flinched. Only ten feet away, a man had appeared, a bow and quiver over his shoulder and two old-fashioned flintlock dueling pistols in his hands. He wore high leather boots, leather breeches, and a pirate-style shirt. His curly black hair looked like a little kid's do and his sparkly green eyes were friendly enough, but a red bandana covered the lower half of his face.

"Welcome!" the bandit cried, pointing his guns at them. "Your money or your life!" Hazel was certain that he hadn't been there a second ago. He'd simply materialized, as if he'd stepped out from behind an invisible curtain.

"Who are you?" Hazel asked.

The bandit laughed. "Sciron, of course!"

"Chiron?" Jason asked. "Like the centaur?"

The bandit rolled his eyes. "*Sky-*ron, my friend. Son of Poseidon! Thief

extraordinaire! All-around awesome guy! But that's not important. I'm not seeing any valuables!" he cried, as if this were excellent news. "I guess that means you want to die?"

"Wait," Hazel said. "We've got valuables. But if we give them up, how can we be sure you'll let us go?"

"Oh, they *always* ask that," Sciron said. "I promise you, on the River Styx, that as soon as you surrender what I want, I will *not* shoot you. I will send you right back down that cliff." Hazel gave Jason a wary look. River Styx or no, the way Sciron phrased his promise didn't reassure her.

"What if we fought you?" Jason asked. "You can't attack us and hold our ship hostage at the same—"

BANG! BANG!

It happened so fast, Hazel's brain needed a moment to catch up.

Smoke curled from the side of Jason's head. Just above his left ear, a groove cut through his hair like a racing stripe. One of Sciron's flintlocks was still pointed at his face. The other flintlock was pointed down, over the side of the cliff, as if Sciron's second shot had been fired at the *Argo II*.

Hazel choked from delayed shock. "What did you do?"

"Oh, don't worry!" Sciron laughed. "If you could see that far—which you can't—you'd see a hole in the deck between the shoes of the big young man, the one with the bow."

"Frank!"

Sciron shrugged. "If you say so. That was just a demonstration. I'm afraid it *could* have been much more serious."

He spun his flintlocks. The hammers reset, and Hazel had a feeling the guns had just magically reloaded.

Sciron wagged his eyebrows at Jason. "So! To answer your question—yes, I *can* attack you and hold your ship hostage at the same time. Celestial bronze

ammunition. Quite deadly to demigods. You two would die first— *bang, bang*. Then I could take my time picking off your friends on that ship.

Target practice is so much more fun with live targets running around screaming!” Jason touched the new furrow that the bullet had plowed through his hair. For once, he didn’t look very confident.

Hazel’s ankles wobbled. Frank was the best shot she knew with a bow, but this bandit Sciron was *inhumanly* good.

“You’re a son of Poseidon?” she managed. “I would’ve thought Apollo, the way you shoot.” The smile lines deepened around his eyes. “Why, thank you! It’s just from practice, though. The giant turtle—that’s due to my parentage. You can’t go around taming giant turtles without being a son of Poseidon! I *could* overwhelm your ship with a tidal wave, of course, but it’s terribly difficult work. Not nearly as fun as ambushing and shooting people.” Hazel tried to collect her thoughts, stall for time, but it was difficult while staring down the smoking barrels of those flintlocks. “Uh...what’s the bandana for?”

“So no one recognizes me!” Sciron said.

“But you introduced yourself,” Jason said. “You’re Sciron.” The bandit’s eyes widened. “How did you— Oh. Yes, I suppose I did.” He lowered one flintlock and scratched the side of his head with the other. “Terribly sloppy of me. Sorry. I’m afraid I’m a little rusty. Back from the dead, and all that. Let me try again.” He leveled his pistols. “Stand and deliver! I am an anonymous bandit, and you *do not* need to know my name!”

An anonymous bandit. Something clicked in Hazel’s memory. “Theseus. He killed you once.” Sciron’s shoulders slumped. “Now, *why* did you have to mention him? We were getting along so well!”

Jason frowned. “Hazel, you know this guy’s story?”

She nodded, though the details were murky. “Theseus met him on the road to Athens. Sciron would kill his victims by, um...”

Something about the turtle. Hazel couldn’t remember.

“Theseus was *such* a cheater!” Sciron complained. “I don’t want to talk about

him. I'm back from the dead now. Gaea promised me I could stay on the coastline and rob all the demigods I wanted, and that's what I'm going to do! Now...where were we?"

"You were about to let us go," Hazel ventured.

"Hmm..." Sciron said. "No, I'm pretty sure that wasn't it. Ah, right! Money or your life. Where are your valuables? No valuables? Then I'll have to—"

"Wait," Hazel said. "I have our valuables. At least, I can get them." Sciron pointed a flintlock at Jason's head. "Well, then, my dear, hop to it, or my next shot will cut off more than your friend's hair!"

Hazel hardly needed to concentrate. She was so anxious, the ground rumbled beneath her and immediately yielded a bumper crop—precious metals popping to the surface as though the dirt was anxious to expel them.

She found herself surrounded by a knee-high mound of treasure—Roman denarii, silver drachmas, ancient gold jewelry, glittering diamonds and topaz and rubies—enough to fill several lawn bags.

Sciron laughed with delight. "How in the *world* did you do that?" Hazel didn't answer. She thought about all the coins that had appeared at the crossroads with Hecate. Here were even more—centuries' worth of hidden wealth from every empire that had ever claimed this land—Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and so many others. Those empires were gone, leaving only a barren coastline for Sciron the bandit.

That thought made her feel small and powerless.

"Just take the treasure," she said. "Let us go."

Sciron chuckled. "Oh, but I did say *all* your valuables. I understand you're holding something very special on that ship...a certain ivory-and-gold statue about, say, forty feet tall?" The sweat started to dry on Hazel's neck, sending a shiver down her back.

Jason stepped forward. Despite the gun pointed at his face, his eyes were as hard as sapphires.

“The statue isn’t negotiable.”

“You’re right, it’s not!” Sciron agreed. “I must have it!”

“Gaea told you about it,” Hazel guessed. “She ordered you to take it.” Sciron shrugged. “Maybe. But she told me I could keep it for myself. Hard to pass up that offer! I don’t intend to die again, my friends. I intend to live a long life as a very wealthy man!”

“The statue won’t do you any good,” Hazel said. “Not if Gaea destroys the world.” The muzzles of Sciron’s pistols wavered. “Pardon?”

“Gaea is using you,” Hazel said. “If you take that statue, we won’t be able to defeat her. She’s planning on wiping all mortals and demigods off the face of the earth, letting her giants and monsters take over. So where will you spend your gold, Sciron? Assuming Gaea even lets you live.” Hazel let that sink in. She figured Sciron would have no trouble believing in double-crosses, being a bandit and all.

He was silent for a count of ten.

Finally his smile lines returned.

“All right!” he said. “I’m not unreasonable. Keep the statue.” Jason blinked. “We can go?”

“Just one more thing,” Sciron said. “I always demand a show of respect. Before I let my victims leave, I insist that they wash my feet.”

Hazel wasn’t sure she’d heard him right. Then Sciron kicked off his leather boots, one after the other. His bare feet were the most disgusting things Hazel had ever seen...and she had seen some *very* disgusting things.

They were puffy, wrinkled, and white as dough, as if they’d been soaking in formaldehyde for a few centuries. Tufts of brown hair sprouted from each misshapen toe. His jagged toenails were green and yellow, like a tortoise’s shell.

Then the smell hit her. Hazel didn’t know if her father’s Underworld palace had a cafeteria for zombies, but if it *did*, that cafeteria would smell like Sciron’s feet.

“So!” Sciron wriggled his disgusting toes. “Who wants the left, and who wants the right?” Jason’s face turned almost as white as those feet. “You’ve...got to be kidding.”

“Not at all!” Sciron said. “Wash my feet, and we’re done. I’ll send you back down the cliff. I promise on the River Styx.”

He made that promise so easily, alarm bells rang in Hazel’s mind. *Feet. Send you back down the cliff. Tortoise shell.*

The story came back to her, all the missing pieces fitting into place. She remembered how Sciron killed his victims.

“Could we have a moment?” Hazel asked the bandit.

Sciron’s eyes narrowed. “What for?”

“Well, it’s a big decision,” she said. “Left foot, right foot. We need to discuss.” She could tell he was smiling under the mask.

“Of course,” he said. “I’m so generous, you can have *two* minutes.” Hazel climbed out of her pile of treasure. She led Jason as far away as she dared—about fifty feet down the cliff, which she hoped was out of earshot.

“Sciron kicks his victims off the cliff,” she whispered.

Jason scowled. “What?”

“When you kneel down to wash his feet,” Hazel said. “That’s how he kills you. When you’re off-balance, woozy from the smell of his feet, he’ll kick you over the edge. You’ll fall right into the mouth of his giant turtle.”

Jason took a moment to digest that, so to speak. He glanced over the cliff, where the turtle’s massive shell glinted just under the water.

“So we have to fight,” Jason said.

“Sciron’s too fast,” Hazel said. “He’ll kill us both.”

“Then I’ll be ready to fly. When he kicks me over, I’ll float halfway down the

cliff. Then when he kicks you, I'll catch you."

Hazel shook her head. "If he kicks you hard and fast enough, you'll be too dazed to fly. And even if you can, Sciron's got the eyes of a marksman. He'll watch you fall. If you hover, he'll just shoot you out of the air."

"Then..." Jason clenched his sword hilt. "I hope you have another idea?" A few feet away, Gale the weasel appeared from the bushes. She gnashed her teeth and peered at Hazel as if to say, *Well? Do you?*

Hazel calmed her nerves, trying to avoid pulling more gold from the ground. She remembered the dream she'd had of her father Pluto's voice: *The dead see what they believe they will see. So do the living. That is the secret.*

She understood what she had to do. She hated the idea worse than she hated that farting weasel, worse than she hated Sciron's feet.

"Unfortunately, yes," Hazel said. "We have to let Sciron win."

"What?" Jason demanded.

Hazel told him the plan.

X X V I I I

H A Z E L

"FINALLY!" SCIRON CRIED. "That was *much* longer than two minutes!"

“Sorry,” Jason said. “It was a big decision...which foot.” Hazel tried to clear her mind and imagine the scene through Sciron’s eyes—what he desired, what he expected.

That was the key to using the Mist. She couldn’t force someone to see the world her way. She couldn’t make Sciron’s reality appear *less* believable. But if she showed him what he wanted to see...well, she was a child of Pluto. She’d spent decades with the dead, listening to them yearn for past lives that were only half-remembered, distorted by nostalgia.

The dead saw what they *believed* they would see. So did the living.

Pluto was the god of the Underworld, the god of wealth. Maybe those two spheres of influence were more connected than Hazel had realized. There wasn’t much difference between longing and greed.

If she could summon gold and diamonds, why not summon another kind of treasure—a vision of the world people *wanted* to see?

Of course she could be wrong, in which case she and Jason were about to be turtle food.

She rested her hand on her jacket pocket, where Frank’s magical firewood seemed heavier than usual. She wasn’t just carrying his lifeline now. She was carrying the lives of the entire crew.

Jason stepped forward, his hands open in surrender. “I’ll go first, Sciron. I’ll wash your left foot.”

“Excellent choice!” Sciron wriggled his hairy, corpse-like toes. “I may have stepped on something with that foot. It felt a little squishy inside my boot. But I’m sure you’ll clean it properly.” Jason’s ears reddened. From the tension in his neck, Hazel could tell that he was tempted to drop the charade and attack—one quick slash with his Imperial gold blade. But Hazel knew if he tried, he would fail.

“Sciron,” she broke in, “do you have water? Soap? How are we supposed to wash—”

“Like this!” Sciron spun his left flintlock. Suddenly it became a squirt bottle

with a rag. He tossed it to Jason.

Jason squinted at the label. “You want me to wash your feet with *glass* cleaner?”

“Of course not!” Sciron knit his eyebrows. “It says *multi-surface* cleanser. My feet definitely qualify as *multi-surface*. Besides, it’s antibacterial. I need that. Believe me, water won’t do the trick on *these* babies.”

Sciron wiggled his toes, and more zombie café odor wafted across the cliffs.

Jason gagged. “Oh, gods, no...”

Sciron shrugged. “You can always choose what’s in my other hand.” He hefted his right flintlock.

“He’ll do it,” Hazel said.

Jason glared at her, but Hazel won the staring contest.

“Fine,” he muttered.

“Excellent! Now...” Sciron hopped to the nearest chunk of limestone that was the right size for a footstool. He faced the water and planted his foot, so he looked like some explorer who’d just claimed a new country. “I’ll watch the horizon while you scrub my bunions. It’ll be much more enjoyable.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “I bet.”

Jason knelt in front of the bandit, at the edge of the cliff, where he was an easy target. One kick, and he’d topple over.

Hazel concentrated. She imagined she was Sciron, the lord of bandits. She was looking down at a pathetic blond-haired kid who was no threat at all—just another defeated demigod about to become his victim.

In her mind, she saw what would happen. She summoned the Mist, calling it from the depths of the earth the way she did with gold or silver or rubies.

Jason squirted the cleaning fluid. His eyes watered. He wiped Sciron’s big toe with his rag and turned aside to gag. Hazel could barely watch. When the kick

happened, she almost missed it.

Sciron slammed his foot into Jason's chest. Jason tumbled backward over the edge, his arms flailing, screaming as he fell. When he was about to hit the water, the turtle rose up and swallowed him in one bite, then sank below the surface.

Alarm bells sounded on the *Argo II*. Hazel's friends scrambled on deck, manning the catapults.

Hazel heard Piper wailing all the way from the ship.

It was so disturbing, Hazel almost lost her focus. She forced her mind to split into two parts—

one intensely focused on her task, one playing the role Sciron needed to see.

She screamed in outrage. "What did you *do*?"

"Oh, dear..." Sciron sounded sad, but Hazel got the impression he was hiding a grin under his bandana. "That was an accident, I assure you."

"My friends will *kill* you now!"

"They can try," Sciron said. "But in the meantime, I think you have time to wash my other foot!"

Believe me, my dear. My turtle is full now. He doesn't want you too. You'll be quite safe, unless you refuse."

He leveled the flintlock pistol at her head.

She hesitated, letting him see her anguish. She couldn't agree too easily, or he wouldn't think she was beaten.

"Don't kick me," she said, half-sobbing.

His eyes twinkled. This was exactly what he expected. She was broken and helpless. Sciron, the son of Poseidon, had won again.

Hazel could hardly believe this guy had the same father as Percy Jackson. Then she remembered that Poseidon had a changeable personality, like the sea. Maybe

his children reflected that. Percy was a child of Poseidon's better nature—powerful, but gentle and helpful, the kind of sea that sped ships safely to distant lands. Sciron was a child of Poseidon's *other* side—the kind of sea that battered relentlessly at the coastline until it crumbled away, or carried the innocents from shore and let them drown, or smashed ships and killed entire crews without mercy.

She snatched up the spray bottle Jason had dropped.

“Sciron,” she growled, “your feet are the *least* disgusting thing about you.” His green eyes hardened. “Just *clean*.”

She knelt, trying to ignore the smell. She shuffled to one side, forcing Sciron to adjust his stance, but she imagined that the sea was still at her back. She held that vision in her mind as she shuffled sideways again.

“Just get on with it!” Sciron said.

Hazel suppressed a smile. She'd managed to turn Sciron one hundred and eighty degrees, but he still saw the water in front of him, the rolling countryside at his back.

She started to clean.

Hazel had done plenty of ugly work before. She'd cleaned the unicorn stables at Camp Jupiter.

She'd filled and dug latrines for the legion.

This is nothing, she told herself. But it was hard not to retch when she looked at Sciron's toes.

When the kick came, she flew backward, but she didn't go far. She landed on her butt in the grass a few yards away.

Sciron stared at her. “But...”

Suddenly the world shifted. The illusion melted, leaving Sciron totally confused. The sea was at *his* back. He'd only succeeded in kicking Hazel away from the ledge.

He lowered his flintlock. “How—”

“Stand and deliver,” Hazel told him.

Jason swooped out of the sky, right over her head, and body-slammed the bandit over the cliff.

Sciron screamed as he fell, firing his flintlock wildly, but for once hitting nothing. Hazel got to her feet. She reached the cliff’s edge in time to see the turtle lunge and snap Sciron out of the air.

Jason grinned. “Hazel, that was *amazing*. Seriously...Hazel? Hey, Hazel?” Hazel collapsed to her knees, suddenly dizzy.

Distantly, she could hear her friends cheering from the ship below. Jason stood over her, but he was moving in slow motion, his outline blurry, his voice nothing but static.

Frost crept across the rocks and grass around her. The mound of riches she’d summoned sank back into the earth. The Mist swirled.

What have I done? she thought in a panic. *Something went wrong.*

“No, Hazel,” said a deep voice behind her. “You have done well.” She hardly dared to breathe. She’d only heard that voice once before, but she had replayed it in her mind thousands of times.

She turned and found herself looking up at her father.

He was dressed in Roman style—his dark hair close-cropped, his pale, angular face clean-shaven. His tunic and toga were of black wool, embroidered with threads of gold. The faces of tormented souls shifted in the fabric. The edge of his toga was lined with the crimson of a senator or a praetor, but the stripe rippled like a river of blood. On Pluto’s ring finger was a massive opal, like a chunk of polished frozen Mist.

His wedding ring, Hazel thought. But Pluto had never married Hazel’s mother. Gods did not marry mortals. That ring would signify his marriage to Persephone.

The thought made Hazel so angry, she shook off her dizziness and stood.

“What do you want?” she demanded.

She hoped her tone would hurt him—jab him for all the pain he’d caused her. But a faint smile played across his mouth.

“My daughter,” he said. “I am impressed. You have grown strong.” *No thanks to you*, she wanted to say. She didn’t want to take any pleasure in his compliment, but her eyes still prickled.

“I thought you major gods were incapacitated,” she managed. “Your Greek and Roman personalities fighting against one another.”

“We are,” Pluto agreed. “But you invoked me so strongly that you allowed me to appear...if only for a moment.”

“I didn’t invoke you.”

But even as she said it, she knew it wasn’t true. For the first time, willingly, she’d embraced her lineage as a child of Pluto. She’d tried to understand her father’s powers and use them to the fullest.

“When you come to my house in Epirus,” Pluto said, “you must be prepared. The dead will not welcome you. And the sorceress Pasiphaë—”

“Pacify?” Hazel asked. Then she realized that must be the woman’s name.

“She will not be fooled as easily as Sciron.” Pluto’s eyes glittered like volcanic stone. “You succeeded in your first test, but Pasiphaë intends to rebuild her domain, which will endanger *all* demigods. Unless you stop her at the House of Hades...”

His form flickered. For a moment he was bearded, in Greek robes with a golden laurel wreath in his hair. Around his feet, skeletal hands broke through the earth.

The god gritted his teeth and scowled.

His Roman form stabilized. The skeletal hands dissolved back into the earth.

“We do not have much time.” He looked like a man who’d just been violently ill. “Know that the Doors of Death are at the lowest level of the Necromanteion.

You must make Pasiphaë see what she wants to see. You are right. That is the secret to all magic. But it will not be easy when you are in her maze.”

“What do you mean? What maze?”

“You will understand,” he promised. “And, Hazel Levesque...you will not believe me, but I am proud of your strength. Sometimes...sometimes the only way I can care for my children is to keep my distance.”

Hazel bit back an insult. Pluto was just another deadbeat godly dad making weak excuses. But her heart pounded as she replayed his words: *I am proud of your strength.*

“Go to your friends,” Pluto said. “They will be worried. The journey to Epirus still holds many perils.”

“Wait,” Hazel said.

Pluto raised an eyebrow.

“When I met Thanatos,” she said, “you know... *Death*...he told me I wasn’t on your list of rogue spirits to capture. He said maybe that’s why you were keeping your distance. If you acknowledged me, you’d have to take me back to the Underworld.”

Pluto waited. “What is your question?”

“You’re here. Why don’t you take me to the Underworld? Return me to the dead?” Pluto’s form started to fade. He smiled, but Hazel couldn’t tell if he was sad or pleased.

“Perhaps that is not what *I* want to see, Hazel. Perhaps I was never here.”

X X I X

PERCY

PERCY WAS RELIEVED when the demon grandmothers closed in for the kill.

Sure, he was terrified. He didn't like the odds of three against several dozen. But at least he understood *fighting*. Wandering through the darkness, waiting to be attacked—that had been driving him crazy.

Besides, he and Annabeth had fought together many times. And now they had a Titan on their side.

“Back off.” Percy jabbed Riptide at the nearest shriveled hag, but she only sneered.

We are the arai, said that weird voice-over, like the entire forest was speaking. *You cannot destroy us.*

Annabeth pressed against his shoulder. “Don't touch them,” she warned. “They're the spirits of curses.”

“Bob doesn't like curses,” Bob decided. The skeleton kitten Small Bob disappeared inside his coveralls. Smart cat.

The Titan swept his broom in a wide arc, forcing the spirits back, but they came in again like the tide.

We serve the bitter and the defeated, said the arai. We serve the slain who prayed for vengeance with their final breath. We have many curses to share with you.

The firewater in Percy's stomach started crawling up his throat. He wished Tartarus had better beverage options, or maybe a tree that dispensed antacid fruit.

"I appreciate the offer," he said. "But my mom told me not to accept curses from strangers." The nearest demon lunged. Her claws extended like bony switchblades. Percy cut her in two, but as soon as she vaporized, the sides of his chest flared with pain. He stumbled back, clamping his hand to his rib cage. His fingers came away wet and red.

"Percy, you're bleeding!" Annabeth cried, which was kind of obvious to him at that point. "Oh, gods, on *both* sides."

It was true. The left and right hems of his tattered shirt were sticky with blood, as if a javelin had run him through.

Or an arrow...

Queasiness almost knocked him over. *Vengeance. A curse from the slain.*

He flashed back to an encounter in Texas two years ago—a fight with a monstrous rancher who could only be killed if each of his three bodies was cut through simultaneously.

"Geryon," Percy said. "This is how I killed him...."

The spirits bared their fangs. More *arai* leaped from the black trees, flapping their leathery wings.

Yes, they agreed. Feel the pain you inflicted upon Geryon. So many curses have been leveled at you, Percy Jackson. Which will you die from? Choose, or we will rip you apart!

Somehow he stayed on his feet. The blood stopped spreading, but he still felt like he had a hot metal curtain rod sticking through his ribs. His sword arm was heavy and weak.

“I don’t understand,” he muttered.

Bob’s voice seemed to echo from the end of a long tunnel: “If you kill one, it gives you a curse.”

“But if we *don’t* kill them...” Annabeth said.

“They’ll kill us anyway,” Percy guessed.

Choose! the *arai* cried. *Will you be crushed like Kampê? Or disintegrated like the young telkhines you slaughtered under Mount St. Helens? You have spread so much death and suffering, Percy Jackson. Let us repay you!*

The winged hags pressed in, their breath sour, their eyes burning with hatred. They looked like Furies, but Percy decided these things were even worse. At least the three Furies were under the control of Hades. These things were wild, and they just kept multiplying.

If they really embodied the dying curses of every enemy Percy had ever destroyed...then Percy was in serious trouble. He’d faced a *lot* of enemies.

One of the demons lunged at Annabeth. Instinctively, she dodged. She brought her rock down on the old lady’s head and broke her into dust.

It wasn’t like Annabeth had a choice. Percy would’ve done the same thing. But instantly Annabeth dropped her rock and cried in alarm.

“I can’t see!” She touched her face, looking around wildly. Her eyes were pure white.

Percy ran to her side as the *arai* cackled.

Polyphemus cursed you when you tricked him with your invisibility in the Sea of Monsters.

You called yourself Nobody. He could not see you. Now you will not see your attackers.

“I’ve got you,” Percy promised. He put his arm around Annabeth, but as the *arai* advanced, he didn’t know how he could protect either of them.

A dozen demons leaped from every direction, but Bob yelled, “SWEEP!” His broom whooshed over Percy’s head. The entire *arai* offensive line toppled backward like bowling pins.

More surged forward. Bob whacked one over the head and speared another, blasting them to dust. The others backed away.

Percy held his breath, waiting for their Titan friend to be laid low with some terrible curse, but Bob seemed fine—a massive silvery bodyguard keeping death at bay with the world’s most terrifying cleaning implement.

“Bob, you okay?” Percy asked. “No curses?”

“No curses for Bob!” Bob agreed.

The *arai* snarled and circled, eyeing the broom. *The Titan is already cursed. Why should we torture him further? You, Percy Jackson, have already destroyed his memory.*

Bob’s spearhead dipped.

“Bob, don’t listen to them,” Annabeth said. “They’re evil!” Time slowed. Percy wondered if the spirit of Kronos was somewhere nearby, swirling in the darkness, enjoying this moment so much that he wanted it to last forever. Percy felt exactly like he had at twelve years old, battling Ares on that beach in Los Angeles, when the shadow of the Titan lord had first passed over him.

Bob turned. His wild white hair looked like an exploded halo. “My memory... It was you?” *Curse him, Titan!* the *arai* urged, their red eyes gleaming. *Add to our numbers!*

Percy’s heart pressed against his spine. “Bob, it’s a long story. I didn’t want you to be my enemy. I tried to make you a friend.”

By stealing your life, the arai said. Leaving you in the palace of Hades to scrub floors!

Annabeth gripped Percy’s hand. “Which way?” she whispered. “If we have to run?” He understood. If Bob wouldn’t protect them, their only chance was to run—but that wasn’t any chance at all.

“Bob, listen,” he tried again, “the *arai* want you to get angry. They spawn from bitter thoughts.

Don’t give them what they want. *We are your friends.*” Even as he said it, Percy felt like a liar. He’d left Bob in the Underworld and hadn’t given him a thought since. What made them friends? The fact that Percy needed him now? Percy always hated it when the gods used him for their errands. Now Percy was treating Bob the same way.

You see his face? the arai growled. The boy cannot even convince himself. Did he visit you, after he stole your memory?

“No,” Bob murmured. His lower lip quivered. “The other one did.” Percy’s thoughts moved sluggishly. “The other one?”

“Nico.” Bob scowled at him, his eyes full of hurt. “Nico visited. Told me about Percy. Said Percy was good. Said he was a friend. *That* is why Bob helped.”

“But...” Percy’s voice disintegrated like someone had hit it with a Celestial bronze blade. He’d never felt so low and dishonorable, so unworthy of having a friend.

The *arai* attacked, and this time Bob did not stop them.

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PERCY

“LEFT!” PERCY DRAGGED ANNABETH, slicing through the *arai* to clear a path. He probably brought down a dozen curses on himself, but he didn’t feel them right away, so he kept running.

The pain in his chest flared with every step. He wove between the trees, leading Annabeth at a full sprint despite her blindness.

Percy realized how much she trusted him to get her out of this. He couldn’t let her down, yet how could he save her? And if she was permanently blind... No. He suppressed a surge of panic. He would figure out how to cure her later. First they had to escape.

Leathery wings beat the air above them. Angry hissing and the scuttling of clawed feet told him the demons were at their backs.

As they ran past one of the black trees, he slashed his sword across the trunk. He heard it topple, followed by the satisfying crunch of several dozen *arai* as they were smashed flat.

If a tree falls in the forest and crushes a demon, does the tree get cursed?

Percy slashed down another trunk, then another. It bought them a few seconds, but not enough.

Suddenly the darkness in front of them became thicker. Percy realized what it meant just in time.

He grabbed Annabeth right before they both charged off the side of the cliff.

“What?” she cried. “What is it?”

“Cliff,” he gasped. “Big cliff.”

“Which way, then?”

Percy couldn’t see how far the cliff dropped. It could be ten feet or a thousand. There was no telling what was at the bottom. They could jump and hope for the best, but he doubted “the best” ever happened in Tartarus.

So, two options: right or left, following the edge.

He was about to choose randomly when a winged demon descended in front of him, hovering over the void on her bat wings, just out of sword reach.

Did you have a nice walk? asked the collective voice, echoing all around them.

Percy turned. The *arai* poured out of the woods, making a crescent around them. One grabbed Annabeth's arm. Annabeth wailed in rage, judo-flipping the monster and dropping on its neck, putting her whole body weight into an elbow strike that would've made any pro wrestler proud.

The demon dissolved, but when Annabeth got to her feet, she looked stunned and afraid as well as blind.

"Percy?" she called, panic creeping into her voice.

"I'm right here."

He tried to put his hand on her shoulder, but she wasn't standing where he thought. He tried again, only to find she was several feet farther away. It was like trying to grab something in a tank of water, with the light shifting the image away.

"Percy!" Annabeth's voice cracked. "Why did you leave me?"

"I didn't!" He turned on the *arai*, his arms shaking with anger. "What did you do to her?" *We did nothing*, the demons said. *Your beloved has unleashed a special curse—a bitter thought from someone you abandoned. You punished an innocent soul by leaving her in her solitude. Now her most hateful wish has come to pass: Annabeth feels her despair. She, too, will perish alone and abandoned.*

"Percy?" Annabeth spread her arms, trying to find him. The *arai* backed up, letting her stumble blindly through their ranks.

"Who did I abandon?" Percy demanded. "I never—"

Suddenly his stomach felt like it had dropped off the cliff.

The words rang in his head: *An innocent soul. Alone and abandoned.* He remembered an island, a cave lit with soft glowing crystals, a dinner table on the beach tended by invisible air spirits.

“She wouldn’t,” he mumbled. “She’d never curse me.”

The eyes of the demons blurred together like their voices. Percy’s sides throbbed. The pain in his chest was worse, as if someone were slowly twisting a dagger.

Annabeth wandered among the demons, desperately calling his name. Percy longed to run to her, but he knew the *arai* wouldn’t allow it. The only reason they hadn’t killed her yet was that they were enjoying her misery.

Percy clenched his jaw. He didn’t care how many curses he suffered. He had to keep these leathery old hags focused on him and protect Annabeth as long as he could.

He yelled in fury and attacked them all.

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PERCY

FOR ONE EXCITING MINUTE, Percy felt like he was winning. Riptide cut through the *arai* as though they were made of powdered sugar. One panicked and ran face-first into a tree. Another screeched and tried to fly away, but Percy sliced off her wings and sent her spiraling into the chasm.

Each time a demon disintegrated, Percy felt a heavier sense of dread as another curse settled on him. Some were harsh and painful: a stabbing in the gut, a burning sensation like he was being blasted by a blowtorch. Some were subtle: a

chill in the blood, an uncontrollable tic in his right eye.

Seriously, who curses you with their dying breath and says: *I hope your eye twitches!*

Percy knew that he'd killed a lot of monsters, but he'd never really thought about it from the monsters' point of view. Now all their pain and anger and bitterness poured over him, sapping his strength.

The *arai* just kept coming. For every one he cut down, six more seemed to appear.

His sword arm grew tired. His body ached, and his vision blurred. He tried to make his way toward Annabeth, but she was just out of reach, calling his name as she wandered among the demons.

As Percy blundered toward her, a demon pounced and sank its teeth into his thigh. Percy roared.

He sliced the demon to dust, but immediately fell to his knees.

His mouth burned worse than when he had swallowed the firewater of the Phlegethon. He doubled over, shuddering and retching, as a dozen fiery snakes seemed to work their way down his esophagus.

You have chosen, said the voice of the *arai*, *the curse of Phineas...an excellent painful death.*

Percy tried to speak. His tongue felt like it was being microwaved. He remembered the old blind king who had chased harpies through Portland with a WeedWacker. Percy had challenged him to a contest, and the loser had drunk a deadly vial of gorgon's blood. Percy didn't remember the old blind man muttering a final curse, but as Phineas dissolved and returned to the Underworld, he probably hadn't wished Percy a long and happy life.

After Percy's victory then, Gaea had warned him: *Do not press your luck. When your death comes, I promise it will be much more painful than gorgon's blood.*

Now he was in Tartarus, dying from gorgon's blood plus a dozen other agonizing curses, while he watched his girlfriend stumble around, helpless and

blind and believing he'd abandoned her. He clutched his sword. His knuckles started to steam. White smoke curled off his forearms.

I won't die like this, he thought.

Not only because it was painful and insultingly lame, but because Annabeth needed him. Once he was dead, the demons would turn their attention to her. He couldn't leave her alone.

The *arai* clustered around him, snickering and hissing.

His head will erupt first, the voice speculated.

No, the voice answered itself from another direction. *He will combust all at once*.

They were placing bets on how he would die...what sort of scorch mark he would leave on the ground.

"Bob," he croaked. "I need you."

A hopeless plea. He could barely hear himself. Why should Bob answer his call twice? The Titan knew the truth now. Percy was no friend.

He raised his eyes one last time. His surroundings seemed to flicker. The sky boiled and the ground blistered.

Percy realized that what he *saw* of Tartarus was only a watered-down version of its true horror

—only what his demigod brain could handle. The worst of it was veiled, the same way the Mist veiled monsters from mortal sight. Now as Percy died, he began to see the truth.

The air was the breath of Tartarus. All these monsters were just blood cells circulating through his body. Everything Percy saw was a dream in the mind of the dark god of the pit.

This must have been the way *Nico* had seen Tartarus, and it had almost destroyed his sanity.

Nico...one of the many people Percy hadn't treated well enough. He and Annabeth had only made it this far through Tartarus because Nico di Angelo had behaved like Bob's *true* friend.

You see the horror of the pit? the *arai* said soothingly. *Give up, Percy Jackson. Isn't death better than enduring this place?*

"I'm sorry," Percy murmured.

He apologizes! The *arai* shrieked with delight. *He regrets his failed life, his crimes against the children of Tartarus!*

"No," Percy said. "I'm sorry, Bob. I should've been honest with you. Please... forgive me.

Protect Annabeth."

He didn't expect Bob to hear him or care, but it felt right to clear his conscience. He couldn't blame anyone else for his troubles. Not the gods. Not Bob. He couldn't even blame Calypso, the girl he'd left alone on that island. Maybe she'd turned bitter and cursed Percy's girlfriend out of despair.

Still...Percy should have followed up with Calypso, made sure the gods sprang her from her exile on Ogygia like they'd promised. He hadn't treated her any better than he'd treated Bob. He hadn't even thought much about her, though her moonlace plant still bloomed in his mom's window box.

It took all his remaining effort, but he got to his feet. Steam rose from his whole body. His legs shook. His insides churned like a volcano.

At least Percy could go out fighting. He raised Riptide.

But before he could strike, all the *arai* in front of him exploded into dust.

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PERCY

BOB SERIOUSLY KNEW HOW TO USE A BROOM.

He slashed back and forth, destroying the demons one after the other while Small Bob the kitten sat on his shoulder, arching his back and hissing.

In a matter of seconds, the *arai* were gone. Most had been vaporized. The smart ones had flown off into the darkness, shrieking in terror.

Percy wanted to thank the Titan, but his voice wouldn't work. His legs buckled. His ears rang.

Through a red glow of pain, he saw Annabeth a few yards away, wandering blindly toward the edge of the cliff.

“Uh!” Percy grunted.

Bob followed his gaze. He bounded toward Annabeth and scooped her up. She yelled and kicked, pummeling Bob's gut, but Bob didn't seem to care. He carried her over to Percy and put her down gently.

The Titan touched her forehead. “Owie.”

Annabeth stopped fighting. Her eyes cleared. “Where— what—?” She saw Percy, and a series of expressions flashed across her face—relief, joy, shock,

horror.

“What’s wrong with him?” she cried. “What happened?”

She cradled his shoulders and wept into his scalp.

Percy wanted to tell her it was okay, but of course it wasn’t. He couldn’t even feel his body anymore. His consciousness was like a small helium balloon, loosely tied to the top of his head. It had no weight, no strength. It just kept expanding, getting lighter and lighter. He knew that soon it would either burst or the string would break, and his life would float away.

Annabeth took his face in her hands. She kissed him and tried to wipe the dust and sweat from his eyes.

Bob loomed over them, his broom planted like a flag. His face was unreadable, luminously white in the dark.

“Lots of curses,” Bob said. “Percy has done bad things to monsters.”

“Can you fix him?” Annabeth pleaded. “Like you did with my blindness? Fix *Percy!*” Bob frowned. He picked at the name tag on his uniform like it was a scab.

Annabeth tried again. “Bob—”

“Iapetus,” Bob said, his voice a low rumble. “Before Bob. It was Iapetus.” The air was absolutely still. Percy felt helpless, barely connected to the world.

“I like Bob better.” Annabeth’s voice was surprisingly calm. “Which do you like?” The Titan regarded her with his pure silver eyes. “I do not know anymore.” He crouched next to her and studied Percy. Bob’s face looked haggard and careworn, as if he suddenly felt the weight of all his centuries.

“I promised,” he murmured. “Nico asked me to help. I do not think Iapetus or Bob likes breaking promises.” He touched Percy’s forehead.

“Owie,” the Titan murmured. “Very big owie.”

Percy sank back into his body. The ringing in his ears faded. His vision cleared.

He still felt like he had swallowed a deep fryer. His insides bubbled. He could sense that the poison had only been slowed, not removed.

But he was alive.

He tried to meet Bob's eyes, to express his gratitude. His head lolled against his chest.

"Bob cannot cure this," Bob said. "Too much poison. Too many curses piled up." Annabeth hugged Percy's shoulders. He wanted to say: *I can feel that now. Ow. Too tight.*

"What can we do, Bob?" Annabeth asked. "Is there water anywhere? Water might heal him."

"No water," Bob said. "Tartarus is bad."

I noticed, Percy wanted to yell.

At least the Titan called himself *Bob*. Even if he blamed Percy for taking his memory, maybe he would help Annabeth if Percy didn't make it.

"No," Annabeth insisted. "No, there *has* to be a way. *Something* to heal him." Bob placed his hand on Percy's chest. A cold tingle like eucalyptus oil spread across his sternum, but as soon as Bob lifted his hand, the relief stopped. Percy's lungs felt as hot as lava again.

"Tartarus kills demigods," Bob said. "It heals monsters, but you do not belong. Tartarus will not heal Percy. The pit hates your kind."

"I don't care," Annabeth said. "Even here, there *has* to be someplace he can rest, some kind of cure he can take. Maybe back at the altar of Hermes, or—" In the distance, a deep voice bellowed—a voice that Percy recognized, unfortunately.

"I SMELL HIM!" roared the giant. "BEWARE, SON OF POSEIDON! I COME FOR YOU!"

"Polybotes," Bob said. "He hates Poseidon and his children. He is very close now." Annabeth struggled to get Percy to his feet. He hated making her work so hard, but he felt like a sack of billiard balls. Even with Annabeth supporting

almost all his weight, he could barely stand.

“Bob, I’m going on, with or without you,” she said. “Will you help?” The kitten Small Bob mewed and began to purr, rubbing against Bob’s chin.

Bob looked at Percy, and Percy wished he could read the Titan’s expression. Was he angry, or just thoughtful? Was he planning revenge, or was he just feeling hurt because Percy had lied about being his friend?

“There is one place,” Bob said at last. “There is a giant who might know what to do.” Annabeth almost dropped Percy. “A giant. Uh, Bob, giants are bad.”

“One is good,” Bob insisted. “Trust me, and I will take you...unless Polybotes and the others catch us first.”

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JASON

JASON FELL ASLEEP ON THE JOB. Which was bad, since he was a thousand feet in the air.

He should have known better. It was the morning after their encounter with Sciron the bandit, and Jason was on duty, fighting some wild *venti* who were threatening the ship. When he slashed through the last one, he forgot to hold his breath.

A stupid mistake. When a wind spirit disintegrates, it creates a vacuum. Unless

you're holding your breath, the air gets sucked right out of your lungs. The pressure in your inner ears drops so fast, you black out.

That's what happened to Jason.

Even worse, he instantly plunged into a dream. In the back of his subconscious, he thought: *Really? Now?*

He needed to wake up, or he would die; but he wasn't able to hold on to that thought. In the dream, he found himself on the roof of a tall building, the nighttime skyline of Manhattan spread around him. A cold wind whipped through his clothes.

A few blocks away, clouds gathered above the Empire State Building—the entrance to Mount Olympus itself. Lightning flashed. The air was metallic with the smell of oncoming rain. The top of the skyscraper was lit up as usual, but the lights seemed to be malfunctioning. They flickered from purple to orange as if the colors were fighting for dominance.

On the roof of Jason's building stood his old comrades from Camp Jupiter: an array of demigods in combat armor, their Imperial gold weapons and shields glinting in the dark. He saw Dakota and Nathan, Leila and Marcus. Octavian stood to one side, thin and pale, his eyes red-rimmed from sleeplessness or anger, a string of sacrificial stuffed animals around his waist. His augur's white robe was draped over a purple T-shirt and cargo pants.

In the center of the line stood Reyna, her metal dogs Aurum and Argentum at her side. Upon seeing her, Jason felt an incredible pang of guilt. He'd let her believe they had a future together. He had never been in love with her, and he hadn't led her on, exactly...but he also hadn't shut her down.

He'd disappeared, leaving her to run the camp on her own. (Okay, that hadn't exactly been Jason's idea, but still...) Then he had returned to Camp Jupiter with his new girlfriend Piper and a whole bunch of Greek friends in a warship. They'd fired on the Forum and run away, leaving Reyna with a war on her hands.

In his dream she looked tired. Others might not notice, but he'd worked with her long enough to recognize the weariness in her eyes, the tightness in her shoulders under the straps of her armor. Her dark hair was wet, like she'd taken

a hasty shower.

The Romans stared at the roof-access door as if they were waiting for someone.

When the door opened, two people emerged. One was a faun—no, Jason thought—a *satyr*. He'd learned the difference at Camp Half-Blood, and Coach Hedge was always correcting him if he made that mistake. Roman fauns tended to hang around and beg and eat. Satyrs were more helpful, more engaged with demigod affairs. Jason didn't think he'd seen this particular satyr before, but he was sure the guy was from the Greek side. No faun would look so purposeful walking up to an armed group of Romans in the middle of the night.

He wore a green Nature Conservancy T-shirt with pictures of endangered whales and tigers and stuff. Nothing covered his shaggy legs and hooves. He had a bushy goatee, curly brown hair tucked into a Rasta-style cap, and a set of reed pipes around his neck. His hands fidgeted with the hem of his shirt, but considering the way he studied the Romans, noting their positions and their weapons, Jason figured this satyr had been in combat before.

At his side was a redheaded girl Jason recognized from Camp Half-Blood—their oracle, Rachel Elizabeth Dare. She had long frizzy hair, a plain white blouse, and jeans covered with hand-drawn ink designs. She held a blue plastic hairbrush that she tapped nervously against her thigh like a good luck talisman.

Jason remembered her at the campfire, reciting lines of prophecy that sent Jason, Piper, and Leo on their first quest together. She was a regular mortal teenager—not a demigod—but for reasons Jason never understood, the spirit of Delphi had chosen her as its host.

The real question: What was she doing with the Romans?

She stepped forward, her eyes fixed on Reyna. “You got my message.” Octavian snorted. “That’s the only reason you made it this far alive, *Graecus*. I hope you’ve come to discuss surrender terms.”

“Octavian...” Reyna warned.

“At least search them!” Octavian protested.

“No need,” Reyna said, studying Rachel Dare. “Do you bring weapons?” Rachel

shrugged. “I hit Kronos in the eye with this hairbrush once. Otherwise, no.” The Romans didn’t seem to know what to make of that. The mortal didn’t sound like she was kidding.

“And your friend?” Reyna nodded to the satyr. “I thought you were coming alone.”

“This is Grover Underwood,” Rachel said. “He’s a leader of the Council.”

“What *council*?” Octavian demanded.

“Cloven Elders, man.” Grover’s voice was high and reedy, as if he were terrified, but Jason suspected the satyr had more steel than he let on. “Seriously, don’t you Romans have nature and trees and stuff? I’ve got some news you need to hear. Plus, I’m a card-carrying protector. I’m here to, you know, protect Rachel.”

Reyna looked like she was trying not to smile. “But no weapons?”

“Just the pipes.” Grover’s expression became wistful. “Percy always said my cover of ‘Born to be Wild’ should count as a dangerous weapon, but I don’t think it’s *that* bad.” Octavian sneered. “Another friend of Percy Jackson. That’s all *I* need to hear.” Reyna held up her hand for silence. Her gold and silver dogs sniffed the air, but they remained calm and attentive at her side.

“So far, our guests speak the truth,” Reyna said. “Be warned, Rachel and Grover, if you start to lie, this conversation will not go well for you. Say what you came to say.” From her jeans pocket, Rachel dug out a piece of paper like a napkin. “A message. From Annabeth.”

Jason wasn’t sure he’d heard her right. Annabeth was in Tartarus. She couldn’t send anyone a note on a napkin.

Maybe I’ve hit the water and died, his subconscious said. This isn’t a real vision. It’s some sort of after-death hallucination.

But the dream seemed very real. He could feel the wind sweeping across the roof. He could smell the storm. Lightning flickered over the Empire State Building, making the Romans’ armor flash.

Reyna took the note. As she read it, her eyebrows crept higher. Her mouth parted in shock.

Finally, she looked up at Rachel. “Is this a joke?”

“I wish,” Rachel said. “They’re really in Tartarus.”

“But how—”

“I don’t know,” Rachel said. “The note appeared in the sacrificial fire at our dining pavilion.

That’s Annabeth’s handwriting. She asks for you by name.” Octavian stirred. “Tartarus? What do you mean?”

Reyna handed him the letter.

Octavian muttered as he read: “Rome, Arachne, Athena— *Athena Parthenos?*” He looked around in outrage, as if waiting for someone to contradict what he was reading. “A Greek trick! Greeks are *infamous* for their tricks!”

Reyna took back the note. “Why ask this of me?”

Rachel smiled. “Because Annabeth is wise. She believes you can do this, Reyna Avila Ramírez-Arellano.”

Jason felt like he’d been slapped. Nobody *ever* used Reyna’s full name. She hated telling anyone what it was. The only time Jason had ever said it aloud, just trying to pronounce it correctly, she’d given him a murderous look. *That was the name of a little girl in San Juan*, she told him. *I left it behind when I left Puerto Rico.*

Reyna scowled. “How did you—”

“Uh,” Grover Underwood interrupted. “You mean your initials are RA-RA?” Reyna’s hand drifted toward her dagger.

“But that’s not important!” the satyr said quickly. “Look, we wouldn’t have risked coming here if we didn’t trust Annabeth’s instincts. A Roman leader returning the most important Greek statue to Camp Half-Blood—she knows that

could prevent a war.”

“This isn’t a trick,” Rachel added. “We’re not lying. Ask your dogs.” The metallic greyhounds didn’t react. Reyna stroked Aurum’s head thoughtfully. “The Athena Parthenos...so the legend is true.”

“Reyna!” Octavian cried. “You can’t seriously be considering this! Even if the statue still exists, you see what they’re doing. We’re on the verge of attacking them—destroying the stupid Greeks once and for all—and they concoct this stupid errand to divert your attention. They want to send you to your death!”

The other Romans muttered, glaring at their visitors. Jason remembered how persuasive Octavian could be, and he was winning the officers to his side.

Rachel Dare faced the augur. “Octavian, son of Apollo, you should take this more seriously.

Even Romans respected your father’s Oracle of Delphi.”

“Ha!” Octavian said. “You’re the Oracle of Delphi? Right. And I’m the Emperor Nero!”

“At least Nero could play music,” Grover muttered.

Octavian balled his fists.

Suddenly the wind shifted. It swirled around the Romans with a hissing sound, like a nest of snakes. Rachel Dare glowed in a green aura, as if hit by a soft emerald spotlight. Then the wind faded and the aura was gone.

The sneer melted from Octavian’s face. The Romans rustled uneasily.

“It’s your decision,” Rachel said, as if nothing had happened. “I have no specific prophecy to offer you, but I *can* see glimpses of the future. I see the Athena Parthenos on Half-Blood Hill. I see *her* bringing it.” She pointed at Reyna. “Also, Ella has been murmuring lines from your Sibylline Books—”

“What?” Reyna interrupted. “The Sibylline Books were destroyed centuries ago.”

“I *knew* it!” Octavian pounded his fist into his palm. “That harpy they brought back from the quest— *Ella*. I knew she was spouting prophecies! Now I understand. She—she somehow memorized a copy of the Sibylline Books.”

Reyna shook her head in disbelief. “How is that possible?”

“We don’t know,” Rachel admitted. “But, yes, that seems to be the case. Ella has a perfect memory. She loves books. Somewhere, somehow, she read your Roman book of prophecies. Now she’s the only source for them.”

“Your friends lied,” Octavian said. “They told us the harpy was just muttering gibberish. They stole her!”

Grover huffed indignantly. “Ella isn’t your property! She’s a free creature. Besides, she wants to be at Camp Half-Blood. She’s dating one of my friends, Tyson.”

“The Cyclops,” Reyna remembered. “A harpy dating a Cyclops...”

“That’s not relevant!” Octavian said. “The harpy has valuable Roman prophecies. If the Greeks won’t return her, we should take their Oracle hostage! Guards!” Two centurions advanced, their *pila* leveled. Grover brought his pipes to his lips, played a quick jig, and their spears turned into Christmas trees. The guards dropped them in surprise.

“Enough!” Reyna shouted.

She didn’t often raise her voice. When she did, everyone listened.

“We’ve strayed from the point,” she said. “Rachel Dare, you’re telling me Annabeth is in Tartarus, yet she’s found a way to send this message. She wants *me* to bring this statue from the ancient lands to your camp.”

Rachel nodded. “Only a Roman can return it and restore peace.”

“And why would the Romans want peace,” Reyna asked, “after your ship attacked our city?”

“You know why,” Rachel said. “To avoid this war. To reconcile the gods’ Greek and Roman sides. We have to work together to defeat Gaea.”

Octavian stepped forward to speak, but Reyna shot him a withering look.

“According to Percy Jackson,” Reyna said, “the battle with Gaea will be fought in the ancient lands. In Greece.”

“That’s where the giants are,” Rachel agreed. “Whatever magic, whatever ritual the giants are planning to wake the Earth Mother, I sense it will happen in Greece. But...well, our problems aren’t limited to the ancient lands. That’s why I brought Grover to talk to you.” The satyr tugged his goatee. “Yeah...see, over the last few months, I’ve been talking to satyrs and nature spirits across the continent. They’re all saying the same thing. Gaea is stirring—I mean, she’s *right* on the edge of consciousness. She’s whispering in the minds of naiads, trying to turn them.

She’s causing earthquakes, uprooting the dryads’ trees. Last week alone, she appeared in human form in a dozen different places, scaring the horns off some of my friends. In Colorado, a giant stone fist rose out of a mountain and swatted some Party Ponies like flies.” Reyna frowned. “*Party Ponies?*”

“Long story,” Rachel said. “The point is: Gaea will rise *everywhere*. She’s already stirring. No place will be safe from the battle. And we know that her first targets are going to be the demigod camps. She wants us destroyed.”

“Speculation,” Octavian said. “A distraction. The Greeks fear our attack. They’re trying to confuse us. It’s the Trojan Horse all over again!”

Reyna twisted the silver ring she always wore, with the sword and torch symbols of her mother, Bellona.

“Marcus,” she said, “bring Scipio from the stables.”

“Reyna, no!” Octavian protested.

She faced the Greeks. “I will do this for Annabeth, for the hope of peace between our camps, but do not think I have forgotten the insults to Camp Jupiter. Your ship fired on our city. *You* declared war

—not us. Now, leave.”

Grover stamped his hoof. “Percy would never—”

“Grover,” Rachel said, “we should go.”

Her tone said: *Before it's too late.*

After they had retreated back down the stairs, Octavian wheeled on Reyna. “Are you *mad*?”

“I am praetor of the legion,” Reyna said. “I judge this to be in the best interest of Rome.”

“To get yourself killed? To break our oldest laws and travel to the ancient lands? How will you even find their ship, assuming you survive the journey?”

“I will find them,” Reyna said. “If they are sailing for Greece, I know a place Jason will stop.”

To face the ghosts in the House of Hades, he will need an army. There is only one place where he can find that sort of help.”

In Jason’s dream, the building seemed to tilt under his feet. He remembered a conversation he’d had with Reyna years ago, a promise they had made to each other. He knew what she was talking about.

“This is insanity,” Octavian muttered. “We’re already under attack. We must take the offensive!”

Those hairy dwarfs have been stealing our supplies, sabotaging our scouting parties—you *know* the Greeks sent them.”

“Perhaps,” Reyna said. “But you will *not* launch an attack without my orders. Continue scouting the enemy camp. Secure your positions. Gather all the allies you can, and if you catch those dwarfs, you have my blessing to send them back to Tartarus. But do *not* attack Camp Half-Blood until I return.”

Octavian narrowed his eyes. “While you’re gone, the augur is the senior officer. I will be in charge.”

“I know.” Reyna didn’t sound happy about it. “But you have my orders. You all heard them.” She scanned the faces of the centurions, daring them to question her.

She stormed off, her purple cloak billowing and her dogs at her heels.

Once she was gone, Octavian turned to the centurions. “Gather all the senior officers. I want a meeting as soon as Reyna has left on her fool’s quest. There will be a few changes in the legion’s plans.”

One of the centurions opened his mouth to respond, but for some reason he spoke in Piper’s voice: “*WAKE UP!*”

Jason’s eyes snapped open, and he saw the ocean’s surface hurtling toward him.

X X X I V

J A S O N

JASON SURVIVED—BARELY.

Later, his friends explained that they hadn’t seen him falling from the sky until the last second.

There was no time for Frank to turn into an eagle and catch him; no time to formulate a rescue plan.

Only Piper’s quick thinking and charmspeak had saved his life. She’d yelled *WAKE UP!* with so much force that Jason felt like he’d been hit with defibrillator paddles. With a millisecond to spare, he’d summoned the winds and avoided becoming a floating patch of demigod grease on the surface of the Adriatic.

Back on board, he had pulled Leo aside and suggested a course correction. Fortunately, Leo trusted him enough not to ask why.

“Weird vacation spot.” Leo grinned. “But, hey, you’re the boss!” Now, sitting with his friends in the mess hall, Jason felt so awake, he doubted he would sleep for a week. His hands were jittery. He couldn’t stop tapping his feet. He guessed that this was how Leo felt all the time, except that Leo had a sense of humor.

After what Jason had seen in his dream, he didn’t feel much like joking.

While they ate lunch, Jason reported on his midair vision. His friends were quiet long enough for Coach Hedge to finish a peanut butter and banana sandwich, along with the ceramic plate.

The ship creaked as it sailed through the Adriatic, its remaining oars still out of alignment from the giant turtle attack. Every once in a while Festus the figurehead creaked and squeaked through the speakers, reporting the autopilot status in that weird machine language that only Leo could understand.

“A note from Annabeth.” Piper shook her head in amazement. “I don’t see how that’s possible, but if it is—”

“She’s alive,” Leo said. “Thank the gods and pass the hot sauce.” Frank frowned. “What does that mean?”

Leo wiped the chip crumbs off his face. “It means pass the hot sauce, Zhang. I’m still hungry.” Frank slid over a jar of salsa. “I can’t believe Reyna would try to find us. It’s taboo, coming to the ancient lands. She’ll be stripped of her praetorship.”

“If she lives,” Hazel said. “It was hard enough for us to make it this far with seven demigods and a warship.”

“And me.” Coach Hedge belched. “Don’t forget, cupcake, you got the *satyr* advantage.” Jason had to smile. Coach Hedge could be pretty ridiculous, but Jason *was* glad he’d come along. He thought about the satyr he’d seen in his dream—Grover Underwood. He couldn’t imagine a satyr more different from Coach Hedge, but they both seemed brave in their own way.

It made Jason wonder about the fauns back at Camp Jupiter—whether they could

be like that if the Roman demigods expected more from them. Another thing to add to his list....

His list. He hadn't realized that he *had* one until that moment, but ever since leaving Camp Half-Blood, he'd been thinking of ways to make Camp Jupiter more... *Greek.*

He had grown up at Camp Jupiter. He'd done well there. But he had always been a little unconventional. He chafed under the rules.

He had joined the Fifth Cohort because everyone told him not to. They warned him it was the worst unit. So he'd thought, *Fine, I'll make it the best.*

Once he became praetor, he'd campaigned to rename the legion the First Legion rather than the Twelfth Legion, to symbolize a new start for Rome. The idea had almost caused a mutiny. New Rome was all about tradition and legacies; the rules didn't change easily. Jason had learned to live with that and even rose to the top.

But now that he had seen both camps, he couldn't shake the feeling that Camp Half-Blood might have taught him more about himself. If he survived this war with Gaea and returned to Camp Jupiter as a praetor, could he change things for the better?

That was his duty.

So why did the idea fill him with dread? He felt guilty about leaving Reyna to rule without him, but still...part of him wanted to go back to Camp Half-Blood with Piper and Leo. He guessed that that made him a pretty terrible leader.

"Jason?" Leo asked. "*Argo II* to Jason. Come in."

He realized his friends were looking at him expectantly. They needed reassurance. Whether or not he made it back to New Rome after the war, Jason had to step up now and act like a praetor.

"Yeah, sorry." He touched the groove that Sciron the bandit had cut in his hair. "Crossing the Atlantic is a hard journey, no doubt. But I'd never bet against Reyna. If anyone can make it, she will." Piper circled her spoon through her soup. Jason was still a little nervous about her getting jealous of Reyna, but

when she looked up, she gave him a dry smile that seemed more teasing than insecure.

“Well, I’d love to see Reyna again,” she said. “But how is she supposed to find us?” Frank raised his hand. “Can’t you just send her an Iris-message?”

“They’re not working very well,” Coach Hedge put in. “Horrible reception. Every night, I swear, I could kick that rainbow goddess....”

He faltered. His face turned bright red.

“Coach?” Leo grinned. “Who have you been calling every night, you old goat?”

“No one!” Hedge snapped. “Nothing! I just meant—”

“He means we’ve already tried,” Hazel intervened, and the coach gave her a grateful look.

“Some magic is interfering...maybe Gaea. Contacting the Romans is even harder. I think they’re shielding themselves.”

Jason looked from Hazel to the coach, wondering what was going on with the satyr, and how Hazel knew about it. Now that Jason thought about it, the coach hadn’t mentioned his cloud nymph girlfriend Mellie in a long time....

Frank drummed his fingers on the table. “I don’t suppose Reyna has a cell phone...? Nah. Never mind. She’d probably have bad reception on a pegasus flying over the Atlantic.” Jason thought about the *Argo II*’s journey across the ocean, the dozens of encounters that had nearly killed them. Thinking about Reyna making that journey alone—he couldn’t decide whether it was terrifying or awe-inspiring.

“She’ll find us,” he said. “She mentioned something in the dream—she’s expecting me to go to a certain place on our way to the House of Hades. I—I’d forgotten about it, actually, but she’s right. It’s a place I need to visit.”

Piper leaned toward him, her caramel braid falling over her shoulder. Her multicolored eyes made it hard for him to think straight.

“And where is this place?” she asked.

“A...uh, a town called Split.”

“Split.” She smelled really good—like blooming honeysuckle.

“Um, yeah.” Jason wondered if Piper was working some sort of Aphrodite magic on him—like maybe every time he mentioned Reyna’s name, she would befuddle him so much he couldn’t think about anything but Piper. He supposed it wasn’t the worst sort of revenge. “In fact, we should be getting close. Leo?”

Leo punched the intercom button. “How’s it going up there, buddy?” Festus the figurehead creaked and steamed.

“He says maybe ten minutes to the harbor,” Leo reported. “Though I still don’t get why you want to go to Croatia, especially a town called *Split*. I mean, you name your city *Split*, you gotta figure it’s a warning to, you know, *split*. Kind of like naming your city *Get Out!* ”

“Wait,” Hazel said. “Why are we going to Croatia?”

Jason noticed that the others were reluctant to meet her eyes. Since her trick with the Mist against Sciron the bandit, even Jason felt a little nervous around her. He knew that wasn’t fair to Hazel. It was hard enough being a child of Pluto, but she’d pulled off some *serious* magic on that cliff.

And afterward, according to Hazel, Pluto himself had appeared to her. That was something Romans typically called a *bad omen*.

Leo pushed his chips and hot sauce aside. “Well, technically we’ve been in Croatian territory for the past day or so. All that coastline we’ve been sailing past is *it*, but I guess back in the Roman times it was called...what’d you say, Jason? Bodacious?”

“Dalmatia,” Nico said, making Jason jump.

Holy Romulus... Jason wished he could put a bell around Nico di Angelo’s neck to remind him the guy was there. Nico had this disturbing habit of standing silently in the corner, blending into the shadows.

He stepped forward, his dark eyes fixed on Jason. Since they’d rescued him from the bronze jar in Rome, Nico had slept very little and eaten even less, as if he

were still subsisting on those emergency pomegranate seeds from the Underworld. He reminded Jason a little too much of a flesh-eating ghoul he'd once fought in San Bernardino.

"Croatia used to be Dalmatia," Nico said. "A major Roman province. You want to visit Diocletian's Palace, don't you?"

Coach Hedge managed another heroic belch. "*Whose* palace? And is Dalmatia where those Dalmatian dogs come from? That *101 Dalmatians* movie—I still have nightmares." Frank scratched his head. "Why would you have nightmares about that?" Coach Hedge looked like he was about to launch into a major speech about the evils of cartoon Dalmatians, but Jason decided he didn't want to know.

"Nico is right," he said. "I need to go to Diocletian's Palace. It's where Reyna will go first, because she knows *I* would go there."

Piper raised an eyebrow. "And why would Reyna think that? Because you've always had a mad fascination with Croatian culture?"

Jason stared at his uneaten sandwich. It was hard to talk about his life before Juno wiped his memory. His years at Camp Jupiter seemed made up, like a movie he'd acted in decades before.

"Reyna and I used to talk about Diocletian," he said. "We both kind of idolized the guy as a leader. We talked about how we'd like to visit Diocletian's Palace. Of course we knew that was impossible. No one could travel to the ancient lands. But still, we made this pact that if we ever *did*, that's where we'd go."

"Diocletian..." Leo considered the name, then shook his head. "I got nothing. Why was he so important?"

Frank looked offended. "He was the last great pagan emperor!" Leo rolled his eyes. "Why am I not surprised you know that, Zhang?"

"Why wouldn't I? He was the last one who worshipped the Olympian gods, before Constantine came along and adopted Christianity."

Hazel nodded. "I remember something about that. The nuns at St. Agnes taught us that Diocletian was a huge villain, right along with Nero and Caligula." She

looked askance at Jason. “Why would you idolize him?”

“He wasn’t a *total* villain,” Jason said. “Yeah, he persecuted Christians, but otherwise he was a good ruler. He worked his way up from nothing by joining the legion. His parents were former slaves...or at least his *mom* was. Demigods know he was a son of Jupiter—the last demigod to rule Rome. He was also the first emperor ever to retire, like, *peacefully*, and give up his power. He was from Dalmatia, so he moved back there and built a retirement palace. The town of Split grew up around...”

He faltered when he looked at Leo, who was mimicking taking notes with an air pencil.

“Go on, Professor Grace!” he said, wide-eyed. “I wanna get an A on the test.”

“Shut up, Leo.”

Piper sipped another spoonful of soup. “So why is Diocletian’s Palace so special?” Nico leaned over and plucked a grape. Probably that was the guy’s entire diet for the day. “It’s said to be haunted by the ghost of Diocletian.”

“Who was a son of Jupiter, like me,” Jason said. “His tomb was destroyed centuries ago, but Reyna and I used to wonder if we could find Diocletian’s ghost and ask where he was buried...well, according to the legends, his scepter was buried with him.” Nico gave him a thin, creepy smile. “Ah... *that* legend.”

“What legend?” Hazel asked.

Nico turned to his sister. “Supposedly Diocletian’s scepter could summon the ghosts of the Roman legions, any of them who worshipped the old gods.” Leo whistled. “Okay, *now* I’m interested. Be nice to have a booty-kicking army of pagan zombies on our side when we enter the House of Hades.”

“Not sure I would’ve put it that way,” Jason muttered, “but yeah.”

“We don’t have much time,” Frank warned. “It’s already July ninth. We have to get to Epirus, close the Doors of Death—”

“Which are guarded,” Hazel murmured, “by a smoky giant and a sorceress who wants...” She hesitated. “Well, I’m not sure. But according to Pluto, she plans to

‘rebuild her domain.’ Whatever that means, it’s bad enough that my dad felt like warning me personally.” Frank grunted. “And if we survive all that, we still have to find out where the giants are waking Gaea and get there before the first of August. Besides, the longer Percy and Annabeth are in Tartarus

—”

“I know,” Jason said. “We won’t take long in Split. But looking for the scepter is worth a try.

While we’re at the palace, I can leave a message for Reyna, letting her know the route we’re taking for Epirus.”

Nico nodded. “The scepter of Diocletian could make a huge difference. You’ll need my help.” Jason tried not to show his discomfort, but his skin prickled at the thought of going anywhere with Nico di Angelo.

Percy had shared some disturbing stories about Nico. His loyalties weren’t always clear. He spent more time with the dead than the living. Once, he’d lured Percy into a trap in the palace of Hades. Maybe Nico had made up for that by helping the Greeks against the Titans, but still...

Piper squeezed his hand. “Hey, sounds fun. I’ll go, too.” Jason wanted to yell: *Thank the gods!*

But Nico shook his head. “You can’t, Piper. It should only be Jason and me. Diocletian’s ghost might appear for a son of Jupiter, but any other demigods would most likely...ah, *spook* him. And I’m the only one who can talk to his spirit. Even Hazel won’t be able to do that.” Nico’s eyes held a gleam of challenge. He seemed curious as to whether or not Jason would protest.

The ship’s bell sounded. Festus creaked and whirred over the loudspeaker.

“We’ve arrived,” Leo announced. “Time to Split.”

Frank groaned. “Can we leave Valdez in Croatia?”

Jason stood. “Frank, you’re in charge of defending the ship. Leo, you’ve got repairs to do. The rest of you, help out wherever you can. Nico and I...” He faced the son of Hades. “We have a ghost to find.”

X X X V

JASON

JASON FIRST SAW THE ANGEL AT THE ICE CREAM CART.

The *Argo II* had anchored in the bay along with six or seven cruise ships. As usual, the mortals didn't pay the trireme any attention; but just to be safe, Jason and Nico hopped on a skiff from one of the tourist boats so they would look like part of the crowd when they came ashore.

At first glance, Split seemed like a cool place. Curving around the harbor was a long esplanade lined with palm trees. At the sidewalk cafés, European teenagers were hanging out, speaking a dozen different languages and enjoying the sunny afternoon. The air smelled of grilled meat and fresh-cut flowers.

Beyond the main boulevard, the city was a hodgepodge of medieval castle towers, Roman walls, limestone town houses with red-tiled roofs, and modern office buildings all crammed together. In the distance, gray-green hills marched toward a mountain ridge, which made Jason a little nervous. He kept glancing at that rocky escarpment, expecting the face of Gaea to appear in its shadows.

Nico and he were wandering along the esplanade when Jason spotted the guy with wings buying an ice cream bar from a street cart. The vendor lady looked bored as she counted the guy's change.

Tourists navigated around the angel's huge wings without a second glance.

Jason nudged Nico. “Are you seeing this?”

“Yeah,” Nico agreed. “Maybe we should buy some ice cream.” As they made their way toward the street cart, Jason worried that this winged dude might be a son of Boreas the North Wind. At his side, the angel carried the same kind of jagged bronze sword the Boreads had, and Jason’s last encounter with them hadn’t gone so well.

But this guy seemed more *chill* than chilly. He wore a red tank top, Bermuda shorts, and huarache sandals. His wings were a combination of russet colors, like a bantam rooster or a lazy sunset. He had a deep tan and black hair almost as curly as Leo’s.

“He’s not a returned spirit,” Nico murmured. “Or a creature of the Underworld.”

“No,” Jason agreed. “I doubt they would eat chocolate-covered ice cream bars.”

“So what is he?” Nico wondered.

They got within thirty feet, and the winged dude looked directly at them. He smiled, gestured over his shoulder with his ice cream bar, and dissolved into the air.

Jason couldn’t exactly *see* him, but he’d had enough experience controlling the wind that he could track the angel’s path—a warm wisp of red and gold zipping across the street, spiraling down the sidewalk, and blowing postcards from the carousels in front of the tourist shops. The wind headed toward the end of the promenade, where a big fortresslike structure loomed.

“I’m betting that’s the palace,” Jason said. “Come on.”

Even after two millennia, Diocletian’s Palace was still impressive. The outer wall was only a pink granite shell, with crumbling columns and arched windows open to the sky, but it was mostly intact, a quarter mile long and seventy or eighty feet tall, dwarfing the modern shops and houses that huddled beneath it. Jason imagined what the palace must have looked like when it was newly built, with Imperial guards walking the ramparts and the golden eagles of Rome glinting on the parapets.

The wind angel—or whatever he was—whisked in and out of the pink granite

windows, then disappeared on the other side. Jason scanned the palace's facade for an entrance. The only one he saw was several blocks away, with tourists lined up to buy tickets. No time for that.

"We've got to catch him," Jason said. "Hold on."

"But—"

Jason grabbed Nico and lifted them both into the air.

Nico made a muffled sound of protest as they soared over the walls and into a courtyard where more tourists were milling around, taking pictures.

A little kid did a double take when they landed. Then his eyes glazed over and he shook his head, like he was dismissing a juice-box-induced hallucination. No one else paid them any attention.

On the left side of the courtyard stood a line of columns holding up weathered gray arches. On the right side was a white marble building with rows of tall windows.

"The peristyle," Nico said. "This was the entrance to Diocletian's private residence." He scowled at Jason. "And please, I don't like being touched. Don't ever grab me again." Jason's shoulder blades tensed. He thought he heard the undertone of a threat, like: *unless you want to get a Stygian sword up your nose*. "Uh, okay. Sorry. How do you know what this place is called?"

Nico scanned the atrium. He focused on some steps in the far corner, leading down.

"I've been here before." His eyes were as dark as his blade. "With my mother and Bianca. A weekend trip from Venice. I was maybe...six?"

"That was when...the 1930s?"

"Thirty-eight or so," Nico said absently. "Why do you care? Do you see that winged guy anywhere?"

"No..." Jason was still trying to wrap his mind around Nico's past.

Jason always tried to build a good relationship with the people on his team. He'd learned the hard way that if somebody was going to have your back in a fight, it was better if you found some common ground and trusted each other. But Nico wasn't easy to figure out. "I just...I can't imagine how weird that must be, coming from another time."

"No, you *can't*." Nico stared at the stone floor. He took a deep breath.

"Look...I don't like talking about it. Honestly, I think Hazel has it worse. She remembers more about when she was young. She had to come back from the dead and adjust to the modern world.

Me...me and Bianca, we were stuck at the Lotus Hotel. Time passed so quickly. In a weird way, that made the transition easier."

"Percy told me about that place," Jason said. "Seventy years, but it only felt like a month?" Nico clenched his fist until his fingers turned white. "Yeah. I'm sure Percy told you all about me."

His voice was heavy with bitterness—more than Jason could understand. He knew that Nico had blamed Percy for getting his sister Bianca killed, but they'd supposedly gotten past that, at least according to Percy. Piper had also mentioned a rumor that Nico had a crush on Annabeth. Maybe that was part of it.

Still... Jason didn't get why Nico pushed people away, why he never spent much time at either camp, why he preferred the dead to the living. He *really* didn't get why Nico had promised to lead the *Argo II* to Epirus if he hated Percy Jackson so much.

Nico's eyes swept the windows above them. "Roman dead are everywhere here... Lares.

Lemures. They're watching. They're angry."

"At us?" Jason's hand went to his sword.

"At everything." Nico pointed to a small stone building on the west end of the courtyard. "That used to be a temple to Jupiter. The Christians changed it to a baptistery. The Roman ghosts don't like that."

Jason stared at the dark doorway.

He'd never met Jupiter, but he thought of his father as a living person—the guy who'd fallen in love with his mom. Of course he knew his dad was immortal, but somehow the full meaning of that had never really sunk in until now, as he stared at a doorway Romans had walked through, thousands of years ago, to worship *his* dad. The idea gave Jason a splitting headache.

“And over there...” Nico pointed east to a hexagonal building ringed with freestanding columns.

“That was the mausoleum of the emperor.”

“But his tomb isn't there anymore,” Jason guessed.

“Not for centuries,” Nico said. “When the empire collapsed, the building was turned into a Christian cathedral.”

Jason swallowed. “So if Diocletian's ghost is still around here—”

“He's probably not happy.”

The wind rustled, pushing leaves and food wrappers across the peristyle. In the corner of his eye, Jason caught a glimpse of movement—a blur of red and gold.

When he turned, a single rust-colored feather was settling on the steps that led down.

“That way.” Jason pointed. “The winged guy. Where do you think those stairs lead?” Nico drew his sword. His smile was even more unsettling than his scowl. “Underground,” he said. “My favorite place.”

Underground was *not* Jason's favorite place.

Ever since his trip beneath Rome with Piper and Percy, fighting those twin giants in the hypogeum under the Colosseum, most of his nightmares were about basements, trapdoors, and large hamster wheels.

Having Nico along was not reassuring. His Stygian iron blade seemed to make the shadows even gloomier, as if the infernal metal was drawing the light and

heat out of the air.

They crept through a vast cellar with thick support columns holding up a vaulted ceiling. The limestone blocks were so old, they had fused together from centuries of moisture, making the place look almost like a naturally formed cave.

None of the tourists had ventured down here. Obviously, they were smarter than demigods.

Jason drew his *gladius*. They made their way under the low archways, their steps echoing on the stone floor. Barred windows lined the top of one wall, facing the street level, but that just made the cellar feel more claustrophobic. The shafts of sunlight looked like slanted prison bars, swirling with ancient dust.

Jason passed a support beam, looked to his left, and almost had a heart attack. Staring right at him was a marble bust of Diocletian, his limestone face glowering with disapproval.

Jason steadied his breathing. This seemed like a good place to leave the note he'd written for Reyna, telling her of their route to Epirus. It was away from the crowds, but he trusted Reyna would find it. She had the instincts of a hunter. He slipped the note between the bust and its pedestal, and stepped back.

Diocletian's marble eyes made him jumpy. Jason couldn't help thinking of Terminus, the talking statue-god back at New Rome. He hoped Diocletian didn't bark at him or suddenly burst into song.

"Hello!"

Before Jason could register that the voice had come from somewhere else, he sliced off the emperor's head. The bust toppled and shattered against the floor.

"That wasn't very nice," said the voice behind them.

Jason turned. The winged man from the ice cream stand was leaning against a nearby column, casually tossing a small bronze hoop in the air. At his feet sat a wicker picnic basket full of fruit.

"I mean," the man said, "what did Diocletian ever do to you?" The air swirled around Jason's feet. The shards of marble gathered into a miniature tornado,

spiraled back to the pedestal, and reassembled into a complete bust, the note still tucked underneath.

“Uh—” Jason lowered his sword. “It was an accident. You startled me.” The winged dude chuckled. “Jason Grace, the West Wind has been called many things...warm, gentle, life-giving, and devilishly handsome. But I have never been called *startling*. I leave that crass behavior to my gusty brethren in the north.”

Nico inched backward. “The West Wind? You mean you’re—”

“Favonius,” Jason realized. “God of the West Wind.”

Favonius smiled and bowed, obviously pleased to be recognized. “You can call me by my Roman name, certainly, or Zephyros, if you’re Greek. I’m not hung up about it.” Nico looked pretty hung up about it. “Why aren’t your Greek and Roman sides in conflict, like the other gods?”

“Oh, I have the occasional headache.” Favonius shrugged. “Some mornings I’ll wake up in a Greek *chiton* when I’m sure I went to sleep in my SPQR pajamas. But mostly the war doesn’t bother me. I’m a minor god, you know—never really been much in the limelight. The to-and-fro battles among you demigods don’t affect me as greatly.”

“So...” Jason wasn’t quite sure whether to sheathe his sword. “What are you doing here?”

“Several things!” Favonius said. “Hanging out with my basket of fruit. I always carry a basket of fruit. Would you like a pear?”

“I’m good. Thanks.”

“Let’s see...earlier I was eating ice cream. Right now I’m tossing this quoit ring.” Favonius spun the bronze hoop on his index finger.

Jason had no idea what a *quoit* was, but he tried to stay focused. “I mean why did you appear to us? Why did you lead us to this cellar?”

“Oh!” Favonius nodded. “The sarcophagus of Diocletian. Yes. This was its final resting place.

The Christians moved it out of the mausoleum. Then some barbarians destroyed the coffin. I just wanted to show you”—he spread his hands sadly—“that what you’re looking for isn’t here. My master has taken it.”

“Your master?” Jason had a flashback to a floating palace above Pikes Peak in Colorado, where he’d visited (and barely survived) the studio of a crazy weatherman who claimed he was the god of all the winds. “Please tell me your master isn’t Aeolus.”

“*That* airhead?” Favonius snorted. “No, of course not.”

“He means Eros.” Nico’s voice turned edgy. “Cupid, in Latin.” Favonius smiled. “Very good, Nico di Angelo. I’m glad to see you again, by the way. It’s been a long time.”

Nico knit his eyebrows. “I’ve never met you.”

“You’ve never *seen* me,” the god corrected. “But I’ve been watching you. When you came here as a small boy, and several times since. I knew eventually you would return to look upon my master’s face.”

Nico turned even paler than usual. His eyes darted around the cavernous room as if he was starting to feel trapped.

“Nico?” Jason said. “What’s he talking about?”

“I don’t know. Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Favonius cried. “The one you care for most...plunged into Tartarus, and still you will not allow the truth?”

Suddenly Jason felt like he was eavesdropping.

The one you care for most.

He remembered what Piper had told him about Nico’s crush on Annabeth. Apparently Nico’s feelings went *way* deeper than a simple crush.

“We’ve only come for Diocletian’s scepter,” Nico said, clearly anxious to change the subject.

“Where is it?”

“Ah...” Favonius nodded sadly. “You thought it would be as easy as facing Diocletian’s ghost?”

I’m afraid not, Nico. Your trials will be *much* more difficult. You know, long before this was Diocletian’s Palace, it was the gateway to my master’s court. I’ve dwelt here for eons, bringing those who sought love into the presence of Cupid.”

Jason didn’t like the mention of difficult trials. He didn’t trust this weird god with the hoop and the wings and the basket of fruit. But an old story surfaced in his mind—something he’d heard at Camp Jupiter. “Like Psyche, Cupid’s wife. You carried her to his palace.” Favonius’s eyes twinkled. “Very good, Jason Grace. From this exact spot, I carried Psyche on the winds and brought her to the chambers of my master. In fact, that is why Diocletian built *his* palace here. This place has always been graced by the gentle West Wind.” He spread his arms. “It is a spot of tranquility and love in a turbulent world. When Diocletian’s Palace was ransacked—”

“You took the scepter,” Jason guessed.

“For safekeeping,” Favonius agreed. “It is one of Cupid’s many treasures, a reminder of better times. If you want it...” Favonius turned to Nico. “You must face the god of love.” Nico stared at the sunlight coming through the windows, as if wishing he could escape through those narrow openings.

Jason wasn’t sure what Favonius wanted, but if *facing the god of love* meant forcing Nico into some sort of confession about which girl he liked, that didn’t seem so bad.

“Nico, you can do this,” Jason said. “It might be embarrassing, but it’s for the scepter.” Nico didn’t look convinced. In fact he looked like he was going to be sick. But he squared his shoulders and nodded. “You’re right. I—I’m not afraid of a love god.” Favonius beamed. “Excellent! Would you like a snack before you go?” He plucked a green apple from his basket and frowned at it. “Oh, bluster. I keep forgetting my symbol is a basket of *unripe* fruit.

Why doesn’t the spring wind get more credit? Summer has *all* the fun.”

“That’s okay,” Nico said quickly. “Just take us to Cupid.” Favonius spun the hoop on his finger, and Jason’s body dissolved into air.

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JASON

JASON HAD RIDDEN THE WIND MANY TIMES. *Being the wind was not the same.*

He felt out of control, his thoughts scattered, no boundaries between his body and the rest of the world. He wondered if this was how monsters felt when they were defeated—bursting into dust, helpless and formless.

Jason could sense Nico’s presence nearby. The West Wind carried them into the sky above Split. Together they raced over the hills, past Roman aqueducts, highways, and vineyards. As they approached the mountains, Jason saw the ruins of a Roman town spread out in a valley below—

crumbling walls, square foundations, and cracked roads, all overgrown with grass—so it looked like a giant, mossy game board.

Favonius set them down in the middle of the ruins, next to a broken column the size of a redwood.

Jason’s body re-formed. For a moment it felt even worse than being the wind, like he’d suddenly been wrapped in a lead overcoat.

“Yes, mortal bodies are *terribly* bulky,” Favonius said, as if reading his thoughts. The wind god settled on a nearby wall with his basket of fruit and spread his russet wings in the sun. “Honestly, I don’t know how you stand it, day in and day out.”

Jason scanned their surroundings. The town must have been huge once. He could make out the shells of temples and bathhouses, a half-buried amphitheater, and empty pedestals that must have once held statues. Rows of columns marched off to nowhere. The old city walls wove in and out of the hillside like stone thread through a green cloth.

Some areas looked like they’d been excavated, but most of the city just seemed abandoned, as if it had been left to the elements for the last two thousand years.

“Welcome to Salona,” Favonius said. “Capital of Dalmatia! Birthplace of Diocletian! But before that, *long* before that, it was the home of Cupid.” The name echoed, as if voices were whispering it through the ruins.

Something about this place seemed even creepier than the palace basement in Split. Jason had never thought much about Cupid. He’d certainly never thought of Cupid as *scary*. Even for Roman demigods, the name conjured up an image of a silly winged baby with a toy bow and arrow, flying around in his diapers on Valentine’s Day.

“Oh, he’s not like that,” said Favonius.

Jason flinched. “You can read my mind?”

“I don’t need to.” Favonius tossed his bronze hoop in the air. “*Everyone* has the wrong impression of Cupid...until they meet him.”

Nico braced himself against a column, his legs trembling visibly.

“Hey, man...” Jason stepped toward him, but Nico waved him off.

At Nico’s feet, the grass turned brown and wilted. The dead patch spread outward, as if poison were seeping from the soles of his shoes.

“Ah...” Favonius nodded sympathetically. “I don’t blame you for being nervous, Nico di Angelo. Do you know how *I* ended up serving Cupid?”

“I don’t serve anyone,” Nico muttered. “Especially not Cupid.” Favonius continued as if he hadn’t heard. “I fell in love with a mortal named Hyacinthus. He was *quite* extraordinary.”

“He...?” Jason’s brain was still fuzzy from his wind trip, so it took him a second to process that.

“Oh...”

“Yes, Jason Grace.” Favonius arched an eyebrow. “I fell in love with a *dude*. Does that shock you?”

Honestly, Jason wasn’t sure. He tried not to think about the details of godly love lives, no matter *who* they fell in love with. After all, his dad, Jupiter, wasn’t exactly a model of good behavior.

Compared to some of the Olympian love scandals he’d heard about, the West Wind falling in love with a mortal guy didn’t seem very shocking. “I guess not. So...Cupid struck you with his arrow, and you fell in love.”

Favonius snorted. “You make it sound so simple. Alas, love is never simple. You see, the god Apollo also liked Hyacinthus. He claimed they were just friends. I don’t know. But one day I came across them together, playing a game of quoits—”

There was that weird word again. “Quoits?”

“A game with those hoops,” Nico explained, though his voice was brittle. “Like horseshoes.”

“Sort of,” Favonius said. “At any rate, I was jealous. Instead of confronting them and finding out the truth, I shifted the wind and sent a heavy metal ring right at Hyacinthus’s head and...well.” The wind god sighed. “As Hyacinthus died, Apollo turned him into a flower, the hyacinth. I’m sure Apollo would’ve taken horrible vengeance on me, but Cupid offered me his protection. I’d done a terrible thing, but I’d been driven mad by love, so he spared me, on the condition that I work for him forever.” *CUPID*.

The name echoed through the ruins again.

“That would be my cue.” Favonius stood. “Think long and hard about how you proceed, Nico di Angelo. You cannot lie to Cupid. If you let your anger rule you...well, your fate will be even sadder than mine.”

Jason felt like his brain was turning back into wind. He didn’t understand what Favonius was talking about, or why Nico seemed so shaken, but he had no time to think about it. The wind god disappeared in a swirl of red and gold. The summer air suddenly felt oppressive. The ground shook, and Jason and Nico drew their swords.

So.

The voice rushed past Jason’s ear like a bullet. When he turned, no one was there.

You come to claim the scepter.

Nico stood at his back, and for once Jason was glad to have the guy’s company.

“Cupid,” Jason called, “where are you?”

The voice laughed. It definitely didn’t *sound* like a cute baby angel’s. It sounded deep and rich, but also threatening—like a tremor before a major earthquake.

Where you least expect me, Cupid answered. As Love always is.

Something slammed into Jason and hurled him across the street. He toppled down a set of steps and sprawled on the floor of an excavated Roman basement.

I would think you’d know better, Jason Grace. Cupid’s voice whirled around him. You’ve found true love, after all. Or do you still doubt yourself?

Nico scrambled down the steps. “You okay?”

Jason accepted his hand and got to his feet. “Yeah. Just sucker punched.” *Oh, did you expect me to play fair?* Cupid laughed. *I am the god of love. I am never fair.*

This time, Jason’s senses were on high alert. He felt the air ripple just as an arrow materialized, racing toward Nico’s chest.

Jason intercepted it with his sword and deflected it sideways. The arrow exploded against the nearest wall, peppering them with limestone shrapnel.

They ran up the steps. Jason pulled Nico to one side as another gust of wind toppled a column that would have crushed him flat.

“Is this guy Love or Death?” Jason growled.

Ask your friends, Cupid said. Frank, Hazel, and Percy met my counterpart, Thanatos. We are not so different. Except Death is sometimes kinder.

“We just want the scepter!” Nico shouted. “We’re trying to stop Gaea. Are you on the gods’ side or not?”

A second arrow hit the ground between Nico’s feet and glowed white-hot. Nico stumbled back as the arrow burst into a geyser of flame.

Love is on every side, Cupid said. And no one’s side. Don’t ask what Love can do for you.

“Great,” Jason said. “Now he’s spouting greeting card messages.” Movement behind him: Jason spun, slicing his sword through the air. His blade bit into something solid. He heard a grunt and he swung again, but the invisible god was gone. On the paving stones, a trail of golden ichor shimmered—the blood of the gods.

Very good, Jason, Cupid said. At least you can sense my presence. Even a glancing hit at true love is more than most heroes manage.

“So now I get the scepter?” Jason asked.

Cupid laughed. *Unfortunately, you could not wield it. Only a child of the Underworld can summon the dead legions. And only an officer of Rome can lead them.*

“But...” Jason wavered. He was an officer. He was praetor. Then he remembered all his second thoughts about where he belonged. In New Rome, he’d offered to give up his position to Percy Jackson. Did that make him unworthy to lead a legion of Roman ghosts?

He decided to face that problem when the time came.

“Just leave that to us,” he said. “Nico can summon—”

The third arrow zipped by Jason’s shoulder. He couldn’t stop it in time. Nico gasped as it sunk into his sword arm.

“Nico!”

The son of Hades stumbled. The arrow dissolved, leaving no blood and no visible wound, but Nico’s face was tight with rage and pain.

“Enough games!” Nico shouted. “Show yourself!”

It is a costly thing, Cupid said, looking on the true face of Love.

Another column toppled. Jason scrambled out of its way.

My wife Psyche learned that lesson, Cupid said. She was brought here eons ago, when this was the site of my palace. We met only in the dark. She was warned never to look upon me, and yet she could not stand the mystery. She feared I was a monster. One night, she lit a candle, and beheld my face as I slept.

“Were you *that* ugly?” Jason thought he had zeroed in on Cupid’s voice—at the edge of the amphitheater about twenty yards away—but he wanted to make sure.

The god laughed. *I was too handsome, I’m afraid. A mortal cannot gaze upon the true appearance of a god without suffering consequences. My mother, Aphrodite, cursed Psyche for her distrust. My poor lover was tormented, forced into exile, given horrible tasks to prove her worth.*

She was even sent to the Underworld on a quest to show her dedication. She earned her way back to my side, but she suffered greatly.

Now I’ve got you, Jason thought.

He thrust his sword in the sky and thunder shook the valley. Lightning blasted a crater where the voice had been speaking.

Silence. Jason was just thinking, *Dang, it actually worked,* when an invisible

force knocked him to the ground. His sword skittered across the road.

A good try, Cupid said, his voice already distant. But Love cannot be pinned down so easily.

Next to him, a wall collapsed. Jason barely managed to roll aside.

“Stop it!” Nico yelled. “It’s me you want. Leave him alone!” Jason’s ears rang. He was dizzy from getting smacked around. His mouth tasted like limestone dust. He didn’t understand why Nico would think of himself as the main target, but Cupid seemed to agree.

Poor Nico di Angelo. The god’s voice was tinged with disappointment. Do you know what you want, much less what I want? My beloved Psyche risked everything in the name of Love. It was the only way to atone for her lack of faith. And you—what have you risked in my name?

“I’ve been to Tartarus and back,” Nico snarled. “You don’t scare me.” *I scare you very, very much. Face me. Be honest.*

Jason pulled himself up.

All around Nico, the ground shifted. The grass withered, and the stones cracked as if something was moving in the earth beneath, trying to push its way through.

“Give us Diocletian’s scepter,” Nico said. “We don’t have time for games.” *Games? Cupid struck, slapping Nico sideways into a granite pedestal. Love is no game! It is no flowery softness! It is hard work—a quest that never ends. It demands everything from you*

—especially the truth. Only then does it yield rewards.

Jason retrieved his sword. If this invisible guy was Love, Jason was beginning to think Love was overrated. He liked Piper’s version better—considerate, kind, and beautiful. Aphrodite he could understand. Cupid seemed more like a thug, an enforcer.

“Nico,” he called, “what does this guy want from you?” *Tell him, Nico di Angelo, Cupid said. Tell him you are a coward, afraid of yourself and your feelings. Tell him the real reason you ran from Camp Half-Blood, and why you*

are always alone.

Nico let loose a guttural scream. The ground at his feet split open and skeletons crawled forth—

dead Romans with missing hands and caved-in skulls, cracked ribs, and jaws unhinged. Some were dressed in the remnants of togas. Others had glinting pieces of armor hanging off their chests.

Will you hide among the dead, as you always do? Cupid taunted.

Waves of darkness rolled off the son of Hades. When they hit Jason, he almost lost consciousness—overwhelmed by hatred and fear and shame...

Images flashed through his mind. He saw Nico and his sister on a snowy cliff in Maine, Percy Jackson protecting them from a mantichore. Percy's sword gleamed in the dark. He'd been the first demigod Nico had ever seen in action.

Later, at Camp Half-Blood, Percy took Nico by the arm, promising to keep his sister Bianca safe. Nico believed him. Nico looked into his sea-green eyes and thought, *How can he possibly fail?*

This is a real hero. He was Nico's favorite game, Mythomagic, brought to life.

Jason saw the moment when Percy returned and told Nico that Bianca was dead. Nico had screamed and called him a liar. He'd felt betrayed, but still...when the skeleton warriors attacked, he couldn't let them harm Percy. Nico had called on the earth to swallow them up, and then he'd run away—terrified of his own powers, and his own emotions.

Jason saw a dozen more scenes like this from Nico's point of view.... And they left him stunned, unable to move or speak.

Meanwhile, Nico's Roman skeletons surged forward and grappled with something invisible. The god struggled, flinging the dead aside, breaking off ribs and skulls, but the skeletons kept coming, pinning the god's arms.

Interesting! Cupid said. *Do you have the strength, after all?*

"I left Camp Half-Blood because of love," Nico said. "Annabeth...she—" *Still*

hiding, Cupid said, smashing another skeleton to pieces. *You do not have the strength.*

“Nico,” Jason managed to say, “it’s okay. I get it.”

Nico glanced over, pain and misery washing across his face.

“No, you don’t,” he said. “There’s no way you can understand.” *And so you run away again*, Cupid chided. *From your friends, from yourself.*

“I don’t have friends!” Nico yelled. “I left Camp Half-Blood because I don’t belong! I’ll never belong!”

The skeletons had Cupid pinned now, but the invisible god laughed so cruelly that Jason wanted to summon another bolt of lightning. Unfortunately, he doubted he had the strength.

“Leave him alone, Cupid,” Jason croaked. “This isn’t...”

His voice failed. He wanted to say it wasn’t Cupid’s business, but he realized this was *exactly* Cupid’s business. Something Favonius said kept buzzing in his ears: *Are you shocked?*

The story of Psyche finally made sense to him—why a mortal girl would be so afraid. Why she would risk breaking the rules to look the god of love in the face, because she feared he might be a monster.

Psyche had been right. Cupid *was* a monster. Love was the most savage monster of all.

Nico’s voice was like broken glass. “I—I wasn’t in love with Annabeth.”

“You were jealous of her,” Jason said. “That’s why you didn’t want to be around her. Especially why you didn’t want to be around...him. It makes total sense.” All the fight and denial seemed to go out of Nico at once. The darkness subsided. The Roman dead collapsed into bones and crumbled to dust.

“I hated myself,” Nico said. “I hated Percy Jackson.”

Cupid became visible—a lean, muscular young man with snowy white wings,

straight black hair, a simple white frock and jeans. The bow and quiver slung over his shoulder were no toys—they were weapons of war. His eyes were as red as blood, as if every Valentine in the world had been squeezed dry, distilled into one poisonous mixture. His face was handsome, but also harsh—as difficult to look at as a spotlight. He watched Nico with satisfaction, as if he'd identified the exact spot for his next arrow to make a clean kill.

“I had a crush on Percy,” Nico spat. “That’s the truth. That’s the big secret.” He glared at Cupid. “Happy now?”

For the first time, Cupid’s gaze seemed sympathetic. “Oh, I wouldn’t say Love always makes you happy.” His voice sounded smaller, much more human. “Sometimes it makes you incredibly sad.

But at least you’ve *faced* it now. That’s the only way to conquer me.” Cupid dissolved into the wind.

On the ground where he’d stood lay an ivory staff three feet long, topped with a dark globe of polished marble about the size of a baseball, nestled on the backs of three gold Roman eagles. The scepter of Diocletian.

Nico knelt and picked it up. He regarded Jason, as if waiting for an attack. “If the others found out—”

“If the others found out,” Jason said, “you’d have that many more people to back you up, and to unleash the fury of the gods on anybody who gives you trouble.” Nico scowled. Jason still felt the resentment and anger rippling off him.

“But it’s your call,” Jason added. “Your decision to share or not. I can only tell you—”

“I don’t feel that way anymore,” Nico muttered. “I mean...I gave up on Percy. I was young and impressionable, and I—I don’t...”

His voice cracked, and Jason could tell the guy was about to get teary-eyed. Whether Nico had really given up on Percy or not, Jason couldn’t imagine what it had been like for Nico all those years, keeping a secret that would’ve been unthinkable to share in the 1940s, denying who he was, feeling completely alone—even more isolated than other demigods.

“Nico,” he said gently, “I’ve seen a lot of brave things. But what you just did? That was maybe the bravest.”

Nico looked up uncertainly. “We should get back to the ship.”

“Yeah. I can fly us—”

“No,” Nico announced. “This time we’re shadow-traveling. I’ve had enough of the winds for a while.”

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ANNABETH

LOSING HER SIGHT HAD BEEN BAD ENOUGH. Being isolated from Percy had been horrible.

But now that she could see again, watching him die slowly from gorgon’s blood poison and being unable to do anything about it—that was the worst curse of all.

Bob slung Percy over his shoulder like a bag of sports equipment while the skeleton kitten Small Bob curled up on Percy’s back and purred. Bob lumbered along at a fast pace, even for a Titan, which made it almost impossible for Annabeth to keep up.

Her lungs rattled. Her skin had started to blister again. She probably needed another drink of firewater, but they’d left the River Phlegethon behind. Her body was so sore and battered that she’d forgotten what it was like *not* to be in pain.

“How much longer?” she wheezed.

“Almost too long,” Bob called back. “But maybe not.”

Very helpful, Annabeth thought, but she was too winded to say it.

The landscape changed again. They were still going downhill, which should have made traveling easier; but the ground sloped at just the wrong angle—too steep to jog, too treacherous to let her guard down even for a moment. The surface was sometimes loose gravel, sometimes patches of slime.

Annabeth stepped around random bristles sharp enough to impale her foot, and clusters of...well, not rocks exactly. More like warts the size of watermelons. If Annabeth had to guess (and she didn't want to) she supposed Bob was leading her down the length of Tartarus's large intestine.

The air got thicker and stank of sewage. The darkness maybe wasn't quite as intense, but she could only see Bob because of the glint of his white hair and the point of his spear. She noticed he hadn't retracted the spearhead on his broom since their fight with the *arai*. That didn't reassure her.

Percy flopped around, causing the kitten to readjust his nest in the small of Percy's back.

Occasionally Percy would groan in pain, and Annabeth felt like a fist was squeezing her heart.

She flashed back to her tea party with Piper, Hazel, and Aphrodite in Charleston. Gods, that seemed so long ago. Aphrodite had sighed and waxed nostalgic about the good old days of the Civil War—how love and war always went hand in hand.

Aphrodite had gestured proudly to Annabeth, using her as an example for the other girls: *I once promised to make her love life interesting. And didn't I?*

Annabeth had wanted to throttle the goddess of love. She'd had more than her share of *interesting*. Now Annabeth was holding out for a happy ending. Surely that was possible, no matter what the legends said about tragic heroes. There had to be exceptions, right? If suffering led to reward, then Percy and she deserved the grand prize.

She thought about Percy's daydream of New Rome—the two of them settling down there, going to college together. At first, the idea of living among the Romans had appalled her. She had resented them for taking Percy away from her.

Now she would accept that offer gladly.

If only they survived this. If only Reyna had gotten her message. If only a million other long shots paid off.

Stop it, she chided herself.

She had to concentrate on the present, putting one foot in front of the other, taking this downhill intestinal hike one giant wart at a time.

Her knees felt warm and wobbly, like wire hangers bent to the point of snapping. Percy groaned and muttered something she couldn't make out.

Bob stopped suddenly. "Look."

Ahead in the gloom, the terrain leveled out into a black swamp. Sulfur-yellow mist hung in the air. Even without sunlight, there were actual plants—clumps of reeds, scrawny leafless trees, even a few sickly-looking flowers blooming in the muck. Mossy trails wound between bubbling tar pits.

Directly in front of Annabeth, sunk into the bog, were footprints the size of trash-can lids, with long, pointed toes.

Sadly, Annabeth was pretty sure she knew what had made them. "Drakon?"

"Yes." Bob grinned at her. "That is good!"

"Uh...why?"

"Because we are close."

Bob marched into the swamp.

Annabeth wanted to scream. She hated being at the mercy of a Titan—especially one who was slowly recovering his memory and bringing them to see a "good"

giant. She hated forging through a swamp that was obviously the stomping ground of a drakon.

But Bob had Percy. If she hesitated, she would lose them in the dark. She hurried after him, hopping from moss patch to moss patch and praying to Athena that she didn't fall in a sinkhole.

At least the terrain forced Bob to go slower. Once Annabeth caught up, she could walk right behind him and keep an eye on Percy, who was mumbling deliriously, his forehead dangerously hot.

Several times he muttered *Annabeth*, and she fought back a sob. The kitten just purred louder and snuggled up.

Finally the yellow mist parted, revealing a muddy clearing like an island in the muck. The ground was dotted with stunted trees and wart mounds. In the center loomed a large, domed hut made of bones and greenish leather. Smoke rose from a hole in the top. The entrance was covered with curtains of scaly reptile skin, and flanking the entrance, two torches made from colossal femur bones burned bright yellow.

What really caught Annabeth's attention was the drakon skull. Fifty yards into the clearing, about halfway to the hut, a massive oak tree jutted from the ground at a forty-five-degree angle. The jaws of a drakon skull encircled the trunk, as if the oak tree were the dead monster's tongue.

"Yes," Bob murmured. "This is very good."

Nothing about this place felt good to Annabeth.

Before she could protest, Small Bob arched his back and hissed. Behind them, a mighty roar echoed through the swamp—a sound Annabeth had last heard in the Battle of Manhattan.

She turned and saw the drakon charging toward them.

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ANNABETH

THE MOST INSULTING PART?

The drakon was easily the most beautiful thing Annabeth had seen since she had fallen into Tartarus. Its hide was dappled green and yellow, like sunlight through a forest canopy. Its reptilian eyes were Annabeth's favorite shade of sea green (just like Percy's). When its frills unfurled around its head, Annabeth couldn't help but think what a regal and amazing monster it was that was about to kill her.

It was easily as long as a subway train. Its massive talons dug into the mud as it pulled itself forward, its tail whipping from side to side. The drakon hissed, spitting jets of green poison that smoked on the mossy ground and set tar pits on fire, filling the air with the scent of fresh pine and ginger. The monster even *smelled* good. Like most drakons, it was wingless, longer, and more snakelike than a dragon, and it looked hungry.

"Bob," Annabeth said, "what are we facing here?"

"Maeonian drakon," Bob said. "From Maeonia."

More helpful information. Annabeth would've smacked Bob upside the head with his own broom if she could lift it. "Any way we can kill it?"

"Us?" Bob said. "No."

The drakon roared as if to accentuate the point, filling the air with more pine-ginger poison, which would have made an excellent car-freshener scent.

“Get Percy to safety,” Annabeth said. “I’ll distract it.” She had no idea how she would do that, but it was her only choice. She couldn’t let Percy die—

not if she still had the strength to stand.

“You don’t have to,” Bob said. “Any minute—”

“ROOOOOAAAR!”

Annabeth turned as the giant emerged from his hut.

He was about twenty feet tall—typical giant height—with a humanoid upper body, and scaly reptilian legs, like a bipedal dinosaur. He held no weapon. Instead of armor, he wore only a shirt stitched together from sheep hides and green-spotted leather. His skin was cherry red; his beard and hair the color of iron rust, braided with tufts of grass, leaves, and swamp flowers.

He shouted in challenge, but thankfully he wasn’t looking at Annabeth. Bob pulled her out of the way as the giant stormed toward the drakon.

They clashed like some sort of weird Christmas combat scene—the red versus the green. The drakon spewed poison. The giant lunged to one side. He grabbed the oak tree and pulled it from the ground, roots and all. The old skull crumbled to dust as the giant hefted the tree like a baseball bat.

The drakon’s tail lashed around the giant’s waist, dragging him closer to its gnashing teeth. But as soon as the giant was in range, he shoved the tree straight down the monster’s throat.

Annabeth hoped she never had to see such a gruesome scene again. The tree pierced the drakon’s gullet and impaled it to the ground. The roots began to move, digging deeper as they touched the earth, anchoring the oak until it looked like it had stood in that spot for centuries. The drakon shook and thrashed, but it was pinned fast.

The giant brought his fist down on the drakon’s neck. *CRACK*. The monster went limp. It began to dissolve, leaving only scraps of bone, meat, hide, and a

new drakon skull whose open jaws ringed the oak tree.

Bob grunted. “Good one.”

The kitten purred in agreement and started cleaning his paws.

The giant kicked at the drakon’s remains, examining them critically. “No good bones,” he complained. “I wanted a new walking stick. Hmpf. Some good skin for the outhouse, though.” He ripped some soft hide from the drakon’s frills and tucked it in his belt.

“Uh...” Annabeth wanted to ask if the giant really used drakon hide for toilet paper, but she decided against it. “Bob, do you want to introduce us?”

“Annabeth...” Bob patted Percy’s legs. “This is Percy.”

Annabeth hoped the Titan was just messing with her, though Bob’s face revealed nothing.

She gritted her teeth. “I meant the giant. You promised he could help.”

“Promise?” The giant glanced over from his work. His eyes narrowed under his bushy red brows. “A big thing, a promise. Why would Bob promise my help?” Bob shifted his weight. Titans were scary, but Annabeth had never seen one next to a giant before. Compared to the drakon-killer, Bob looked downright runty.

“Damasen is a good giant,” Bob said. “He is peaceful. He can cure poisons.” Annabeth watched the giant Damasen, who was now ripping chunks of bloody meat from the drakon carcass with his bare hands.

“Peaceful,” she said. “Yes, I can see that.”

“Good meat for dinner.” Damasen stood up straight and studied Annabeth, as if she were another potential source of protein. “Come inside. We will have stew. Then we will see about this promise.”

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ANNABETH

COZY.

Annabeth never thought she would describe anything in Tartarus that way, but despite the fact that the giant's hut was as big as a planetarium and constructed of bones, mud, and drakon skin, it definitely felt cozy.

In the center blazed a bonfire made of pitch and bone; yet the smoke was white and odorless, rising through the hole in the middle of the ceiling. The floor was covered with dry marsh grass and gray wool rugs. At one end lay a massive bed of sheepskins and drakon leather. At the other end, freestanding racks were hung with drying plants, cured leather, and what looked like strips of drakon jerky. The whole place smelled of stew, smoke, basil, and thyme.

The only thing that worried Annabeth was the flock of sheep huddled in a pen at the back of the hut.

Annabeth remembered the cave of Polyphemus the Cyclops, who ate demigods and sheep indiscriminately. She wondered if giants had similar tastes.

Part of her was tempted to run, but Bob had already placed Percy in the giant's bed, where he nearly disappeared in the wool and leather. Small Bob hopped off Percy and kneaded the blankets, purring so strongly the bed rattled like a Thousand-Finger Massage.

Damasen plodded to the bonfire. He tossed his drakon meat into a hanging pot that seemed to be made from an old monster skull, then picked up a ladle and began to stir.

Annabeth didn't want to be the next ingredient in his stew, but she'd come here for a reason. She took a deep breath and marched up to Damasen. "My friend is dying. Can you cure him or not?" Her voice caught on the word *friend*. Percy was a lot more than that. Even *boyfriend* really didn't cover it. They'd been through so much together, at this point Percy was *part* of her—a sometimes annoying part, sure, but definitely a part she could not live without.

Damasen looked down at her, glowering under his bushy red eyebrows. Annabeth had met large scary humanoids before, but Damasen unsettled her in a different way. He didn't seem hostile. He radiated sorrow and bitterness, as if he were so wrapped up in his own misery that he resented Annabeth for trying to make him focus on anything else.

"I don't hear words like those in Tartarus," the giant grumbled. "*Friend. Promise.*" Annabeth crossed her arms. "How about *gorgon's blood*? Can you cure that, or did Bob overstate your talents?"

Angering a twenty-foot-tall drakon slayer probably wasn't a wise strategy, but Percy was dying.

She didn't have time for diplomacy.

Damasen scowled at her. "You question my talents? A half-dead mortal straggles into my swamp and questions my talents?"

"Yep," she said.

"Hmph." Damasen handed Bob the ladle. "Stir."

As Bob tended the stew, Damasen perused his drying racks, plucking various leaves and roots.

He popped a fistful of plant material into his mouth, chewed it up, then spat it into a clump of wool.

“Cup of broth,” Damasen ordered.

Bob ladled some stew juice into a hollow gourd. He handed it to Damasen, who dunked the chewed-up gunk ball and stirred it with his finger.

“Gorgon’s blood,” he muttered. “Hardly a challenge for *my* talents.” He lumbered to the bedside and propped up Percy with one hand. Small Bob the kitten sniffed the broth and hissed. He scratched the sheets with his paws like he wanted to bury it.

“You’re going to feed him *that*?” Annabeth asked.

The giant glared at her. “Who is the healer here? You?”

Annabeth shut her mouth. She watched as the giant made Percy sip the broth. Damasen handled him with surprising gentleness, murmuring words of encouragement that she couldn’t quite catch.

With each sip, Percy’s color improved. He drained the cup, and his eyes fluttered open. He looked around with a dazed expression, spotted Annabeth, and gave her a drunken grin. “Feel great.” His eyes rolled up in his head. He fell back in the bed and began to snore.

“A few hours of sleep,” Damasen pronounced. “He’ll be good as new.” Annabeth sobbed with relief.

“Thank you,” she said.

Damasen stared at her mournfully. “Oh, don’t thank me. You’re still doomed. And I require payment for my services.”

Annabeth’s mouth went dry. “Uh...what sort of payment?”

“A story.” The giant’s eyes glittered. “It gets boring in Tartarus. You can tell me your story while we eat, eh?”

Annabeth felt uneasy telling a giant about their plans.

Still, Damasen was a good host. He’d saved Percy. His drakon-meat stew was excellent (especially compared to firewater). His hut was warm and comfortable,

and for the first time since plunging into Tartarus, Annabeth felt like she could relax. Which was ironic, since she was having dinner with a Titan and a giant.

She told Damasen about her life and her adventures with Percy. She explained how Percy had met Bob, wiped his memory in the River Lethe, and left him in the care of Hades.

“Percy was trying to do something good,” she promised Bob. “He didn’t know Hades would be such a creep.”

Even to her, it didn’t sound convincing. Hades was *always* a creep.

She thought about what the *arai* had said—how Nico di Angelo had been the only person to visit Bob in the palace of the Underworld. Nico was one of the least outgoing, least friendly demigods Annabeth knew. Yet he’d been kind to Bob. By convincing Bob that Percy was a friend, Nico had inadvertently saved their lives. Annabeth wondered if she would *ever* figure that guy out.

Bob washed his bowl with his squirt bottle and rag.

Damasen made a rolling gesture with his spoon. “Continue your story, Annabeth Chase.” She explained about their quest in the *Argo II*. When she got to the part about stopping Gaea from waking, she faltered. “She’s, um...she’s your mom, right?” Damasen scraped his bowl. His face was covered with old poison burns, gouges, and scar tissue, so it looked like the surface of an asteroid.

“Yes,” he said. “And Tartarus is my father.” He gestured around the hut. “As you can see, I was a disappointment to my parents. They expected... *more* from me.” Annabeth couldn’t quite wrap her mind around the fact that she was sharing soup with a twenty-foot-tall lizard-legged man whose parents were Earth and the Pit of Darkness.

Olympian gods were hard enough to imagine as parents, but at least they resembled humans. The old primordial gods like Gaea and Tartarus... How could you leave home and ever be independent of your parents, when they literally encompassed the entire world?

“So...” she said. “You don’t mind us fighting your mom?”

Damasen snorted like a bull. “Best of luck. At present, it’s my father you should

worry about.

With him opposing you, you have no chance to survive.”

Suddenly Annabeth didn’t feel so hungry. She put her bowl on the floor. Small Bob came over to check it out.

“Opposing us how?” she asked.

“*All* of this.” Damasen cracked a drakon bone and used a splinter as a toothpick. “All that you see is the body of Tartarus, or at least one manifestation of it. He knows you are here. He tries to thwart your progress at every step. My brethren hunt you. It is remarkable you have lived this long, even with the help of Iapetus.”

Bob scowled when he heard his name. “The defeated ones hunt us, yes. They will be close behind now.”

Damasen spat out his toothpick. “I can obscure your path for a while, long enough for you to rest.

I have power in this swamp. But eventually, they will catch you.”

“My friends must reach the Doors of Death,” Bob said. “That is the way out.”

“Impossible,” Damasen muttered. “The Doors are too well guarded.” Annabeth sat forward. “But you know where they are?”

“Of course. All of Tartarus flows down to one place: his heart. The Doors of Death are there.

But you cannot make it there alive with only Iapetus.”

“Then come with us,” Annabeth said. “Help us.”

“HA!”

Annabeth jumped. In the bed, Percy muttered deliriously in his sleep, “Ha, ha, ha.”

“Child of Athena,” the giant said, “I am not your friend. I helped mortals once,

and you see where it got me.”

“You helped mortals?” Annabeth knew a lot about Greek legends, but she drew a total blank on the name Damasen. “I—I don’t understand.”

“Bad story,” Bob explained. “Good giants have bad stories. Damasen was created to oppose Ares.”

“Yes,” the giant agreed. “Like all my brethren, I was born to answer a certain god. My foe was Ares. But Ares was the god of war. And so, when I was born —”

“You were his opposite,” Annabeth guessed. “You were peaceful.”

“Peaceful for a giant, at least.” Damasen sighed. “I wandered the fields of Maeonia, in the land you now call Turkey. I tended my sheep and collected my herbs. It was a good life. But I would not fight the gods. My mother and father cursed me for that. The final insult: One day the Maeonian drakon killed a human shepherd, a friend of mine, so I hunted the creature down and slew it, thrusting a tree straight through its mouth. I used the power of the earth to regrow the tree’s roots, planting the drakon firmly in the ground. I made sure it would terrorize mortals no more. That was a deed Gaea could not forgive.”

“Because you helped someone?”

“Yes.” Damasen looked ashamed. “Gaea opened the earth, and I was consumed, exiled here in the belly of my father Tartarus, where all the useless flotsam collects—all the bits of creation he does not care for.” The giant plucked a flower out of his hair and regarded it absently. “They let me live, tending my sheep, collecting my herbs, so I might know the uselessness of the life I chose. Every day

—or what passes for day in this lightless place—the Maeonian drakon re-forms and attacks me.

Killing it is my endless task.”

Annabeth gazed around the hut, trying to imagine how many eons Damasen had been exiled here

—slaying the drakon, collecting its bones and hide and meat, knowing it would attack again the next day. She could barely imagine surviving a *week* in Tartarus. Exiling your own son here for centuries

—that was beyond cruel.

“Break the curse,” she blurted out. “Come with us.”

Damasen chuckled sourly. “As simple as that. Don’t you think I have tried to leave this place? It is impossible. No matter which direction I travel, I end up here again. The swamp is the only thing I know—the only destination I can imagine. No, little demigod. My curse has overtaken me. I have no hope left.”

“No hope,” Bob echoed.

“There must be a way.” Annabeth couldn’t stand the expression on the giant’s face. It reminded her of her own father, the few times he’d confessed to her that he still loved Athena. He had looked so sad and defeated, wishing for something he knew was impossible.

“Bob has a plan to reach the Doors of Death,” she insisted. “He said we could hide in some sort of Death Mist.”

“Death Mist?” Damasen scowled at Bob. “You would take them to *Akhlys*?”

“It is the only way,” Bob said.

“You will die,” Damasen said. “Painfully. In darkness. *Akhlys* trusts no one and helps no one.” Bob looked like he wanted to argue, but he pressed his lips together and remained silent.

“Is there another way?” Annabeth asked.

“No,” Damasen said. “The Death Mist...that is the best plan. Unfortunately, it is a terrible plan.” Annabeth felt like she was hanging over the pit again, unable to pull herself up, unable to maintain her grip—left with no good options.

“But isn’t it worth trying?” she asked. “You could return to the mortal world. You could see the sun again.”

Damasen's eyes were like the sockets of the drakon's skull—dark and hollow, devoid of hope.

He flicked a broken bone into the fire and rose to his full height—a massive red warrior in sheepskin and drakon leather, with dried flowers and herbs in his hair. Annabeth could see how he was the *anti-*Ares. Ares was the worst god, blustery and violent. Damasen was the best giant, kind and helpful...and for that, he'd been cursed to eternal torment.

“Get some sleep,” the giant said. “I will prepare supplies for your journey. I am sorry, but I cannot do more.”

Annabeth wanted to argue, but as soon as he said *sleep*, her body betrayed her, despite her resolution never to sleep in Tartarus again. Her belly was full. The fire made a pleasant crackling sound. The herbs in the air reminded her of the hills around Camp Half-Blood in the summer, when the satyrs and naiads gathered wild plants in the lazy afternoons.

“Maybe a little sleep,” she agreed.

Bob scooped her up like a rag doll. She didn't protest. He set her next to Percy on the giant's bed, and she closed her eyes.

X L

ANNABETH

ANNABETH WOKE STARING at the shadows dancing across the hut's

ceiling. She hadn't had a single dream. That was so unusual, she wasn't sure if she'd actually woken up.

As she lay there, Percy snoring next to her and Small Bob purring on her belly, she heard Bob and Damasen deep in conversation.

"You haven't told her," Damasen said.

"No," Bob admitted. "She is already scared."

The giant grumbled. "She *should* be. And if you cannot guide them past Night?" Damasen said *Night* like it was a proper name—an *evil* name.

"I have to," Bob said.

"Why?" Damasen wondered. "What have the demigods given you? They have erased your old self, everything you were. Titans and giants...we are meant to be the foes of the gods and their children. Are we not?"

"Then why did you heal the boy?"

Damasen exhaled. "I have been wondering that myself. Perhaps because the girl goaded me, or perhaps...I find these two demigods intriguing. They are resilient to have made it so far. That is admirable. Still, how can we help them any further? It is not our fate."

"Perhaps," Bob said, uncomfortably. "But...do you like our fate?"

"What a question. Does anyone like his fate?"

"I liked being Bob," Bob murmured. "Before I started to remember..."

"Huh." There was a shuffling sound, as if Damasen was stuffing a leather bag.

"Damasen," the Titan asked, "do you remember the sun?"

The shuffling stopped. Annabeth heard the giant exhale through his nostrils.

"Yes. It was yellow.

When it touched the horizon, it turned the sky beautiful colors."

“I miss the sun,” Bob said. “The stars, too. I would like to say hello to the stars again.”

“Stars...” Damasen said the word as if he’d forgotten its meaning. “Yes. They made silver patterns in the night sky.” He threw something to the floor with a thump. “Bah. This is useless talk.

We cannot—”

In the distance, the Maeonian drakon roared.

Percy sat bolt upright. “What? What—where—what?”

“It’s okay.” Annabeth took his arm.

When he registered that they were together in a giant’s bed with a skeleton cat, he looked more confused than ever. “That noise...where are we?”

“How much do you remember?” she asked.

Percy frowned. His eyes seemed alert. All his wounds had vanished. Except for his tattered clothes and a few layers of dirt and grime, he looked as if he’d never fallen into Tartarus.

“I—the demon grandmothers—and then...not much.”

Damasen loomed over the bed. “There is no time, little mortals. The drakon is returning. I fear its roar will draw the others—my brethren, hunting you. They will be here within minutes.” Annabeth’s pulse quickened. “What will you tell them when they get here?” Damasen’s mouth twitched. “What is there to tell? Nothing of significance, as long as you are gone.”

He tossed them two drakon-leather satchels. “Clothes, food, drink.” Bob was wearing a similar but larger pack. He leaned on his broom, gazing at Annabeth as if still pondering Damasen’s words: *What have the demigods given you? We are meant to be the foes of the gods and their children.*

Suddenly Annabeth was struck by a thought so sharp and clear, it was like a blade from Athena herself.

“The Prophecy of Seven,” she said.

Percy had already climbed out of the bed and was shouldering his pack. He frowned at her.

“What about it?”

Annabeth grabbed Damasen’s hand, startling the giant. His brow furrowed. His skin was as rough as sandstone.

“You *have* to come with us,” she pleaded. “The prophecy says *foes bear arms to the Doors of Death*. I thought it meant Romans and Greeks, but that’s not it. The line means *us*—demigods, a Titan, a giant. We *need* you to close the Doors!”

The drakon roared outside, closer this time. Damasen gently pulled his hand away.

“No, child,” he murmured. “My curse is here. I cannot escape it.”

“Yes, you can,” Annabeth said. “Don’t fight the drakon. Figure out a way to break the cycle!

Find *another* fate.”

Damasen shook his head. “Even if I could, I cannot leave this swamp. It is the only destination I can picture.”

Annabeth’s mind raced. “There *is* another destination. Look at me! Remember my face. When you’re ready, come find me. We’ll take you to the mortal world with us. You can see the sunlight and stars.”

The ground shook. The drakon was close now, stomping through the marsh, blasting trees and moss with its poison spray. Farther away, Annabeth heard the voice of the giant Polybotes, urging his followers forward. “THE SEA GOD’S SON! HE IS CLOSE!”

“Annabeth,” Percy said urgently, “that’s our cue to leave.” Damasen took something from his belt. In his massive hand, the white shard looked like another toothpick; but when he offered it to Annabeth, she realized it was a sword—a blade of dragon bone, honed to a deadly edge, with a simple grip of

leather.

“One last gift for the child of Athena,” rumbled the giant. “I cannot have you walking to your death unarmed. Now, go! Before it is too late.”

Annabeth wanted to sob. She took the sword, but she couldn’t even make herself say thank you.

She knew the giant was meant to fight at their side. That was the answer—but Damasen turned away.

“We must leave,” Bob urged as his kitten climbed onto his shoulder.

“He’s right, Annabeth,” Percy said.

They ran for the entrance. Annabeth didn’t look back as she followed Percy and Bob into the swamp, but she heard Damasen behind them, shouting his battle cry at the advancing drakon, his voice cracking with despair as he faced his old enemy yet again.

X L I

PIPER

PIPER DIDN’T KNOW MUCH about the Mediterranean, but she was pretty sure it wasn’t supposed to freeze in July.

Two days out to sea from Split, gray clouds swallowed the sky. The waves

turned choppy. Cold drizzle sprayed across the deck, forming ice on the rails and the ropes.

“It’s the scepter,” Nico murmured, hefting the ancient staff. “It has to be.” Piper wondered. Ever since Jason and Nico had returned from Diocletian’s Palace, they’d been acting nervous and cagey. Something major had happened there—something Jason wouldn’t share with her.

It made sense that the scepter might have caused this weather change. The black orb on top seemed to leach the color right out of the air. The golden eagles at its base glinted coldly. The scepter could supposedly control the dead, and it *definitely* gave off bad vibes. Coach Hedge had taken one look at the thing, turned pale, and announced that he was going to his room to console himself with Chuck Norris videos. (Although Piper suspected that he was actually making Iris-messages back home to his girlfriend Mellie; the coach had been acting very agitated about her lately, though he wouldn’t tell Piper what was going on.)

So, yes... *maybe* the scepter could cause a freak ice storm. But Piper didn’t think that was it. She feared something else was happening—something even worse.

“We can’t talk up here,” Jason decided. “Let’s postpone the meeting.” They’d all gathered on the quarterdeck to discuss strategy as they got closer to Epirus. Now it was clearly not a good place to hang out. Wind swept frost across the deck. The sea churned beneath them.

Piper didn’t mind the waves so much. The rocking and pitching reminded her of surfing with her dad off the California coast. But she could tell Hazel wasn’t doing well. The poor girl got seasick even in calm waters. She looked like she was trying to swallow a billiard ball.

“Need to—” Hazel gagged and pointed below.

“Yeah, go.” Nico kissed her cheek, which Piper found surprising. He hardly ever made gestures of affection, even to his sister. He seemed to hate physical contact. Kissing Hazel...it was almost like he was saying good-bye.

“I’ll walk you down.” Frank put his arm around Hazel’s waist and helped her to the stairs.

Piper hoped Hazel would be okay. The last few nights, since that fight with Sciron, they'd had some good talks together. Being the only two girls on board was kind of rough. They'd shared stories, complained about the guys' gross habits, and shed some tears together about Annabeth. Hazel had told her what it was like to control the Mist, and Piper had been surprised by how much it sounded like using charmspeak. Piper had offered to help her if she could. In return, Hazel had promised to coach her in sword fighting—a skill at which Piper epically sucked. Piper felt like she had a new friend, which was great... assuming they lived long enough to enjoy the friendship.

Nico brushed some ice from his hair. He frowned at the scepter of Diocletian. "I should put this thing away. If it's really causing the weather, maybe taking it below deck will help..."

"Sure," Jason said.

Nico glanced at Piper and Leo, as if worried what they might say when he was gone. Piper felt his defenses going up, like he was curling into a psychological ball, the way he'd gone into a death trance in that bronze jar.

Once he headed below, Piper studied Jason's face. His eyes were full of concern. What had *happened* in Croatia?

Leo pulled a screwdriver from his belt. "So much for the big team meeting. Looks like it's just us again."

Just us again.

Piper remembered a wintry day in Chicago last December, when the three of them had landed in Millennium Park on their first quest.

Leo hadn't changed much since then, except he seemed more comfortable in his role as a child of Hephaestus. He'd always had too much nervous energy. Now he knew how to use it. His hands were constantly in motion, pulling tools from his belt, working controls, tinkering with his beloved Archimedes sphere. Today he'd removed it from the control panel and shut down Festus the figurehead for maintenance—something about rewiring his processor for a motor-control upgrade with the sphere, whatever the heck that meant.

As for Jason, he looked thinner, taller, and more careworn. His hair had gone

from close-cropped Roman style to longer and shaggier. The groove Sciron had shot across the left side of his scalp was interesting too—almost like a rebellious streak. His icy blue eyes looked older, somehow

—full of worry and responsibility.

Piper knew what her friends whispered about Jason—he was *too* perfect, too straitlaced. If that had ever been true, it wasn't anymore. He'd been battered on this journey, and not just physically. His hardships hadn't weakened him, but he'd been weathered and softened like leather—as if he were becoming a more comfortable version of himself.

And Piper? She could only imagine what Leo and Jason thought when they looked at her. She definitely didn't feel like the same person she'd been last winter.

That first quest to rescue Hera seemed like centuries ago. So much had changed in seven months...she wondered how the gods could stand being alive for thousands of years. How much change had *they* seen? Maybe it wasn't surprising that the Olympians seemed a little crazy. If Piper had lived through three millennia, she would have gone loopy.

She gazed into the cold rain. She would have given anything to be back at Camp Half-Blood, where the weather was controlled even in the winter. The images she'd seen in her knife recently...

well, they didn't give her much to look forward to.

Jason squeezed her shoulder. "Hey, it'll be fine. We're close to Epirus now. Another day or so, if Nico's directions are right."

"Yep." Leo tinkered with his sphere, tapping and nudging one of the jewels on its surface. "By tomorrow morning, we'll reach the western coast of Greece. Then another hour inland, and bang—

House of Hades! I'ma get me the T-shirt!"

"Yay," Piper muttered.

She wasn't anxious to plunge into the darkness again. She still had nightmares

about the nymphaeum and the hypogeum under Rome. In the blade of Katoptris, she'd seen images similar to what Leo and Hazel had described from their dreams—a pale sorceress in a gold dress, her hands weaving golden light in the air like silk on a loom; a giant wrapped in shadows, marching down a long corridor lined with torches. As he passed each one, the flames died. She saw a huge cavern filled with monsters—Cyclopes, Earthborn, and stranger things—surrounding her and her friends, hopelessly outnumbering them.

Every time she saw those images, a voice in her head kept repeating one line over and over.

“Guys,” she said, “I’ve been thinking about the Prophecy of Seven.” It took a lot to get Leo’s attention away from his work, but that did the trick.

“What about it?” he asked. “Like...good stuff, I hope?”

She readjusted her cornucopia’s shoulder strap. Sometimes the horn of plenty seemed so light she forgot about it. Other times it felt like an anvil, as if the river god Achelous was sending out bad thoughts, trying to punish her for taking his horn.

“In Katoptris,” she started, “I keep seeing that giant Clytius—the guy who’s wrapped in shadows. I know his weakness is fire, but in my visions, he snuffs out flames wherever he goes. Any kind of light just gets sucked into his cloud of darkness.”

“Sounds like Nico,” Leo said. “You think they’re related?” Jason scowled. “Hey, man, cut Nico some slack. So, Piper, what about this giant? What are you thinking?”

She and Leo exchanged a quizzical look, like: *Since when does Jason defend Nico di Angelo?*

She decided not to comment.

“I keep thinking about fire,” Piper said. “How we expect Leo to beat this giant because he’s...”

“Hot?” Leo suggested with a grin.

“Um, let’s go with *flammable*. Anyway, that line from the prophecy bothers me: *To storm or fire the world must fall.*”

“Yeah, we know all about it,” Leo promised. “You’re gonna say I’m fire. And Jason here is storm.”

Piper nodded reluctantly. She knew that none of them liked talking about this, but they all must have *felt* it was the truth.

The ship pitched to starboard. Jason grabbed the icy railing. “So you’re worried one of us will endanger the quest, maybe accidentally destroy the world?”

“No,” Piper said. “I think we’ve been reading that line the wrong way. The *world*...the Earth. In Greek, the word for that would be...”

She hesitated, not wanting to say the name aloud, even at sea.

“Gaea.” Jason’s eyes gleamed with sudden interest. “You mean, *to storm or fire Gaea must fall?*”

“Oh...” Leo grinned even wider. “You know, I like your version a lot better. ’Cause if Gaea falls to me, Mr. Fire, that is absolutely copacetic.”

“Or to me...storm.” Jason kissed her. “Piper, that’s brilliant! If you’re right, this is great news.

We just have to figure out which of us destroys Gaea.”

“Maybe.” She felt uneasy getting their hopes up. “But, see, it’s *storm or fire*...” She unsheathed Katoptris and set it on the console. Immediately, the blade flickered, showing the dark shape of the giant Clytius moving through a corridor, snuffing out torches.

“I’m worried about Leo and this fight with Clytius,” she said. “That line in the prophecy makes it sound like only *one* of you can succeed. And if the *storm or fire* part is connected to the third line, *an oath to keep with a final breath*...”

She didn’t finish the thought, but from Jason’s and Leo’s expressions, she saw that they understood. If she was reading the prophecy right, either Leo or Jason would defeat Gaea. The other one would die.

PIPER

LEO STARED AT THE DAGGER. “Okay...so I don’t like your idea as much as I thought. You think one of us defeats Gaea and the other one dies? Or maybe one of us dies *while* defeating her? Or—”

“Guys,” Jason said, “we’ll drive ourselves crazy overthinking it. You know how prophecies are.

Heroes always get in trouble trying to thwart them.”

“Yeah,” Leo muttered. “We’d *hate* to get in trouble. We’ve got it so good right now.”

“You know what I mean,” Jason said. “The *final breath* line might not be connected to the *storm and fire* part. For all we know, the two of us aren’t even storm and fire. Percy can raise hurricanes.”

“And I could always set Coach Hedge on fire,” Leo volunteered. “Then *he* can be fire.” The thought of a blazing satyr screaming, “Die, scumbag!” as he attacked Gaea was almost enough to make Piper laugh— almost.

“I hope I’m wrong,” she said cautiously. “But the whole quest started with us finding Hera and waking that giant king Porphyron. I have a feeling the war will end with us too. For better or worse.”

“Hey,” Jason said, “personally, I *like* us.”

“Agreed,” Leo said. “*Us* is my favorite people.”

Piper managed a smile. She really did love these guys. She wished she could use her charmspeak on the Fates, describe a happy ending, and force them to make it come true.

Unfortunately, it was hard to imagine a happy ending with all the dark thoughts in her head. She worried that the giant Clytius had been put in their path to eliminate Leo as a threat. If so, that meant Gaea would also try to eliminate Jason. Without storm or fire, their quest couldn't succeed.

And this wintry weather bothered her too... She felt certain it was being caused by something more than just Diocletian's scepter. The cold wind, the mix of ice and rain seemed actively hostile, and somehow familiar.

That smell in the air, the thick smell of...

Piper should have understood what was happening sooner, but she'd spent most of her life in Southern California with no major changes of season. She hadn't grown up with that smell...the smell of impending snow.

Every muscle in her body tensed. “Leo, sound the alarm.” Piper hadn't realized she was charmspeaking, but Leo immediately dropped his screwdriver and punched the alarm button. He frowned when nothing happened.

“Uh, it's disconnected,” he remembered. “Festus is shut down. Gimme a minute to get the system back online.”

“We don't have a minute! Fires—we need vials of Greek fire. Jason, call the winds. Warm, southerly winds.”

“Wait, what?” Jason stared at her in confusion. “Piper, what's wrong?”

“It's her!” Piper snatched up her dagger. “She's back! We have to—” Before she could finish, the boat listed to port. The temperature dropped so fast, the sails crackled with ice. The bronze shields along the rails popped like over-pressurized soda cans.

Jason drew his sword, but it was too late. A wave of ice particles swept over him, coating him like a glazed donut and freezing him in place. Under a layer of ice, his eyes were wide with amazement.

“Leo! Flames! Now!” Piper yelled.

Leo’s right hand blazed, but the wind swirled around him and doused the fire. Leo clutched his Archimedes sphere as a funnel cloud of sleet lifted him off his feet.

“Hey!” he yelled. “Hey! Let me go!”

Piper ran toward him, but a voice in the storm said, “Oh, yes, Leo Valdez. I will let you go *permanently*.”

Leo shot skyward, like he’d been launched from a catapult. He disappeared into the clouds.

“No!” Piper raised her knife, but there was nothing to attack. She looked desperately at the stairwell, hoping to see her friends charging to the rescue, but a block of ice had sealed the hatch. The whole lower deck might have been frozen solid.

She needed a better weapon to fight with—something more than her voice, a stupid fortune-telling dagger, and a cornucopia that shot ham and fresh fruit.

She wondered whether she could make it to the ballista.

Then her enemies appeared, and she realized that no weapon would be enough.

Standing amidships was a girl in a flowing dress of white silk, her mane of black hair pinned back with a circlet of diamonds. Her eyes were the color of coffee, but without the warmth.

Behind her stood her brothers—two young men with purple-feathered wings, stark white hair, and jagged swords of Celestial bronze.

“So good to see you again, *ma chère*,” said Khione, the goddess of snow. “It’s time we had a very cold reunion.”

PIPER

PIPER DIDN'T PLAN TO SHOOT BLUEBERRY MUFFINS. The cornucopia must have sensed her distress and thought she and her visitors could use some warm baked goods.

Half a dozen steamy muffins flew from the horn of plenty like buckshot. It wasn't the most effective opening attack.

Khione simply leaned to one side. Most of the muffins sailed past her over the rail. Her brothers, the Boreads, each caught one and began to eat.

"Muffins," said the bigger one. Cal, Piper remembered: short for *Calais*. He was dressed exactly as he had been in Quebec—in cleats, sweatpants, and a red hockey jersey—and had two black eyes and several broken teeth. "Muffins are good."

"Ah, *merci*," said the scrawny brother—Zethes, she recalled—who stood on the catapult platform, his purple wings spread. His white hair was still feathered in a horrible Disco Age mullet.

The collar of his silk shirt stuck out over his breastplate. His chartreuse polyester pants were grotesquely tight, and his acne had only gotten worse. Despite that, he wriggled his eyebrows and smiled like he was the demigod of pickup artists.

"I knew the pretty girl would miss me." He spoke Québécois French, which

Piper translated effortlessly. Thanks to her mom, Aphrodite, the language of love was hardwired into her, though she didn't want to speak it with Zethes.

"What are you doing?" Piper demanded. Then, in charmspeak: "Let my friends go." Zethes blinked. "We should let your friends go."

"Yes," Call agreed.

"No, you idiots!" Khione snapped. "She is charmspeaking. Use your wits."

"Wits..." Call frowned as if he wasn't sure what wits were. "Muffins are better." He stuffed the whole thing in his mouth and began to chew.

Zethes picked a blueberry off the top of his and nibbled it delicately. "Ah, my beautiful Piper...

so long I have waited to see you again. Sadly, my sister is right. We cannot let your friends go. In fact we must take them to Quebec, where they shall be laughed at eternally. I am so sorry, but these are our orders."

"Orders...?"

Ever since last winter, Piper had expected Khione to show her frosty face sooner or later. When they'd defeated her at the Wolf House in Sonoma, the snow goddess had vowed revenge. But why were Zethes and Call here? In Quebec, the Boreads had seemed almost friendly—at least compared to their subzero sister.

"Guys, listen," Piper said. "Your sister disobeyed Boreas. She's working with the giants, trying to raise Gaea. She's planning to take over your father's throne." Khione laughed, soft and cold. "Dear Piper McLean. You would manipulate my weak-willed brothers with your charms, like a true daughter of the love goddess. Such a skillful liar."

"*Liar?*" Piper cried. "You tried to kill us! Zethes, she's working for Gaea!" Zethes winced. "Alas, beautiful girl. We all are working for Gaea now. I fear these orders are from our father, Boreas himself."

"What?" Piper didn't want to believe it, but Khione's smug smile told her it was true.

“At last my father saw the wisdom of my counsel,” Khione purred, “or at least he *did* before his Roman side began warring with his Greek side. I fear he is quite incapacitated now, but he left me in charge. He has ordered that the forces of the North Wind be used in the service of King Porphyron, and of course...the Earth Mother.”

Piper gulped. “How are you even here?” She gestured at the ice all over the ship. “It’s summer!” Khione shrugged. “Our powers grow. The rules of nature are turned upside down. Once the Earth Mother wakes, we shall remake the world as we choose!”

“With hockey,” Call said, his mouth still full. “And pizza. And muffins.”

“Yes, yes,” Khione sneered. “I had to promise a few things to the big simpleton. And to Zethes

—”

“Oh, my needs are simple.” Zethes slicked back his hair and winked at Piper. “I should have kept you at our palace when we first met, my dear Piper. But soon we will go there again, together, and I shall romance you most incredibly.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Piper said. “Now, *let Jason go.*” She put all her power into the words, and Zethes obeyed. He snapped his fingers. Jason instantly defrosted. He crumpled to the floor, gasping and steaming; but at least he was alive.

“You imbecile!” Khione thrust out her hand, and Jason refroze, now flat on the deck like a bearskin rug. She wheeled on Zethes. “If you wish the girl as your prize, you must prove you can control her. Not the other way around!”

“Yes, of course.” Zethes looked chagrined.

“As for Jason Grace...” Khione’s brown eyes gleamed. “He and the rest of your friends will join our court of ice statues in Quebec. Jason will *grace* my throne room.”

“Clever,” Piper muttered. “Take you all day to think up that line?” At least she knew Jason was still alive, which made Piper a little less panicky. The deep freeze could be reversed. That meant her other friends were probably still alive

below deck. She just needed a plan to free them.

Unfortunately, she wasn't Annabeth. She wasn't so good at devising plans on the fly. She needed time to think.

"What about Leo?" she blurted. "Where did you send him?" The snow goddess stepped lightly around Jason, examining him as if he were sidewalk art.

"Leo Valdez deserved a special punishment," she said. "I have sent him to a place from which he can never return."

Piper couldn't breathe. Poor Leo. The idea of never seeing him again almost destroyed her.

Khione must've seen it in her face.

"Alas, my dear Piper!" She smiled in triumph. "But it is for the best. Leo could not be tolerated, even as an ice statue...not after he insulted me. The fool refused to rule at my side! And his power over fire..." She shook her head. "He could not be allowed to reach the House of Hades. I'm afraid Lord Clytius likes fire even less than I do."

Piper gripped her dagger.

Fire, she thought. Thanks for reminding me, you witch.

She scanned the deck. How to make fire? A box of Greek fire vials was secured by the forward ballista, but that was too far away. Even if she made it without getting frozen, Greek fire would burn everything, including the ship and all her friends. There had to be another way. Her eyes strayed to the prow.

Oh.

Festus the figurehead could blow some serious flames. Unfortunately, Leo had switched him off.

Piper had no idea how to reactivate him. She would never have time to figure out the right controls at the ship's console. She had vague memories of Leo tinkering around inside the dragon's bronze skull, mumbling about a control disk; but even if Piper could make it to the prow, she would have no idea what she was

doing.

Still, some instinct told her Festus was her best chance, if only she could figure out how to convince her captors to let her get close enough...

“Well!” Khione interrupted her thoughts. “I fear our time together is at a close. Zethes, if you would—”

“Wait!” Piper said.

A simple command, and it worked. The Boreads and Khione frowned at her, waiting.

Piper was fairly sure she could control the brothers with charmspeak, but Khione was a problem. Charmspeak worked poorly if the person wasn't attracted to you. It worked poorly on a powerful being like a god. And it worked poorly when your victim *knew* about charmspeak and was actively on guard against it. All of the above applied to Khione.

What would Annabeth do?

Delay, Piper thought. When in doubt, talk some more.

“You're afraid of my friends,” she said. “So why not just kill them?” Khione laughed. “You are not a god, or you would understand. Death is so short, so...

unsatisfying. Your puny mortal souls flit off to the Underworld, and what happens then? The *best* I can hope for is that you go to the Fields of Punishment or Asphodel, but you demigods are insufferably noble. More likely you will go to Elysium—or get reborn in a new life. Why would I want to reward your friends that way? Why...when I can punish them eternally?”

“And me?” Piper hated to ask. “Why am I still alive and unfrozen?” Khione glanced at her brothers with annoyance. “Zethes has claimed you, for one thing.”

“I kiss magnificently,” Zethes promised. “You will see, beautiful one.” The idea made Piper's stomach churn.

“But that is not the only reason,” Khione said. “It is because I *hate* you, Piper. Deeply and truly.

Without you, Jason would have stayed with me in Quebec.”

“Delusional, much?”

Khione’s eyes turned as hard as the diamonds in her circlet. “You are a meddler, the daughter of a useless goddess. What can you do alone? Nothing. Of all the seven demigods, you have no purpose, no power. I wish you to stay on this ship, adrift and helpless, while Gaea rises and the world ends.

And just to be sure you are well out of the way...”

She gestured to Zethes, who plucked something from the air—a frozen sphere the size of a softball, covered in icy spikes.

“A bomb,” Zethes explained, “especially for you, my love.”

“Bombs!” Call laughed. “A good day! Bombs and muffins!”

“Uh...” Piper lowered her dagger, which seemed even more useless than usual. “Flowers would’ve been fine.”

“Oh, it will not kill the pretty girl.” Zethes frowned. “Well...I am *fairly* sure of this. But when the fragile container cracks, in...ah, roughly not very long...it will unleash the full force of the northern winds. This ship will be blown very far off course. Very, very far.”

“Indeed.” Khione’s voice prickled with false sympathy. “We will take your friends for our statue collection, then unleash the winds and bid you good-bye! You can watch the end of the world from...”

well, the end of the world! Perhaps you can charmspeak the fish, and feed yourself with your silly cornucopia. You can pace the deck of this empty ship and watch our victory in the blade of your dagger. When Gaea has arisen and the world you knew is dead, *then* Zethes can come back and retrieve you for his bride. What will you do to stop us, Piper? A hero? Ha! You are a joke.” Her words stung like sleet, mostly because Piper had had the same thoughts herself. What could she do? How could she save her friends with what she had?

She came close to snapping—flying at her enemies in a rage and getting herself killed.

She looked at Khione's smug expression and she realized the goddess was *hoping* for that. She wanted Piper to break. She wanted entertainment.

Piper's spine turned to steel. She remembered the girls who used to make fun of her at the Wilderness School. She remembered Drew, the cruel head counselor she had replaced in Aphrodite's cabin; and Medea, who had charmed Jason and Leo in Chicago; and Jessica, her dad's old assistant, who had always treated her like a useless brat. All her life, Piper had been looked down upon, told she was useless.

It has never been true, another voice whispered—a voice that sounded like her mother's. *Each of them berated you because they feared you and envied you. So does Khione. Use that!*

Piper didn't feel like it, but she managed a laugh. She tried it again, and the laughter came more easily. Soon she was doubled over, giggling and snorting.

Calais joined in, until Zethes elbowed him.

Khione's smile wavered. "What? What is so funny? I have doomed you!"

"Doomed me!" Piper laughed again. "Oh, gods...sorry." She took a shaky breath and tried to stop giggling. "Oh, boy...okay. You really think I'm powerless? You *really* think I'm useless? Gods of Olympus, your brain must have freezer burn. You don't know my secret, do you?" Khione's eyes narrowed.

"You have no secret," she said. "You are lying."

"Okay, whatever," Piper said. "Yeah, go ahead and take my friends. Leave me here... *useless*." She snorted. "Yeah. Gaea will be *really* pleased with you." Snow swirled around the goddess. Zethes and Calais glanced at each other nervously.

"Sister," Zethes said, "if she really has some secret—"

"Pizza?" Call speculated. "Hockey?"

"—then we must know," Zethes continued.

Khione obviously didn't buy it. Piper tried to keep a straight face, but she made

her eyes dance with mischief and humor.

Go ahead, she dared. Call my bluff.

“What secret?” Khione demanded. “Reveal it to us!”

Piper shrugged. “Suit yourself.” She pointed casually toward the prow. “Follow me, ice people.”

X L I V

PIPER

SHE PUSHED BETWEEN THE BOREADS, which was like walking through a meat freezer. The air around them was so cold, it burned her face. She felt like she was breathing pure snow.

Piper tried not to look down at Jason’s frozen body as she passed. She tried not to think about her friends below, or Leo shot into the sky to a place of no return. She *definitely* tried not to think about the Boreads and the snow goddess who were following her.

She fixed her eyes on the figurehead.

The ship rocked under her feet. A single gust of summer air made it through the chill, and Piper breathed it in, taking it as a good omen. It was still summer out there. Khione and her brothers did *not* belong here.

Piper knew she couldn't win a straight fight against Khione and two winged guys with swords.

She wasn't as clever as Annabeth, or as good at problem solving as Leo. But she *did* have power.

And she intended to use it.

Last night, during her talk with Hazel, Piper had realized that the secret of charmspeak was a lot like using the Mist. In the past, Piper had had a lot of trouble making her charms work, because she always ordered her enemies to do what *she* wanted. She would yell *Don't kill us* when the monster's fondest wish was to kill them. She would put all her power into her voice and hope it was enough to overwhelm her enemy's will.

Sometimes it worked, but it was exhausting and unreliable. Aphrodite wasn't about head-on confrontation. Aphrodite was about subtlety and guile and charm. Piper decided she shouldn't focus on making people do what she wanted. She needed to push them to do the things *they* wanted.

A great theory, if she could make it work....

She stopped at the foremast and faced Khione. "Wow, I just realized why you hate us so much," she said, filling her voice with pity. "We humiliated you pretty badly in Sonoma." Khione's eyes glinted like iced espresso. She shot an uneasy look at her brothers.

Piper laughed. "Oh, you didn't tell them!" she guessed. "I don't blame you. You had a giant king on your side, plus an army of wolves and Earthborn, and you still couldn't beat us."

"Silence!" the goddess hissed.

The air turned misty. Piper felt frost gathering on her eyebrows and freezing her ear canals, but she feigned a smile.

"Whatever." She winked at Zethes. "But it was pretty funny."

"The beautiful girl must be lying," Zethes said. "Khione was not *beaten* at the Wolf House. She said it was a...ah, what is the term? A tactical retreat."

“Treats?” Call asked. “Treats are good.”

Piper pushed the big guy’s chest playfully. “No, Cal. He means that your sister ran away.”

“I did not!” Khione shrieked.

“What did Hera call you?” Piper mused. “Right—a D-list goddess!” She burst out laughing again, and her amusement was so genuine, Zethes and Call started laughing too.

“That is *très bon!*” Zethes said. “A D-list goddess. Ha!”

“Ha!” Call said. “Sister ran away! Ha!”

Khione’s white dress began to steam. Ice formed over Zethes’s and Cal’s mouths, plugging them up.

“Show us this secret of yours, Piper McLean,” Khione growled. “Then *pray* I leave you on this ship intact. If you are toying with us, I will show you the horrors of frostbite. I doubt Zethes will still want you if you have no fingers or toes...perhaps no nose or ears.” Zethes and Call spat the ice plugs out of their mouths.

“The pretty girl would look less pretty without a nose,” Zethes admitted.

Piper had seen pictures of frostbite victims. The threat terrified her, but she didn’t let it show.

“Come on, then.” She led the way to the prow, humming one of her dad’s favorite songs

—“Summertime.”

When she got to the figurehead, she put her hand on Festus’s neck. His bronze scales were cold.

There was no hum of machinery. His ruby eyes were dull and dark.

“You remember our dragon?” Piper asked.

Khione scoffed. “This cannot be your secret. The dragon is broken. Its fire is gone.”

“Well, yes...” Piper stroked the dragon’s snout.

She didn’t have Leo’s power to make gears turn or circuits spark. She couldn’t sense anything about the workings of a machine. All she could do was speak her heart and tell the dragon what he *most* wanted to hear. “But Festus is more than a machine. He’s a living creature.”

“Ridiculous,” the goddess spat. “Zethes, Cal—gather the frozen demigods from below. Then we shall break open the sphere of winds.”

“You could do that, boys,” Piper agreed. “But then you wouldn’t see Khione humiliated. I know you’d like that.”

The Boreads hesitated.

“Hockey?” Call asked.

“Almost as good,” Piper promised. “You fought at the side of Jason and the Argonauts, didn’t you? On a ship like this, the first *Argo*. ”

“Yes,” Zethes agreed. “The *Argo*. Much like this, but we did not have a dragon.”

“Don’t listen to her!” Khione snapped.

Piper felt ice forming on her lips.

“You could shut me up,” she said quickly. “But you want to know my secret power—how I will destroy you, and Gaea, and the giants.”

Hatred seethed in Khione’s eyes, but she withheld her frost.

“You—have—no—power,” she insisted.

“Spoken like a D-list goddess,” Piper said. “One who never gets taken seriously, who *always* wants more power.”

She turned to Festus and ran her hand behind his metal ears. “You’re a good friend, Festus. No one can truly deactivate you. You’re more than a machine.

Khione doesn't understand that." She turned to the Boreads. "She doesn't value you, either, you know. She thinks she can boss you around because you're demigods, not full-fledged gods. She doesn't understand that you're a powerful team."

"A team," Call grunted. "Like the Ca-na-di-ens."

He had to struggle with the word since it was more than two syllables. He grinned and looked very pleased with himself.

"Exactly," Piper said. "Just like a hockey team. The whole is greater than the parts."

"Like a pizza," Call added.

Piper laughed. "You *are* smart, Cal! Even I underestimated you."

"Wait, now," Zethes protested. "I am smart also. And good-looking."

"Very smart," Piper agreed, ignoring the *good-looking* part. "So put down the wind bomb, and watch Khione get humiliated."

Zethes grinned. He crouched and rolled the ice sphere across the deck.

"You fool!" Khione yelled.

Before the goddess could go after the sphere, Piper cried, "Our secret weapon, Khione! We're not just a bunch of demigods. We're a team. Just like Festus isn't only a collection of parts. He's *alive*. He's *my friend*. And when his friends are in trouble, especially Leo, he can wake up *on his own*."

She willed all her confidence into her voice—all her love for the metal dragon and everything he'd done for them.

The rational part of her knew this was hopeless. How could you start a machine with emotions?

But Aphrodite wasn't rational. She ruled through emotions. She was the oldest and most primordial of the Olympians, born from the blood of Ouranos churning in the sea. Her power was more ancient than that of Hephaestus, or Athena, or

even Zeus.

For a terrible moment, nothing happened. Khione glared at her. The Boreads began to come out of their daze, looking disappointed.

“Never mind our plan,” Khione snarled. “Kill her!”

As the Boreads raised their swords, the dragon’s metal skin grew warm under Piper’s hand. She dove out of the way, tackling the snow goddess, as Festus turned his head one hundred and eighty degrees and blasted the Boreads, vaporizing them on the spot. For some reason, Zethes’s sword was spared. It clunked to the deck, still steaming.

Piper scrambled to her feet. She spotted the sphere of winds at the base of the foremast. She ran for it, but before she could get close, Khione materialized in front of her in a swirl of frost. Her skin glowed bright enough to cause snow blindness.

“You *miserable* girl,” she hissed. “You think you can defeat me—a *goddess*?” At Piper’s back, Festus roared and blew steam, but Piper knew he couldn’t breathe fire again without hitting her too.

About twenty feet behind the goddess, the ice sphere began to crack and hiss.

Piper was out of time for subtlety. She yelled and raised her dagger, charging the goddess.

Khione grabbed her wrist. Ice spread over Piper’s arm. The blade of Katoptris turned white.

The goddess’s face was only six inches from hers. Khione smiled, knowing she had won.

“A child of Aphrodite,” she chided. “You are *nothing*.” Festus creaked again. Piper could swear he was trying to shout encouragement.

Suddenly her chest grew warm—not with anger or fear, but with love for that dragon; and Jason, who was depending on her; and her friends trapped below; and Leo, who was lost and would need her help.

Maybe love was no match for ice...but Piper had used it to wake a metal dragon. Mortals did superhuman feats in the name of love all the time. Mothers lifted cars to save their children. And Piper was more than just mortal. She was a demigod. A hero.

The ice melted on her blade. Her arm steamed under Khione's grip.

"Still underestimating me," Piper told the goddess. "You really need to work on that." Khione's smug expression faltered as Piper drove her dagger straight down.

The blade touched Khione's chest, and the goddess exploded in a miniature blizzard. Piper collapsed, dazed from the cold. She heard Festus clacking and whirring, the reactivated alarm bells ringing.

The bomb.

Piper struggled to rise. The sphere was ten feet away, hissing and spinning as the winds inside began to stir.

Piper dove for it.

Her fingers closed around the bomb just as the ice shattered and the winds exploded.

X L V

PERCY

PERCY FELT HOMESICK FOR THE SWAMP.

He never thought he'd miss sleeping in a giant's leather bed in a drakon-bone hut in a festering cesspool, but right now that sounded like Elysium.

He and Annabeth and Bob stumbled along in the darkness, the air thick and cold, the ground alternating patches of pointy rocks and pools of muck. The terrain seemed to be designed so that Percy could never let his guard down. Even walking ten feet was exhausting.

Percy had started out from the giant's hut feeling strong again, his head clear, his belly full of drakon jerky from their packs of provisions. Now his legs were sore. Every muscle ached. He pulled a makeshift tunic of drakon leather over his shredded T-shirt, but it did nothing to keep out the chill.

His focus narrowed to the ground in front of him. Nothing existed except for that and Annabeth at his side.

Whenever he felt like giving up, plopping himself down, and dying (which was, like, every ten minutes), he reached over and took her hand, just to remember there was warmth in the world.

After Annabeth's talk with Damasen, Percy was worried about her. Annabeth didn't give in to despair easily, but as they walked, she wiped tears from her eyes, trying not to let Percy see. He knew she hated it when her plans didn't work out. She was convinced they needed Damasen's help, but the giant had turned them down.

Part of Percy was relieved. He was concerned enough about Bob's staying on their side once they reached the Doors of Death. He wasn't sure he wanted a giant as his wingman, even if that giant could cook a mean bowl of stew.

He wondered what had happened after they left Damasen's hut. He hadn't heard their pursuers in hours, but he could sense their hatred...especially Polybotes's. That giant was back there somewhere, following, pushing them deeper into Tartarus.

Percy tried to think of good things to keep his spirits up—the lake at Camp Half-Blood, the time he'd kissed Annabeth underwater. He tried to imagine the two of them at New Rome together, walking through the hills and holding hands. But

Camp Jupiter and Camp Half-Blood both seemed like dreams. He felt as if only Tartarus existed. This was the real world—death, darkness, cold, pain.

He'd been imagining all the rest.

He shivered. No. That was the pit speaking to him, sapping his resolve. He wondered how Nico had survived down here alone without going insane. That kid had more strength than Percy had given him credit for. The deeper they traveled, the harder it became to stay focused.

"This place is worse than the River Cocytus," he muttered.

"Yes," Bob called back happily. "Much worse! It means we are close." Close to what? Percy wondered. But he didn't have the strength to ask. He noticed Small Bob the cat had hidden himself in Bob's coveralls again, which reinforced Percy's opinion that the kitten was the smartest one in their group.

Annabeth laced her fingers through his. In the light of his bronze sword, her face was beautiful.

"We're together," she reminded him. "We'll get through this." He'd been so worried about lifting her spirits, and here she was reassuring *him*.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Piece of cake."

"But next time," she said, "I want to go somewhere different on a date."

"Paris was nice," he recalled.

She managed a smile. Months ago, before Percy got amnesia, they'd had dinner in Paris one night, compliments of Hermes. That seemed like another lifetime.

"I'd settle for New Rome," she offered. "As long as you're there with me." *Man*, Annabeth was awesome. For a moment, Percy actually remembered what it was like to feel happy. He had an amazing girlfriend. They could have a future together.

Then the darkness dispersed with a massive sigh, like the last breath of a dying god. In front of them was a clearing—a barren field of dust and stones. In the center, about twenty yards away, knelt the gruesome figure of a woman, her

clothes tattered, her limbs emaciated, her skin leathery green.

Her head was bent as she sobbed quietly, and the sound shattered all Percy's hopes.

He realized that life was pointless. His struggles were for nothing. This woman cried as if mourning the death of the entire world.

"We're here," Bob announced. "Akhlys can help."

X L V I

PERCY

IF THE SOBBING GHOUL WAS BOB'S IDEA OF HELP, Percy was pretty sure he didn't want it.

Nevertheless, Bob trudged forward. Percy felt obliged to follow. If nothing else, this area was less dark—not exactly light, but with more of a soupy white fog.

"Akhlys!" Bob called.

The creature raised her head, and Percy's stomach screamed, *Help me!*

Her body was bad enough. She looked like the victim of a famine—limbs like sticks, swollen knees and knobby elbows, rags for clothes, broken fingernails and toenails. Dust was caked on her skin and piled on her shoulders as if she'd taken a shower at the bottom of an hourglass.

Her face was utter desolation. Her eyes were sunken and rheumy, pouring out tears. Her nose dripped like a waterfall. Her stringy gray hair was matted to her skull in greasy tufts, and her cheeks were raked and bleeding as if she'd been clawing herself.

Percy couldn't stand to meet her eyes, so he lowered his gaze. Across her knees lay an ancient shield—a battered circle of wood and bronze, painted with the likeness of Akhlys herself holding a shield, so the image seemed to go on forever, smaller and smaller.

“That shield,” Annabeth murmured. “That’s *his*. I thought it was just a story.”

“Oh, no,” the old hag wailed. “The shield of Hercules. He painted me on its surface, so his enemies would see me in their final moments—the goddess of misery.” She coughed so hard, it made Percy’s chest hurt. “As if Hercules knew true misery. It’s not even a good likeness!” Percy gulped. When he and his friends had encountered Hercules at the Straits of Gibraltar, it hadn’t gone well. The exchange had involved a lot of yelling, death threats, and high-velocity pineapples.

“What’s his shield doing here?” Percy asked.

The goddess stared at him with her wet milky eyes. Her cheeks dripped blood, making red polka dots on her tattered dress. “He doesn’t need it anymore, does he? It came here when his mortal body was burned. A reminder, I suppose, that no shield is sufficient. In the end, misery overtakes all of you.

Even Hercules.”

Percy inched closer to Annabeth. He tried to remember why they were here, but the sense of despair made it difficult to think. Hearing Akhlys speak, he no longer found it strange that she had clawed her own cheeks. The goddess radiated pure pain.

“Bob,” Percy said, “we shouldn’t have come here.”

From somewhere inside Bob’s uniform, the skeleton kitten mewled in agreement.

The Titan shifted and winced as if Small Bob was clawing his armpit. “Akhlys

controls the Death Mist,” he insisted. “She can hide you.”

“*Hide* them?” Akhlys made a gurgling sound. She was either laughing or choking to death. “Why would I do that?”

“They must reach the Doors of Death,” Bob said. “To return to the mortal world.”

“Impossible!” Akhlys said. “The armies of Tartarus will find you. They will kill you.” Annabeth turned the blade of her drakon-bone sword, which Percy had to admit made her look pretty intimidating and hot in a “Barbarian Princess” kind of way. “So I guess your Death Mist is pretty useless, then,” she said.

The goddess bared her broken yellow teeth. “*Useless? Who are you?*”

“A daughter of Athena.” Annabeth’s voice sounded brave—though how she did it, Percy didn’t know. “I didn’t walk halfway across Tartarus to be told what’s impossible by some minor goddess.” The dust quivered at their feet. Fog swirled around them with a sound like agonized wailing.

“Minor goddess?” Akhlys’s gnarled fingernails dug into Hercules’s shield, gouging the metal. “I was old before the Titans were born, you ignorant girl. I was old when Gaea first woke. Misery is *eternal*. Existence is misery. I was born of the eldest ones—of Chaos and Night. I was—”

“Yes, yes,” Annabeth said. “Sadness and misery, blah blah blah. But you still don’t have enough power to hide two demigods with your Death Mist. Like I said: useless.” Percy cleared his throat. “Uh, Annabeth—”

She flashed him a warning look: *Work with me*. He realized how terrified she was, but she had no choice. This was their best shot at stirring the goddess into action.

“I mean...Annabeth is right!” Percy volunteered. “Bob brought us all this way because he thought you could help. But I guess you’re too busy staring at that shield and crying. I can’t blame you.

It looks just like you.”

Akhlys wailed and glared at the Titan. “Why did you inflict these annoying

children on me?” Bob made a sound somewhere between a rumble and a whimper. “I thought—I thought—”

“The Death Mist is not for *helping!*” Akhlys shrieked. “It shrouds mortals in misery as their souls pass into the Underworld. It is the very breath of Tartarus, of death, of despair!”

“Awesome,” Percy said. “Could we get two orders of that to go?” Akhlys hissed. “Ask me for a more sensible gift. I am also the goddess of poisons. I could give you death—thousands of ways to die less painful than the one you have chosen by marching into the heart of the pit.”

Around the goddess, flowers bloomed in the dust—dark purple, orange, and red blossoms that smelled sickly sweet. Percy’s head swam.

“Nightshade,” Akhlys offered. “Hemlock. Belladonna, henbane, or strychnine. I can dissolve your innards, boil your blood.”

“That’s very nice of you,” Percy said. “But I’ve had enough poison for one trip. Now, can you hide us in your Death Mist, or not?”

“Yeah, it’ll be fun,” Annabeth said.

The goddess’s eyes narrowed. “*Fun?*”

“Sure,” Annabeth promised. “If we fail, think how great it will be for you, gloating over our spirits when we die in agony. You’ll get to say ‘I told you so’ for eternity.”

“Or, if we succeed,” Percy added, “think of all the suffering you’ll bring to the monsters down here. We intend to seal the Doors of Death. That’s going to cause a lot of wailing and moaning.” Akhlys considered. “I enjoy suffering. Wailing is also good.”

“Then it’s settled,” Percy said. “Make us invisible.”

Akhlys struggled to her feet. The shield of Hercules rolled away and wobbled to a stop in a patch of poison flowers. “It is not so simple,” the goddess said. “The Death Mist comes at the moment you are closest to your end. Your eyes will be clouded only then. The world will fade.” Percy’s mouth felt dry. “Okay. But...

we'll be shrouded from the monsters?"

"Oh, yes," Akhlys said. "If you survive the process, you will be able to pass unnoticed among the armies of Tartarus. It is hopeless, of course, but if you are determined, then come. I will show you the way."

"The way to where, exactly?" Annabeth asked.

The goddess was already shuffling into the gloom.

Percy turned to look at Bob, but the Titan was gone. How does a ten-foot-tall silver dude with a very loud kitten disappear?

"Hey!" Percy yelled to Akhlys. "Where's our friend?"

"He cannot take this path," the goddess called back. "He is not mortal. Come, little fools. Come experience the Death Mist."

Annabeth exhaled and grabbed his hand. "Well...how bad can it be?" The question was so ridiculous Percy laughed, even though it hurt his lungs. "Yeah. Next date, though—dinner in New Rome."

They followed the goddess's dusty footprints through the poison flowers, deeper into the fog.

X L V I I

P E R C Y

PERCY MISSED BOB.

He'd gotten used to having the Titan on his side, lighting their way with his silver hair and his fearsome war broom.

Now their only guide was an emaciated corpse lady with serious self-esteem issues.

As they struggled across the dusty plain, the fog became so thick that Percy had to resist the urge to swat it away with his hands. The only reason he was able to follow Akhlys's path was because poisonous plants sprang up wherever she walked.

If they were still on the body of Tartarus, Percy figured they must be on the bottom of his foot—a rough, calloused expanse where only the most disgusting plant life grew.

Finally they arrived at the end of the big toe. At least that's what it looked like to Percy. The fog dissipated, and they found themselves on a peninsula that jutted out over a pitch-black void.

"Here we are." Akhlys turned and leered at them. Blood from her cheeks dripped on her dress.

Her sickly eyes looked moist and swollen but somehow excited. Can Misery look excited?

"Uh...great," Percy asked. "Where is *here*?"

"The verge of final death," Akhlys said. "Where Night meets the void below Tartarus." Annabeth inched forward and peered over the cliff. "I thought there was nothing below Tartarus."

"Oh, certainly there is...." Akhlys coughed. "Even Tartarus had to rise from somewhere. This is the edge of the earliest darkness, which was my mother. Below lies the realm of Chaos, my father.

Here, you are closer to nothingness than any mortal has ever been. Can you not feel it?" Percy knew what she meant. The void seemed to be pulling at him, leaching the breath from his lungs and the oxygen from his blood. He looked at

Annabeth and saw that her lips were tinged blue.

“We can’t stay here,” he said.

“No, indeed!” Akhlys said. “Don’t you feel the Death Mist? Even now, you pass between.

Look!”

White smoke gathered around Percy’s feet. As it coiled up his legs, he realized the smoke wasn’t surrounding him. It was coming *from* him. His whole body was dissolving. He held up his hands and found they were fuzzy and indistinct. He couldn’t even tell how many fingers he had. Hopefully still ten.

He turned to Annabeth and stifled a yelp. “You’re—uh—”

He couldn’t say it. She looked *dead*.

Her skin was sallow, her eye sockets dark and sunken. Her beautiful hair had dried into a skein of cobwebs. She looked like she’d been stuck in a cool, dark mausoleum for decades, slowly withering into a desiccated husk. When she turned to look at him, her features momentarily blurred into mist.

Percy’s blood moved like sap in his veins.

For years, he had worried about Annabeth dying. When you were a demigod, that went with the territory. Most half-bloods didn’t live long. You always knew that the next monster you fought could be your last. But seeing Annabeth like this was too painful. He’d rather stand in the River Phlegethon, or get attacked by *arai*, or be trampled by giants.

“Oh, gods,” Annabeth sobbed. “Percy, the way you look...”

Percy studied his arms. All he saw were blobs of white mist, but he guessed that to Annabeth he looked like a corpse. He took a few steps, though it was difficult. His body felt insubstantial, like he was made of helium and cotton candy.

“I’ve looked better,” he decided. “I can’t move very well. But I’m all right.” Akhlys clucked. “Oh, you’re definitely *not* all right.” Percy frowned. “But we’ll pass unseen now? We can get to the Doors of Death?”

“Well, perhaps you could,” the goddess said, “if you lived that long, which you won’t.” Akhlys spread her gnarled fingers. More plants bloomed along the edge of the pit—hemlock, nightshade, and oleander spreading toward Percy’s feet like a deadly carpet. “The Death Mist is not simply a disguise, you see. It is a state of being. I could not bring you this gift unless death followed

—true death.”

“It’s a trap,” Annabeth said.

The goddess cackled. “Didn’t you *expect* me to betray you?”

“Yes,” Annabeth and Percy said together.

“Well, then, it was hardly a trap! More of an inevitability. Misery is inevitable. Pain is—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Percy growled. “Let’s get to the fighting.” He drew Riptide, but the blade was made of smoke. When he slashed at Akhlys, the sword just floated across her like a gentle breeze.

The goddess’s ruined mouth split into a grin. “Did I forget to mention? You are only mist now—

a shadow before death. Perhaps if you had time, you could learn to control your new form. But you do *not* have time. Since you cannot touch me, I fear any fight with Misery will be quite one-sided.” Her fingernails grew into talons. Her jaw unhinged, and her yellow teeth elongated into fangs.

X L V I I I

P E R C Y

AKHLYS LUNGED AT PERCY, and for a split second he thought: *Well, hey, I'm just smoke. She can't touch me, right?*

He imagined the Fates up in Olympus, laughing at his wishful thinking: *LOL, NOOB!*

The goddess's claws raked across his chest and stung like boiling water.

Percy stumbled backward, but he wasn't used to being smoky. His legs moved too slowly. His arms felt like tissue paper. In desperation, he threw his backpack at her, thinking maybe it would turn solid when it left his hand, but no such luck. It fell with a soft thud.

Akhlys snarled, crouching to spring. She would have bitten Percy's face off if Annabeth hadn't charged and screamed, "HEY!" right in the goddess's ear.

Akhlys flinched, turning toward the sound.

She lashed out at Annabeth, but Annabeth was better at moving than Percy. Maybe she wasn't feeling as smoky, or maybe she'd just had more combat training. She'd been at Camp Half-Blood since she was seven. Probably she'd had classes Percy never got, like *How to Fight While Partially Made of Smoke*.

Annabeth dove straight between the goddess's legs and somersaulted to her feet.

Akhlys turned and attacked, but Annabeth dodged again, like a matador.

Percy was so stunned, he lost a few precious seconds. He stared at corpse Annabeth, shrouded in mist but moving as fast and confidently as ever. Then it occurred to him why she was doing this: to buy them time. Which meant Percy needed to help.

He thought furiously, trying to come up with a way to defeat Misery. How could he fight when he couldn't touch anything?

On Akhlys's third attack, Annabeth wasn't so lucky. She tried to veer aside, but the goddess grabbed Annabeth's wrist and pulled her hard, sending her sprawling.

Before the goddess could pounce, Percy advanced, yelling and waving his sword. He still felt about as solid as a Kleenex, but his anger seemed to help him move faster.

"Hey, Happy!" he yelled.

Akhlys spun, dropping Annabeth's arm. "Happy?" she demanded.

"Yeah!" He ducked as she swiped at his head. "You're downright cheerful!"

"Arggh!" She lunged again, but she was off balance. Percy sidestepped and backed away, leading the goddess farther from Annabeth.

"Pleasant!" he called. "Delightful!"

The goddess snarled and winced. She stumbled after Percy. Each compliment seemed to hit her like sand in the face.

"I will kill you slowly!" she growled, her eyes and nose watering, blood dripping from her cheeks. "I will cut you into pieces as a sacrifice to Night!" Annabeth struggled to her feet. She started rifling through her pack, no doubt looking for something that might help.

Percy wanted to give her more time. She was the brains. Better for him to get attacked while she came up with a brilliant plan.

“Cuddly!” Percy yelled. “Fuzzy, warm, and huggable!”

Akhlys made a growling, choking noise, like a cat having a seizure.

“A slow death!” she screamed. “A death from a thousand poisons!” All around her, poisonous plants grew and burst like overfilled balloons. Green-and-white sap trickled out, collecting into pools, and began flowing across the ground toward Percy. The sweet-smelling fumes made his head feel wobbly.

“Percy!” Annabeth’s voice sounded far away. “Uh, hey, Miss Wonderful! Cheerful! Grins! Over here!”

But the goddess of misery was now fixated on Percy. He tried to retreat again. Unfortunately the poison ichor was flowing all around him now, making the ground steam and the air burn. Percy found himself stuck on an island of dust not much bigger than a shield. A few yards away, his backpack smoked and dissolved into a puddle of goo. Percy had nowhere to go.

He fell to one knee. He wanted to tell Annabeth to run, but he couldn’t speak. His throat was as dry as dead leaves.

He wished there were water in Tartarus—some nice pool he could jump into to heal himself, or maybe a river he could control. He’d settle for a bottle of Evian.

“You will feed the eternal darkness,” Akhlys said. “You will die in the arms of Night!” He was dimly aware of Annabeth shouting, throwing random pieces of drakon jerky at the goddess. The white-green poison kept pooling, little streams trickling from the plants as the venomous lake around him got wider and wider.

Lake, he thought. Streams. Water.

Probably it was just his brain getting fried from poison fumes, but he croaked out a laugh. Poison was liquid. If it moved like water, it must be partially water.

He remembered some science lecture about the human body being mostly water. He remembered extracting water from Jason’s lungs back in Rome.... If he could control *that*, then why not other liquids?

It was a crazy idea. Poseidon was the god of the sea, not of every liquid everywhere.

Then again, Tartarus had its own rules. Fire was drinkable. The ground was the body of a dark god. The air was acid, and demigods could be turned into smoky corpses.

So why not try? He had nothing left to lose.

He glared at the poison flood encroaching from all sides. He concentrated so hard that something inside him cracked—as if a crystal ball had shattered in his stomach.

Warmth flowed through him. The poison tide stopped.

The fumes blew away from him—back toward the goddess. The lake of poison rolled toward her in tiny waves and rivulets.

Akhlys shrieked. “What is this?”

“Poison,” Percy said. “That’s your specialty, right?”

He stood, his anger growing hotter in his gut. As the flood of venom rolled toward the goddess, the fumes began to make her cough. Her eyes watered even more.

Oh, good, Percy thought. More water.

Percy imagined her nose and throat filling with her own tears.

Akhlys gagged. “I—” The tide of venom reached her feet, sizzling like droplets on a hot iron.

She wailed and stumbled back.

“Percy!” Annabeth called.

She’d retreated to the edge of the cliff, even though the poison wasn’t after her. She sounded terrified. It took Percy a moment to realize she was terrified of *him*.

“Stop...” she pleaded, her voice hoarse.

He didn’t want to stop. He wanted to choke this goddess. He wanted to watch her drown in her own poison. He wanted to see just how much misery Misery

could take.

“Percy, please...” Annabeth’s face was still pale and corpse-like, but her eyes were the same as always. The anguish in them made Percy’s anger fade.

He turned to the goddess. He willed the poison to recede, creating a small path of retreat along the edge of the cliff.

“Leave!” he bellowed.

For an emaciated ghoul, Akhlys could run pretty fast when she wanted to. She scrambled along the path, fell on her face, and got up again, wailing as she sped into the dark.

As soon as she was gone, the pools of poison evaporated. The plants withered to dust and blew away.

Annabeth stumbled toward him. She looked like a corpse wreathed in smoke, but she felt solid enough when she gripped his arms.

“Percy, please don’t ever...” Her voice broke in a sob. “Some things aren’t meant to be controlled. Please.”

His whole body tingled with power, but the anger was subsiding. The broken glass inside him was beginning to smooth at the edges.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, okay.”

“We have to get away from this cliff,” Annabeth said. “If Akhlys brought us here as some kind of sacrifice...”

Percy tried to think. He was getting used to moving with the Death Mist around him. He felt more solid, more like himself. But his mind still felt stuffed with cotton.

“She said something about feeding us to the night,” he remembered. “What was that about?” The temperature dropped. The abyss before them seemed to exhale.

Percy grabbed Annabeth and backed away from the edge as a presence emerged from the void—

a form so vast and shadowy, he felt like he understood the concept of *dark* for the first time.

“I imagine,” said the darkness, in a feminine voice as soft as coffin lining, “that she meant Night, with a capital N. After all, I am the only one.”

X L I X

LEO

THE WAY LEO FIGURED IT, he spent more time crashing than he did flying.

If there were a rewards card for frequent crashers, he'd be, like, double-platinum level.

He regained consciousness as he was free-falling through the clouds. He had a hazy memory of Khione taunting him right before he got shot into the sky. He hadn't actually seen her, but he could never forget that snow witch's voice. He had no idea how long he'd been gaining altitude, but at some point he must have passed out from the cold and the lack of oxygen. Now he was on his way down, heading for his biggest crash ever.

The clouds parted around him. He saw the glittering sea far, *far* below. No sign of the *Argo II*.

No sign of any coastline, familiar or otherwise, except for one tiny island at the horizon.

Leo couldn't fly. He had a couple of minutes at most before he'd hit the water and go *ker-splat*.

He decided he didn't like that ending to the Epic Ballad of Leo.

He was still clutching the Archimedes sphere, which didn't surprise him. Unconscious or not, he would never let go of his most valuable possession. With a little maneuvering, he managed to pull some duct tape from his tool belt and strap the sphere to his chest. That made him look like a low-budget Iron Man, but at least he had both hands free. He started to work, furiously tinkering with the sphere, pulling out anything he thought would help from his magic tool belt: a drop cloth, metal extenders, some string and grommets.

Working while falling was almost impossible. The wind roared in his ears. It kept ripping tools, screws, and canvas out of his hands, but finally he constructed a makeshift frame. He popped open a hatch on the sphere, teased out two wires, and connected them to his crossbar.

How long until he hit the water? Maybe a minute?

He turned the sphere's control dial, and it whirred into action. More bronze wires shot from the orb, intuitively sensing what Leo needed. Cords laced up the canvas drop cloth. The frame began to expand on its own. Leo pulled out a can of kerosene and a rubber tube and lashed them to the thirsty new engine that the orb was helping him assemble.

Finally he made himself a rope halter and shifted so that the X-frame was attached to his back.

The sea got closer and closer—a glittering expanse of slap-you-in-the-face death.

He yelled in defiance and punched the sphere's override switch.

The engine coughed to life. The makeshift rotor turned. The canvas blades spun, but much too slowly. Leo's head was pointed straight down at the sea—maybe thirty seconds to impact.

At least nobody's around, he thought bitterly, or I'd be a demigod joke forever. *What was the last thing to go through Leo's mind? The Mediterranean.*

Suddenly the orb got warm against his chest. The blades turned faster. The engine coughed, and Leo tilted sideways, slicing through the air.

“YES!” he yelled.

He had successfully created the world’s most dangerous personal helicopter.

He shot toward the island in the distance, but he was still falling much too fast. The blades shuddered. The canvas screamed.

The beach was only a few hundred yards away when the sphere turned lava-hot and the helicopter exploded, shooting flames in every direction. If he hadn’t been immune to fire, Leo would have been charcoal. As it was, the midair explosion probably saved his life. The blast flung Leo sideways while the bulk of his flaming contraption smashed into the shore at full speed with a massive *KA-BOOM!*

Leo opened his eyes, amazed to be alive. He was sitting in a bathtub-sized crater in the sand. A few yards away, a column of thick black smoke roiled into the sky from a much larger crater. The surrounding beach was peppered with smaller pieces of burning wreckage.

“My sphere.” Leo patted his chest. The sphere wasn’t there. His duct tape and rope halter had disintegrated.

He struggled to his feet. None of his bones seemed broken, which was good; but mostly he was worried about his Archimedes sphere. If he’d destroyed his priceless artifact to make a flaming thirty-second helicopter, he was going to track down that stupid snow goddess Khione and smack her with a monkey wrench.

He staggered across the beach, wondering why there weren’t any tourists or hotels or boats in sight. The island seemed perfect for a resort, with blue water and soft white sand. Maybe it was uncharted. Did they still *have* uncharted islands in the world? Maybe Khione had blasted him out of the Mediterranean altogether. For all he knew, he was in Bora Bora.

The larger crater was about eight feet deep. At the bottom, the helicopter blades were still trying to turn. The engine belched smoke. The rotor croaked like a stepped-on frog, but *dang*—pretty impressive for a rush job.

The helicopter had apparently crashed *onto* something. The crater was littered with broken wooden furniture, shattered china plates, some half-melted pewter goblets, and burning linen napkins.

Leo wasn't sure why all that fancy stuff had been on the beach, but at least it meant that this place was inhabited, after all.

Finally he spotted the Archimedes sphere—steaming and charred but still intact, making unhappy clicking noises in the center of the wreckage.

“Sphere!” he yelled. “Come to Papa!”

He skidded to the bottom of the crater and snatched up the sphere. He collapsed, sat cross-legged, and cradled the device in his hands. The bronze surface was searing hot, but Leo didn't care.

It was still in one piece, which meant he could use it.

Now, if he could just figure out where he was, and how to get back to his friends....

He was making a mental list of tools he might need when a girl's voice interrupted him: “What are you *doing*? You blew up my dining table!”

Immediately Leo thought: *Uh-oh*.

He'd met a lot of goddesses, but the girl glaring down at him from the edge of the crater actually *looked* like a goddess.

She wore a sleeveless white Greek-style dress with a gold braided belt. Her hair was long, straight, and golden brown—almost the same cinnamon-toast color as Hazel's, but the similarity to Hazel ended there. The girl's face was milky pale, with dark, almond-shaped eyes and pouty lips. She looked maybe fifteen, about Leo's age, and, sure, she was pretty; but with that angry expression on her face she reminded Leo of every popular girl in every school he'd ever attended—the ones who made fun of him, gossiped a lot, thought they were *so* superior, and basically did everything they could to make his life miserable.

Leo disliked her instantly.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” he said. “I just fell out of the sky. I constructed a helicopter in midair, burst into flames halfway down, crash-landed, and barely survived. But by all means—let’s talk about your dining table!”

He snatched up a half-melted goblet. “Who puts a dining table on the beach where innocent demigods can crash into it? Who *does* that?”

The girl clenched her fists. Leo was pretty sure she was going to march down the crater and punch him in the face. Instead she looked up at the sky.

“REALLY?” she screamed at the empty blue. “You want to make my curse even worse? Zeus!

Hephaestus! Hermes! Have you no shame?”

“Uh...” Leo noticed that she’d just picked three gods to blame, and one of them was his dad. He didn’t figure that was a good sign. “I doubt they’re listening. You know, the whole split personality thing—”

“Show yourself!” the girl yelled at the sky, completely ignoring Leo. “It’s not bad enough I am exiled? It’s not bad enough you take away the few *good* heroes I’m allowed to meet? You think it’s funny to send me this—this charbroiled runt of a boy to ruin my tranquility? This is NOT FUNNY!

Take him back!”

“Hey, Sunshine,” Leo said. “I’m right here, you know.”

She growled like a cornered animal. “Do *not* call me Sunshine! Get out of that hole and come with me *now* so I can get you off my island!”

“Well, since you asked so nicely...”

Leo didn’t know what the crazy girl was so worked up about, but he didn’t really care. If she could help him leave this island, that was totally fine by him. He clutched his charred sphere and climbed out of the crater. When he reached the top, the girl was already marching down the shoreline.

He jogged to catch up.

She gestured in disgust at the burning wreckage. “This was a pristine beach! Look at it now.”

“Yeah, my bad,” Leo muttered. “I should’ve crashed on one of the other islands. Oh, wait—there aren’t any!”

She snarled and kept walking along the edge of the water. Leo caught a whiff of cinnamon—

maybe her perfume? Not that he cared. Her hair swayed down her back in a mesmerizing kind of way, which of course he didn’t care about either.

He scanned the sea. Just like he’d seen during his fall, there were no landmasses or ships all the way to the horizon. Looking inland, he saw grassy hills dotted with trees. A footpath wound through a grove of cedars. Leo wondered where it led: probably to the girl’s secret lair, where she roasted her enemies so she could eat them at her dining table on the beach.

He was so busy thinking about that, he didn’t notice when the girl stopped. He ran into her.

“Gah!” She turned and grabbed his arms to keep from falling in the surf. Her hands were strong, as though she worked with them for a living. Back at camp, the girls in the Hephaestus cabin had had strong hands like that, but she didn’t look like a Hephaestus kid.

She glared at him, her dark almond eyes only a few inches from his. Her cinnamon smell reminded him of his *abuela*’s apartment. Man, he hadn’t thought about that place in years.

The girl pushed him away. “All right. This spot is good. Now tell me you want to leave.”

“What?” Leo’s brain was still kind of muddled from the crash landing. He wasn’t sure he had heard her right.

“Do you want to *leave*?” she demanded. “Surely you’ve got somewhere to go!”

“Uh...yeah. My friends are in trouble. I need to get back to my ship and—”

“Fine,” she snapped. “Just say, *I want to leave Ogygia.*”

“Uh, okay.” Leo wasn’t sure why, but her tone kind of hurt...which was stupid, since he didn’t care what this girl thought. “I want to leave—whatever you said.”

“Oh-gee-gee-ah.” The girl pronounced it slowly, as if Leo were five years old.

“I want to leave Oh-gee-gee-ah,” he said.

She exhaled, clearly relieved. “Good. In a moment, a magical raft will appear. It will take you wherever you want to go.”

“Who *are* you?”

She looked like she was about to answer but stopped herself. “It doesn’t matter. You’ll be gone soon. You’re obviously a mistake.”

That was harsh, Leo thought.

He’d spent enough time thinking he was a mistake—as a demigod, on this quest, in life in general. He didn’t need a random crazy goddess reinforcing the idea.

He remembered a Greek legend about a girl on an island.... Maybe one of his friends had mentioned it? It didn’t matter. As long as she let him leave.

“Any moment now...” The girl stared out at the water.

No magical raft appeared.

“Maybe it got stuck in traffic,” Leo said.

“This is wrong.” She glared at the sky. “This is completely wrong!”

“So...plan B?” Leo asked. “You got a phone, or—”

“Agh!” The girl turned and stormed inland. When she got to the footpath, she sprinted into the grove of trees and disappeared.

“Okay,” Leo said. “Or you could just run away.”

From his tool belt pouches he pulled some rope and a snap hook, then fastened

the Archimedes sphere to his belt.

He looked out to sea. Still no magic raft.

He could stand here and wait, but he was hungry, thirsty, and tired. He was banged up pretty bad from his fall.

He didn't want to follow that crazy girl, no matter how good she smelled.

On the other hand, he had no place else to go. The girl had a dining table, so she probably had food. And she seemed to find Leo's presence annoying.

"Annoying her is a plus," he decided.

He followed her into the hills.

L

LEO

"HOLY HEPHAESTUS," LEO SAID.

The path opened into the nicest garden Leo had ever seen. Not that he had spent a lot of time in gardens, but *dang*. On the left was an orchard and a vineyard—peach trees with red-golden fruit that smelled awesome in the warm sun, carefully pruned vines bursting with grapes, bowers of flowering jasmine, and a bunch of other plants Leo couldn't name.

On the right were neat beds of vegetables and herbs, arranged like spokes around a big sparkling fountain where bronze satyrs spewed water into a central bowl.

At the back of the garden, where the footpath ended, a cave opened in the side of a grassy hill.

Compared to Bunker Nine back at camp, the entrance was tiny, but it was impressive in its own way.

On either side, crystalline rock had been carved into glittering Grecian columns. The tops were fitted with a bronze rod that held silky white curtains.

Leo's nose was assaulted by good smells—cedar, juniper, jasmine, peaches, and fresh herbs.

The aroma from the cave really caught his attention—like beef stew cooking.

He started toward the entrance. Seriously, how could he not? He stopped when he noticed the girl. She was kneeling in her vegetable garden, her back to Leo. She muttered to herself as she dug furiously with a trowel.

Leo approached her from one side so she could see him. He didn't feel like surprising her when she was armed with a sharp gardening implement.

She kept cursing in Ancient Greek and stabbing at the dirt. She had flecks of soil all over her arms, her face, and her white dress, but she didn't seem to care.

Leo could appreciate that. She looked better with a little mud—less like a beauty queen and more like an actual get-your-hands-dirty kind of person.

“I think you've punished that dirt enough,” he offered.

She scowled at him, her eyes red and watery. “Just go away.”

“You're crying,” he said, which was stupidly obvious; but seeing her that way took the wind out of his helicopter blades, so to speak. It was hard to stay mad at someone who was crying.

“None of your business,” she muttered. “It's a big island. Just...find your own place. Leave me alone.” She waved vaguely toward the south. “Go that way,

maybe.”

“So, no magic raft,” Leo said. “No other way off the island?”

“Apparently not!”

“What am I supposed to do, then? Sit in the sand dunes until I die?”

“That would be fine....” The girl threw down her trowel and cursed at the sky. “Except I suppose he *can’t* die here, can he? Zeus! This is not funny!” Can’t *die here*?

“Hold up.” Leo’s head spun like a crankshaft. He couldn’t quite translate what this girl was saying—like when he heard Spaniards or South Americans speaking Spanish. Yeah, he could understand it, sort of; but it sounded so different, it was almost another language.

“I’m going to need some more information here,” he said. “You don’t want me in your face, that’s cool. I don’t want to be here either. But I’m not going to go die in a corner. I have to get off this island. There’s *got* to be a way. Every problem has a fix.” She laughed bitterly. “You haven’t lived very long, if you still believe that.” The way she said it sent a shiver up his back. She looked the same age as him, but he wondered how old she really was.

“You said something about a curse,” he prompted.

She flexed her fingers, like she was practicing her throat-strangling technique. “Yes. I cannot leave Ogygia. My father, Atlas, fought against the gods, and I supported him.”

“Atlas,” Leo said. “As in the *Titan* Atlas?”

The girl rolled her eyes. “Yes, you impossible little...” Whatever she was going to say, she bit it back. “I was imprisoned here, where I could cause the Olympians no trouble. About a year ago, after the Second Titan War, the gods vowed to forgive their enemies and offer amnesty. Supposedly Percy made them promise—”

“Percy,” Leo said. “Percy Jackson?”

She squeezed her eyes shut. A tear trickled down her cheek.

Oh, Leo thought.

“Percy came here,” he said.

She dug her fingers into the soil. “I—I thought I would be released. I dared to hope...but I am still here.”

Leo remembered now. The story was supposed to be a secret, but of course that meant it had spread like wildfire across the camp. Percy had told Annabeth. Months later, when Percy had gone missing, Annabeth told Piper. Piper told Jason...

Percy had talked about visiting this island. He had met a goddess who’d gotten a major crush on him and wanted him to stay, but eventually she let him go.

“You’re that lady,” Leo said. “The one who was named after Caribbean music.” Her eyes glinted murderously. “Caribbean music.”

“Yeah. Reggae?” Leo shook his head. “Merengue? Hold on, I’ll get it.” He snapped his fingers. “Calypso! But Percy said you were awesome. He said you were all sweet and helpful, not, um...”

She shot to her feet. “Yes?”

“Uh, nothing,” Leo said.

“Would you be *sweet*,” she demanded, “if the gods forgot their promise to let you go? Would you be sweet if they *laughed* at you by sending another hero, but a hero who looked like—like *you*?”

“Is that a trick question?”

“*Di Immortales!*” She turned and marched into her cave.

“Hey!” Leo ran after her.

When he got inside, he lost his train of thought. The walls were made from multicolored chunks of crystal. White curtains divided the cave into different

rooms with comfy pillows and woven rugs and platters of fresh fruit. He spotted a harp in one corner, a loom in another, and a big cooking pot where the stew was bubbling, filling the cavern with luscious smells.

The strangest thing? The chores were doing themselves. Towels floated through the air, folding and stacking into neat piles. Spoons washed themselves in a copper sink. The scene reminded Leo of the invisible wind spirits that had served him lunch at Camp Jupiter.

Calypso stood at a washbasin, cleaning the dirt off her arms.

She scowled at Leo, but she didn't yell at him to leave. She seemed to be running out of energy for her anger.

Leo cleared his throat. If he was going to get any help from this lady, he needed to be nice.

"So...I get why you're angry. You probably never want to see another demigod again. I guess that didn't sit right when, uh, Percy left you—"

"He was only the latest," she growled. "Before him, it was that pirate Drake. And before him, Odysseus. They were all the same! The gods send me the greatest heroes, the ones I cannot help but..."

"You fall in love with them," Leo guessed. "And then they leave you." Her chin trembled. "That is my curse. I had hoped to be free of it by now, but here I am, still stuck on Ogygia after three thousand years."

"Three thousand." Leo's mouth felt tingly, like he'd just eaten Pop Rocks. "Uh, you look good for three thousand."

"And now...the worst insult of all. The gods mock me by sending *you*." Anger bubbled in Leo's stomach.

Yeah, typical. If Jason were here, Calypso would fall all over him. She'd beg him to stay, but he'd be all noble about returning to his duties, and he'd leave Calypso brokenhearted. That magic raft would *totally* arrive for him.

But Leo? He was the annoying guest she couldn't get rid of. She'd never fall for him, because she was totally out of his league. Not that he cared. She wasn't his

type anyway. She was way too annoying, and beautiful, and—well, it didn't matter.

“Fine,” he said. “I'll leave you alone. I'll build something myself and get off this stupid island without your help.”

She shook her head sadly. “You don't understand, do you? The gods are laughing at both of us. If the raft will not appear, that means they've closed Ogygia. You're stuck here the same as me. You can never leave.”

L I

LEO

THE FIRST FEW DAYS WERE THE WORST.

Leo slept outside on a bed of drop cloths under the stars. It got cold at night, even on the beach in the summer, so he built fires with the remains of Calypso's dining table. That cheered him up a little.

During the days, he walked the circumference of the island and found nothing of interest—unless you liked beaches and endless sea in every direction. He tried to send an Iris-message in the rainbows that formed in the sea spray, but he had no luck. He didn't have any drachmas for an offering, and apparently the goddess Iris wasn't interested in nuts and bolts.

He didn't even dream, which was unusual for him—or for any demigod—so he had no idea what was going on in the outside world. Had his friends gotten rid of

Khione? Were they looking for him, or had they sailed on to Epirus to complete the quest?

He wasn't even sure what to hope for.

The dream he'd had back on the *Argo II* finally made sense to him—when the evil sorceress lady had told him to either jump off a cliff into the clouds or descend into a dark tunnel where ghostly voices whispered. That tunnel must have represented the House of Hades, which Leo would never see now. He'd taken the cliff instead—falling through the sky to this stupid island. But in the dream, Leo had been given a choice. In real life, he'd had none. Khione had simply plucked him off his ship and shot him into orbit. Totally unfair.

The worst part of being stuck here? He was losing track of the days. He woke up one morning and couldn't remember if he'd been on Ogygia for three nights or four.

Calypso wasn't much help. Leo confronted her in the garden, but she just shook her head. "Time is difficult here."

Great. For all Leo knew, a century had passed in the real world, and the war with Gaea was over for better or worse. Or maybe he'd only been on Ogygia for five minutes. His whole life might pass here in the time it took his friends on the *Argo II* to have breakfast.

Either way, he needed to get off this island.

Calypso took pity on him in some ways. She sent her invisible servants to leave bowls of stew and goblets of apple cider at the edge of the garden. She even sent him a few new sets of clothes—

simple, undyed cotton pants and shirts that she must have made on her loom. They fit him so well, Leo wondered how she'd gotten his measurements. Maybe she just used her generic pattern for SCRAWNY

MALE.

Anyway, he was glad to have new threads, since his old ones were pretty smelly and burned up.

Usually Leo could keep his clothes from burning when he caught fire, but it took concentration.

Sometimes back at camp, if he wasn't thinking about it, he'd be working on some metal project at the hot forge, look down, and realize his clothes had burned away, except for his magic tool belt and a smoking pair of underwear. Kind of embarrassing.

Despite the gifts, Calypso obviously didn't want to see him. One time he poked his head inside the cave and she freaked out, yelling and throwing pots at his head.

Yeah, she was *definitely* on Team Leo.

He ended up pitching a more permanent camp near the footpath, where the beach met the hills.

That way he was close enough to pick up his meals, but Calypso didn't have to see him and go into a pot-throwing rage.

He made himself a lean-to with sticks and canvas. He dug a campfire pit. He even managed to build himself a bench and a worktable from some driftwood and dead cedar branches. He spent hours fixing the Archimedes sphere, cleaning it and repairing its circuits. He made himself a compass, but the needle would spin all crazy no matter what he tried. Leo guessed a GPS would have been useless too. This island was designed to be off the charts, impossible to leave.

He remembered the old bronze astrolabe he'd picked up in Bologna—the one the dwarfs told him Odysseus had made. He had a sneaking suspicion Odysseus had been thinking about this island when he constructed it, but unfortunately Leo had left it back on the ship with Buford the Wonder Table. Besides, the dwarfs had told him the astrolabe didn't work. Something about a missing crystal...

He walked the beach, wondering why Khione had sent him here—assuming his landing here wasn't an accident. Why not just kill him instead? Maybe Khione wanted him to be in limbo forever.

Perhaps she knew the gods were too incapacitated to pay attention to Ogygia, and so the island's magic was broken. That could be why Calypso was still stuck here, and why the magic raft wouldn't appear for Leo.

Or maybe the magic of this place was working just fine. The gods punished Calypso by sending her buff courageous dudes who left as soon as she fell for them. Maybe that was the problem. Calypso would *never* fall for Leo. She *wanted* him to leave. So they were stuck in a vicious circle. If that was Khione's plan...wow. Major-league devious.

Then one morning he made a discovery, and things got even more complicated.

Leo was walking in the hills, following a little brook that ran between two big cedar trees. He liked this area—it was the only place on Ogygia where he couldn't see the sea, so he could pretend he wasn't stuck on an island. In the shade of the trees, he almost felt like he was back at Camp Half-Blood, heading through the woods toward Bunker Nine.

He jumped over the creek. Instead of landing on soft earth, his feet hit something much harder.

CLANG.

Metal.

Excited, Leo dug through the mulch until he saw the glint of bronze.

“Oh, man.” He giggled like a crazy person as he excavated the scraps.

He had no idea why the stuff was here. Hephaestus was always tossing broken parts out of his godly workshop and littering the earth with scrap metal, but what were the chances some of it would hit Ogygia?

Leo found a handful of wires, a few bent gears, a piston that might still work, and several hammered sheets of Celestial bronze—the smallest the size of a drink coaster, the largest the size of a war shield.

It wasn't a lot—not compared to Bunker Nine, or even to his supplies aboard the *Argo II*. But it was more than sand and rocks.

He looked up at the sunlight winking through the cedar branches. “Dad? If you sent this here for me—thanks. If you didn't...well, thanks anyway.”

He gathered up his treasure trove and lugged it back to his campsite.

After that, the days passed more quickly, and with a lot more noise.

First Leo made himself a forge out of mud bricks, each one baked with his own fiery hands. He found a large rock he could use as an anvil base, and he pulled nails from his tool belt until he had enough to melt into a plate for a hammering surface.

Once that was done, he began to recast the Celestial bronze scraps. Each day his hammer rang on bronze until his rock anvil broke, or his tongs bent, or he ran out of firewood.

Each evening he collapsed, drenched in sweat and covered in soot; but he felt great. At least he was working, trying to solve his problem.

The first time Calypso came to check on him, it was to complain about the noise.

“Smoke and fire,” she said. “Clanging on metal all day long. You’re scaring away the birds!”

“Oh, no, not the birds!” Leo grumbled.

“What do you hope to accomplish?”

He glanced up and almost smashed his thumb with his hammer. He’d been staring at metal and fire so long he’d forgotten how beautiful Calypso was. *Annoyingly* beautiful. She stood there with the sunlight in her hair, her white skirt fluttering around her legs, a basket of grapes and fresh-baked bread tucked under one arm.

Leo tried to ignore his rumbling stomach.

“I’m *hoping* to get off this island,” he said. “That is what you want, right?” Calypso scowled. She set the basket near his bedroll. “You haven’t eaten in two days. Take a break and *eat*.”

“Two days?” Leo hadn’t even noticed, which surprised him, since he liked food. He was even more surprised that Calypso *had* noticed.

“Thanks,” he muttered. “I’ll, uh, try to hammer more quietly.”

“Huh.” She sounded unimpressed.

After that, she didn’t complain about the noise or the smoke.

The next time she visited, Leo was putting the final touches on his first project. He didn’t see her until she spoke right behind him.

“I brought you—”

Leo jumped, dropping his wires. “Bronze bulls, girl! Don’t sneak up on me like that!” She was wearing red today—Leo’s favorite color. That was completely irrelevant. She looked really good in red. Also irrelevant.

“I wasn’t *sneaking*,” she said. “I was bringing you these.” She showed him the clothes that were folded over her arm: a new pair of jeans, a white T-shirt, an army fatigue jacket...wait, those were *his* clothes, except that they couldn’t be. His original army jacket had burned up months ago. He hadn’t been *wearing* it when he landed on Ogygia. But the clothes Calypso held looked exactly like the clothes he’d been wearing the first day he’d arrived at Camp Half-Blood—except these looked bigger, resized to fit him better.

“How?” he asked.

Calypso set the clothes at his feet and backed away as if he were a dangerous beast. “I do have a little magic, you know. You keep burning through the clothes I give you, so I thought I would weave something less flammable.”

“These won’t burn?” He picked up the jeans, but they felt just like normal denim.

“They are completely fireproof,” Calypso promised. “They’ll stay clean and expand to fit you, should you ever become less scrawny.”

“Thanks.” He meant it to sound sarcastic, but he was honestly impressed. Leo could make a lot of things, but an inflammable, self-cleaning outfit wasn’t one of them. “So...you made an exact replica of my favorite outfit. Did you, like, Google me or something?” She frowned. “I don’t know that word.”

“You looked me up,” he said. “Almost like you had some interest in me.” She wrinkled her nose. “I have an interest in not making you a new set of clothes

every other day. I have an interest in your not smelling so bad and walking around my island in smoldering rags.”

“Oh, yeah.” Leo grinned. “You’re really warming up to me.” Her face got even redder. “You are the most insufferable person I have ever met! I was only returning a favor. You fixed my fountain.”

“That?” Leo laughed. The problem had been so simple, he’d almost forgotten about it. One of the bronze satyrs had gotten turned sideways and the water pressure was off, so it started making an annoying ticking sound, jiggling up and down, and spewing water over the rim of the pool. He’d pulled out a couple of tools and fixed it in about two minutes. “That was no big deal. I don’t like it when things don’t work right.”

“And the curtains across the cave entrance?”

“The rod wasn’t level.”

“And my gardening tools?”

“Look, I just sharpened the shears. Cutting vines with a dull blade is dangerous. And the pruners needed to be oiled at the hinge, and—”

“Oh, yeah,” Calypso said, in a pretty good imitation of his voice. “You’re really warming up to me.”

For once, Leo was speechless. Calypso’s eyes glittered. He knew she was making fun of him, but somehow it didn’t feel mean.

She pointed at his worktable. “What are you building?”

“Oh.” He looked at the bronze mirror, which he’d just finished wiring up to the Archimedes sphere. In the screen’s polished surface, his own reflection surprised him. His hair had grown out longer and curlier. His face was thinner and more chiseled, maybe because he hadn’t been eating. His eyes were dark and a little ferocious when he wasn’t smiling—kind of a Tarzan look, if Tarzan came in extra-small Latino. He couldn’t blame Calypso for backing away from him.

“Uh, it’s a seeing device,” he said. “We found one like this in Rome, in the workshop of Archimedes. If I can make it work, maybe I can find out what’s

going on with my friends.” Calypso shook her head. “That’s impossible. This island is hidden, cut off from the world by strong magic. Time doesn’t even flow the same here.”

“Well, you’ve got to have some kind of outside contact. How did you find out that I used to wear an army jacket?”

She twisted her hair as if the question made her uncomfortable. “Seeing the past is simple magic.

Seeing the present or the future—that is not.”

“Yeah, well,” Leo said. “Watch and learn, Sunshine. I just connect these last two wires, and—” The bronze plate sparked. Smoke billowed from the sphere. A flash of fire raced up Leo’s sleeve. He pulled off his shirt, threw it down, and stomped on it.

He could tell Calypso was trying not to laugh, but she was shaking with the effort.

“Not a word,” Leo warned.

She glanced at his bare chest, which was sweaty, bony, and streaked with old scars from weapon-making accidents.

“Nothing worth commenting on,” she assured him. “If you want that device to work, perhaps you should try a musical invocation.”

“Right,” he said. “Whenever an engine malfunctions, I like to tap-dance around it. Works every time.”

She took a deep breath and began to sing.

Her voice hit him like a cool breeze—like that first cold front in Texas when the summer heat finally breaks and you start to believe things might get better. Leo couldn’t understand the words, but the song was plaintive and bittersweet, as if she were describing a home she could never return to.

Her singing was magic, no doubt. But it wasn’t like Medea’s trance-inducing voice, or even Piper’s charmspeak. The music didn’t want anything from him. It

simply reminded him of his best memories—building things with his mom in her workshop; sitting in the sunshine with his friends at camp. It made him miss home.

Calypso stopped singing. Leo realized he was staring like an idiot.

“Any luck?” she asked.

“Uh...” He forced his eyes back to the bronze mirror. “Nothing. Wait...” The screen glowed. In the air above it, holographic pictures shimmered to life.

Leo recognized the commons at Camp Half-Blood.

There was no sound, but Clarisse LaRue from the Ares Cabin was yelling orders at the campers, forming them into lines. Leo’s brethren from Cabin Nine hurried around, fitting everyone with armor and passing out weapons.

Even Chiron the centaur was dressed for war. He trotted up and down the ranks, his plumed helmet gleaming, his legs decked in bronze greaves. His usual friendly smile was gone, replaced with a look of grim determination.

In the distance, Greek triremes floated on Long Island Sound, prepped for war. Along the hills, catapults were being primed. Satyrs patrolled the fields, and riders on pegasi circled overhead, alert for aerial attacks.

“Your friends?” Calypso asked.

Leo nodded. His face felt numb. “They’re preparing for war.”

“Against whom?”

“Look,” Leo said.

The scene changed. A phalanx of Roman demigods marched through a moonlit vineyard. An illuminated sign in the distance read: GOLDSMITH WINERY.

“I’ve seen that sign before,” Leo said. “That’s not far from Camp Half-Blood.” Suddenly the Roman ranks deteriorated into chaos. Demigods scattered. Shields fell. Javelins swung wildly, like the whole group had stepped in fire ants.

Darting through the moonlight were two small hairy shapes dressed in mismatched clothes and garish hats. They seemed to be everywhere at once—whacking Romans on the head, stealing their weapons, cutting their belts so their pants fell around their ankles.

Leo couldn't help grinning. "Those beautiful little troublemakers! They kept their promise." Calypso leaned in, watching the Kerkopes. "Cousins of yours?"

"Ha, ha, ha, no," Leo said. "Couple of dwarfs I met in Bologna. I sent them to slow down the Romans, and they're doing it."

"But for how long?" Calypso wondered.

Good question. The scene shifted again. Leo saw Octavian—that no-good blond scarecrow of an augur. He stood in a gas station parking lot, surrounded by black SUVs and Roman demigods. He held up a long pole wrapped in canvas. When he uncovered it, a golden eagle glimmered at the top.

"Oh, that's not good," Leo said.

"A Roman standard," Calypso noted.

"Yeah. And this one shoots lightning, according to Percy." As soon as he said Percy's name, Leo regretted it. He glanced at Calypso. He could see in her eyes how much she was struggling, trying to Marshall her emotions into neat orderly rows like strands on her loom. What surprised Leo most was the surge of anger he felt. It wasn't just annoyance or jealousy. He was *mad* at Percy for hurting this girl.

He refocused on the holographic images. Now he saw a single rider—Reyna, the praetor from Camp Jupiter—flying through a storm on the back of a light-brown pegasus. Reyna's dark hair flew in the wind. Her purple cloak fluttered, revealing the glimmer of her armor. She was bleeding from cuts on her arms and face. Her pegasus's eyes were wild, his mouth slathering from hard riding; but Reyna peered steadfastly forward into the storm.

As Leo watched, a wild gryphon dived out of the clouds. It raked its claws across the horse's ribs, almost throwing Reyna. She drew her sword and slashed the monster down. Seconds later, three *venti* appeared—dark air spirits swirling like miniature tornadoes laced with lightning. Reyna charged them, yelling

defiantly.

Then the bronze mirror went dark.

“No!” Leo yelled. “No, not now. Show me what happens!” He banged on the mirror. “Calypso, can you sing again or something?”

She glared at him. “I suppose that is your girlfriend? Your Penelope? Your Elizabeth? Your Annabeth?”

“What?” Leo couldn’t figure this girl out. Half the stuff she said made no sense. “That’s Reyna.

She’s not my girlfriend! I need to see more! I need—”

NEED, a voice rumbled in the ground beneath his feet. Leo staggered, suddenly feeling like he was standing on the surface of a trampoline.

NEED is an overused word. A swirling human figure erupted from the sand—Leo’s least favorite goddess, the Mistress of Mud, the Princess of Potty Sludge, Gaea herself.

Leo threw a pair of pliers at her. Unfortunately she wasn’t solid, and they passed right through.

Her eyes were closed, but she didn’t look asleep, exactly. She had a smile on her dust devil face, as if she were intently listening to her favorite song. Her sandy robes shifted and folded, reminding Leo of the undulating fins on that stupid shrimpzilla monster they’d fought in the Atlantic. For his money, though, Gaea was uglier.

You want to live, Gaea said. You want to join your friends. But you do not need this, my poor boy. It would make no difference. Your friends will die, regardless.

Leo’s legs shook. He hated it, but whenever this witch appeared, he felt like he was eight years old again, trapped in the lobby of his mom’s machine shop, listening to Gaea’s soothing evil voice while his mother was locked inside the burning warehouse, dying from heat and smoke.

“What I *don’t* need,” he growled, “is more lies from you, Dirt Face. You told me

my great-granddad died in the 1960s. Wrong! You told me I couldn't save my friends in Rome. Wrong! You told me a lot of things."

Gaea's laughter was a soft rustling sound, like dirt trickling down a hill in the first moments of an avalanche.

I tried to help you make better choices. You could have saved yourself. But you defied me at every step. You built your ship. You joined that foolish quest. Now you are trapped here, helpless, while the mortal world dies.

Leo's hands burst into flame. He wanted to melt Gaea's sandy face to glass. Then he felt Calypso's hand on his shoulder.

"Gaea." Her voice was stern and steady. "You are not welcome." Leo wished he could sound as confident as Calypso. Then he remembered that this annoying fifteen-year-old girl was actually the immortal daughter of a Titan.

Ah, Calypso. Gaea raised her arms as if for a hug. Still here, I see, despite the gods' promises.

Why do you think that is, my dear grandchild? Are the Olympians being spiteful, leaving you with no company except this undergrown fool? Or have they simply forgotten you, because you are not worth their time?

Calypso stared straight through the swirling face of Gaea, all the way to the horizon.

Yes, Gaea murmured sympathetically. The Olympians are faithless. They do not give second chances. Why do you hold out hope? You supported your father, Atlas, in his great war. You knew that the gods must be destroyed. Why do you hesitate now? I offer you a chance that Zeus would never give you.

"Where were you these last three thousand years?" Calypso asked. "If you are so concerned with my fate, why do you visit me only now?"

Gaea turned up her palms. *The earth is slow to wake. War comes in its own time. But do not think it will pass you by on Ogygia. When I remake the world, this prison will be destroyed as well.*

"Ogygia destroyed?" Calypso shook her head, as if she couldn't imagine those

two words going together.

You do not have to be here when that happens, Gaea promised. Join me now. Kill this boy.

Spill his blood upon the earth, and help me to wake. I will free you and grant you any wish.

Freedom. Revenge against the gods. Even a prize. Would you still have the demigod Percy Jackson? I will spare him for you. I will raise him from Tartarus. He will be yours to punish or to love, as you choose. Only kill this trespassing boy. Show your loyalty.

Several scenarios went through Leo's head—none of them good. He was positive Calypso would strangle him on the spot, or order her invisible wind servants to chop him into a Leo purée.

Why wouldn't she? Gaea was making her the ultimate deal—kill one annoying guy, get a handsome one free!

Calypso thrust her hand toward Gaea in a three-fingered gesture Leo recognized from Camp Half-Blood: the Ancient Greek ward against evil. "This is not just my prison, Grandmother. It is my home. And *you* are the trespasser."

The wind ripped Gaea's form into nothingness, scattering the sand into the blue sky.

Leo swallowed. "Uh, don't take this the wrong way, but you didn't kill me. Are you crazy?" Calypso's eyes smoldered with anger, but for once Leo didn't think the anger was aimed at him.

"Your friends must need you, or else Gaea would not ask for your death."

"I—uh, yeah. I guess."

"Then we have work to do," she said. "We must get you back to your ship."

LEO

LEO THOUGHT HE'D BEEN BUSY BEFORE. When Calypso set her mind to something, she was a machine.

Within a day, she'd gathered enough supplies for a weeklong voyage—food, flasks of water, herbal medicines from her garden. She wove a sail big enough for a small yacht and made enough rope for all the rigging.

She got so much done that by the second day she asked Leo if he needed any help with his own project.

He looked up from the circuit board that was slowly coming together. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were anxious to get rid of me.”

“That’s a bonus,” she admitted. She was dressed for work in a pair of jeans and a grubby white T-shirt. When he asked her about the wardrobe change, she claimed she had realized how practical these clothes were after making some for Leo.

In the blue jeans, she didn’t look much like a goddess. Her T-shirt was covered with grass and dirt stains, like she’d just run through a swirling Gaea. Her feet were bare. Her cinnamon-toast hair was tied back, which made her almond eyes look even larger and more startling. Her hands were calloused and blistered from working with rope.

Looking at her, Leo felt a tugging in his stomach that he couldn't quite explain.

"So?" she prompted.

"So...what?"

She nodded at the circuitry. "So can I help? How is it coming?"

"Oh, uh, I'm good here. I guess. If I can wire this thing up to the boat, I should be able to navigate back to the world."

"Now all you need is a boat."

He tried to read her expression. He wasn't sure if she was annoyed that he was still here, or wistful that she wasn't leaving too. Then he looked at all the supplies she'd stacked up—easily enough for two people for several days.

"What Gaea said..." He hesitated. "About you getting off this island. Would you want to try it?" She scowled. "What do you mean?"

"Well...I'm not saying it would be fun having you along, always complaining and glaring at me and stuff. But I suppose I could stand it, if you wanted to try." Her expression softened just a little.

"How noble," she muttered. "But no, Leo. If I tried to come with you, your tiny chance of escape would be no chance at all. The gods have placed ancient magic on this island to keep me here. A hero can leave. I cannot. The most important thing is getting you free so you can stop Gaea. Not that I care what happens to you," she added quickly. "But the world's fate is at stake."

"Why would you care about that?" he asked. "I mean, after being away from the world for so long?"

She arched her eyebrows, as if surprised that he'd asked a sensible question. "I suppose I don't like being told what to do—by Gaea or anyone else. As much as I hate the gods sometimes, over the past three millennia I've come to see that they're better than the Titans. They're *definitely* better than the giants. At least the gods kept in touch. Hermes has always been kind to me. And your father, Hephaestus, has often visited. He is a good person."

Leo wasn't sure what to make of her faraway tone. She almost sounded like she was pondering *his* worth, not his dad's.

She reached out and closed his mouth. He hadn't realized it was hanging open.

"Now," Calypso said, "how can I help?"

"Oh." He stared down at his project, but when he spoke, he blurted out an idea that had been forming ever since Calypso made his new clothes. "You know that flameproof cloth? You think you could make me a little bag of that fabric?"

He described the dimensions. Calypso waved her hand impatiently. "That will only take minutes.

Will it help on your quest?"

"Yeah. It might save a life. And, um, could you chip off a little piece of crystal from your cave? I don't need much."

She frowned. "That's an odd request."

"Humor me."

"All right. Consider it done. I'll make the fireproof pouch tonight at the loom, when I've cleaned up. But what can I do now, while my hands are dirty?"

She held up her calloused, grimy fingers. Leo couldn't help thinking there was *nothing* hotter than a girl who didn't mind getting her hands dirty. But of course, that was just a general comment.

Didn't apply to Calypso. Obviously.

"Well," he said, "you could twist some more bronze coils. But that's kind of specialized—" She pushed in next to him on the bench and began to work, her hands braiding the bronze wiring faster than he could have. "Just like weaving," she said. "This isn't so hard."

"Huh," Leo said. "Well, if you ever get off this island and want a job, let me know. You're not a total klutz."

She smirked. “A job, eh? Making things in your forge?”

“Nah, we could start our own shop,” Leo said, surprising himself. Starting a machine shop had always been one of his dreams, but he’d never told anyone about it. “Leo and Calypso’s Garage: Auto Repair and Mechanical Monsters.”

“Fresh fruits and vegetables,” Calypso offered.

“Cider and stew,” Leo added. “We could even provide entertainment. You could sing and I could, like, randomly burst into flames.”

Calypso laughed—a clear, happy sound that made Leo’s heart go *ka-bump*.

“See,” he said, “I’m funny.”

She managed to kill her smile. “You are *not* funny. Now, get back to work, or no cider and stew.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. They worked in silence, side by side, for the rest of the afternoon.

Two nights later, the guidance console was finished.

Leo and Calypso sat on the beach, near the spot where Leo had destroyed the dining table, and they ate a picnic dinner together. The full moon turned the waves to silver. Their campfire sent orange sparks into the sky. Calypso wore a fresh white shirt and her jeans, which she’d apparently decided to live in.

Behind them in the dunes, the supplies were carefully packed and ready to go.

“All we need now is a boat,” Calypso said.

Leo nodded. He tried not to linger on the word *we*. Calypso had made it clear she wasn’t going.

“I can start chopping wood into boards tomorrow,” Leo said. “Few days, we’ll have enough for a small hull.”

“You’ve made a ship before,” Calypso remembered. “Your *Argo II*.” Leo nodded. He thought about all those months he’d spent creating the *Argo II*.

Somehow, making a boat to sail from Ogygia seemed like a more daunting task.

“So how long until you sail?” Calypso’s tone was light, but she didn’t meet his eyes.

“Uh, not sure. Another week?” For some reason, saying that made Leo feel less agitated. When he had gotten here, he couldn’t wait to leave. Now, he was glad he had a few more days. Weird.

Calypso ran her fingers across the completed circuit board. “This took so long to make.”

“You can’t rush perfection.”

A smile tugged at the edge of her mouth. “Yes, but will it work?”

“Getting out, no problem,” Leo said. “But to get back I’ll need Festus and—”

“*What?*”

Leo blinked. “Festus. My bronze dragon. Once I figure out how to rebuild him, I’ll—”

“You told me about Festus,” Calypso said. “But what do you mean *get back?*” Leo grinned nervously. “Well...to get back here, duh. I’m sure I said that.”

“You most definitely did not.”

“I’m not gonna leave you here! After you helped me and everything? Of course I’m coming back.

Once I rebuild Festus, he’ll be able to handle an improved guidance system. There’s this astrolabe that I, uh...” He stopped, deciding it was best not to mention that it had been built by one of Calypso’s old flames. “...that I found in Bologna. Anyway, I think with that crystal you gave me—”

“You can’t come back,” Calypso insisted.

Leo’s heart went *clunk*. “Because I’m not welcome?”

“Because you *can’t*. It’s impossible. No man finds Ogygia twice. That is the

rule.” Leo rolled his eyes. “Yeah, well, you might’ve noticed I’m not good at following rules. I’m coming back here with my dragon, and we’ll spring you. Take you wherever you want to go. It’s only fair.”

“Fair...” Calypso’s voice was barely audible.

In the firelight, her eyes looked so sad, Leo couldn’t stand it. Did she think he was lying to her just to make her feel better? He considered it a given that he would come back and free her from this island. How could he not?

“You didn’t really think I could start Leo and Calypso’s Auto Repair without Calypso, did you?” he asked. “I can’t make cider and stew, and I *sure* can’t sing.” She stared at the sand.

“Well, anyway,” Leo said, “tomorrow I’ll start on the lumber. And in a few days...” He looked out over the water. Something was bobbing on the waves. Leo watched in disbelief as a large wooden raft floated in on the tide and slid to a stop on the beach.

Leo was too dazed to move, but Calypso sprang to her feet.

“Hurry!” She sprinted across the beach, grabbed some supply bags, and ran them to the raft. “I don’t know how long it will stay!”

“But...” Leo stood. His legs felt like they’d turned to rock. He had just convinced himself he had another week on Ogygia. Now he didn’t have time to finish dinner. “That’s the magic raft?”

“Duh!” Calypso yelled. “It *might* work like it’s supposed to and take you where you want to go.

But we can’t be sure. The island’s magic is obviously unstable. You must rig up your guidance device to navigate.”

She snatched up the console and ran toward the raft, which got Leo moving. He helped her fasten it to the raft and run wires to the small rudder in the back. The raft was already fitted with a mast, so Leo and Calypso hauled their sail aboard and started on the rigging.

They worked side by side in perfect harmony. Even among the Hephaestus

campers, Leo had never worked with anyone as intuitive as this immortal gardener girl. In no time, they had the sail in place and all the supplies aboard. Leo hit the buttons on the Archimedes sphere, muttered a prayer to his dad, Hephaestus, and the Celestial bronze console hummed to life.

The rigging tightened. The sail turned. The raft began scraping against the sand, straining to reach the waves.

“Go,” Calypso said.

Leo turned. She was so close he couldn’t stand it. She smelled like cinnamon and wood smoke, and he thought he’d never smell anything that good again.

“The raft finally got here,” he said.

Calypso snorted. Her eyes might have been red, but it was hard to tell in the moonlight. “You just noticed?”

“But if it only shows up for guys you like—”

“Don’t push your luck, Leo Valdez,” she said. “I *still* hate you.”

“Okay.”

“And you are *not* coming back here,” she insisted. “So don’t give me any empty promises.”

“How about a *full* promise?” he said. “Because I’m definitely—” She grabbed his face and pulled him into a kiss, which effectively shut him up.

For all his joking and flirting, Leo had never kissed a girl before. Well, sisterly pecks on the cheek from Piper, but that didn’t count. This was a real, full-contact kiss. If Leo had had gears and wires in his brain, they would’ve short-circuited.

Calypso pushed him away. “That didn’t happen.”

“Okay.” His voice sounded an octave higher than usual.

“Get out of here.”

“Okay.”

She turned, wiping her eyes furiously, and stormed up the beach, the breeze tousling her hair.

Leo wanted to call to her, but the sail caught the full force of the wind, and the raft cleared the beach. He struggled to align the guidance console. By the time Leo looked back, the island of Ogygia was a dark line in the distance, their campfire pulsing like a tiny orange heart.

His lips still tingled from the kiss.

That didn't happen, he told himself. I can't be in love with an immortal girl. She definitely can't be in love with me. Not possible.

As his raft skimmed over the water, taking him back to the mortal world, he understood a line from the Prophecy better— *an oath to keep with a final breath.*

He understood how dangerous oaths could be. But Leo didn't care.

"I'm coming back for you, Calypso," he said to the night wind. "I swear it on the River Styx."

L I I I

ANNABETH

ANNABETH HAD NEVER BEEN SCARED OF THE DARK.

But normally the dark wasn't forty feet tall. It didn't have black wings, a whip

made out of stars, and a shadowy chariot pulled by vampire horses.

Nyx was almost too much to take in. Looming over the chasm, she was a churning figure of ash and smoke, as big as the Athena Parthenos statue, but very much alive. Her dress was void black, mixed with the colors of a space nebula, as if galaxies were being born in her bodice. Her face was hard to see except for the pinpoints of her eyes, which shone like quasars. When her wings beat, waves of darkness rolled over the cliffs, making Annabeth feel heavy and sleepy, her eyesight dim.

The goddess's chariot was made of the same material as Nico di Angelo's sword—Stygian iron

—and pulled by two massive horses, all black except for their pointed silver fangs. The beasts' legs floated in the abyss, turning from solid to smoke as they moved.

The horses snarled and bared their fangs at Annabeth. The goddess lashed her whip—a thin streak of stars like diamond barbs—and the horses reared back.

“No, Shade,” the goddess said. “Down, Shadow. These little prizes are not for you.” Percy eyed the horses as they nickered. He was still shrouded in Death Mist, so he looked like an out-of-focus corpse—which broke Annabeth's heart every time she saw him. It also must not have been very good camouflage, since Nyx could obviously see them.

Annabeth couldn't read the expression on Percy's ghoulish face very well. Apparently he didn't like whatever the horses were saying.

“Uh, so you won't let them eat us?” he asked the goddess. “They really want to eat us.” Nyx's quasar eyes burned. “Of course not. I would not let my horses eat you, any more than I would let Akhlys kill you. Such fine prizes, I will kill myself!” Annabeth didn't feel particularly witty or courageous, but her instincts told her to take the initiative, or this would be a very short conversation.

“Oh, don't kill yourself!” she cried. “We're not *that* scary.” The goddess lowered her whip. “What? No, I didn't mean—”

“Well, I'd hope not!” Annabeth looked at Percy and forced a laugh. “We wouldn't want to scare her, would we?”

“Ha, ha,” Percy said weakly. “No, we wouldn’t.”

The vampire horses looked confused. They reared and snorted and knocked their dark heads together. Nyx pulled back on the reins.

“Do you know who I am?” she demanded.

“Well, you’re Night, I suppose,” said Annabeth. “I mean, I can tell because you’re *dark* and everything, though the brochure didn’t say much about you.” Nyx’s eyes winked out for a moment. “What brochure?”

Annabeth patted her pockets. “We had one, didn’t we?”

Percy licked his lips. “Uh-huh.” He was still watching the horses, his hand tight on his sword hilt, but he was smart enough to follow Annabeth’s lead. Now she just had to hope she wasn’t making things worse...though honestly, she didn’t see how things *could* be worse.

“Anyway,” she said, “I guess the brochure didn’t say much, because you weren’t spotlighted on the tour. We got to see the River Phlegethon, the Cocytus, the *arai*, the poison glade of Akhlys, even some random Titans and giants, but Nyx...hmm, no, you weren’t really featured.”

“*Featured? Spotlighted?*”

“Yeah,” Percy said, warming up to the idea. “We came down here for the Tartarus tour—like, exotic destinations, you know? The Underworld is overdone. Mount Olympus is a tourist trap—”

“Gods, totally!” Annabeth agreed. “So we booked the Tartarus excursion, but no one even mentioned we’d run into Nyx. Huh. Oh, well. Guess they didn’t think you were important.”

“Not important!” Nyx cracked her whip. Her horses bucked and snapped their silvery fangs.

Waves of darkness rolled out of the chasm, turning Annabeth’s insides to jelly, but she couldn’t show her fear.

She pushed down Percy’s sword arm, forcing him to lower his weapon. This was

a goddess beyond anything they had ever faced. Nyx was older than any Olympian or Titan or giant, older even than Gaea. She couldn't be defeated by two demigods—at least not two demigods using *force*.

Annabeth made herself look at the goddess's massive dark face.

"Well, how many other demigods have come to see you on the tour?" she asked innocently.

Nyx's hand went slack on the reins. "None. Not one. This is unacceptable!" Annabeth shrugged. "Maybe it's because you haven't really *done* anything to get in the news. I mean, I can understand Tartarus being important! This whole place is named after him. Or, if we could meet Day—"

"Oh, yeah," Percy chimed in. "Day? She would be impressive. I'd totally want to meet her.

Maybe get her autograph."

"Day!" Nyx gripped the rail of her black chariot. The whole vehicle shuddered. "You mean Hemera? She is my daughter! Night is much more powerful than Day!"

"Eh," said Annabeth. "I liked the *arai*, or even Akhlys better."

"They are my children as well!"

Percy stifled a yawn. "Got a lot of children, huh?"

"I am the mother of all terrors!" Nyx cried. "The Fates themselves! Hecate! Old Age! Pain!

Sleep! Death! And all of the curses! Behold how newsworthy I am!"

ANNABETH

NYX LASHED HER WHIP AGAIN. The darkness congealed around her. On either side, an army of shadows appeared—more dark-winged *arai*, which Annabeth was not thrilled to see; a withered man who must have been Geras, the god of old age; and a younger woman in a black toga, her eyes gleaming and her smile like a serial killer’s—no doubt Eris, the goddess of strife. More kept appearing: dozens of demons and minor gods, each one the spawn of Night.

Annabeth wanted to run. She was facing a brood of horrors that could snap anyone’s sanity. But if she ran, she would die.

Next to her, Percy’s breathing turned shallow. Even through his misty ghoul disguise, Annabeth could tell he was on the verge of panic. She had to stand her ground for both of them.

I am a daughter of Athena, she thought. I control my own mind.

She imagined a mental frame around what she was seeing. She told herself it was just a movie—

a scary movie, sure, but it could not hurt her. She was in control.

“Yeah, not bad,” she admitted. “I guess we could get one picture for the scrapbook, but I don’t know. You guys are so... *dark*. Even if I used a flash, I’m not sure it would come out.”

“Y-yeah,” Percy managed. “You guys aren’t photogenic.”

“You—miserable—tourists!” Nyx hissed. “How dare you not tremble before me! How dare you not whimper and beg for my autograph and a picture for your scrapbook! You want *newsworthy*? My son Hypnos once put Zeus to sleep! When Zeus pursued him across the earth, bent on vengeance, Hypnos hid in *my* palace for safety, and Zeus did not follow. Even the king of Olympus fears me!”

“Uh-huh.” Annabeth turned to Percy. “Well, it’s getting late. We should probably get lunch at one of those restaurants the tour guide recommended. Then we can find the Doors of Death.”

“Aha!” Nyx cried in triumph. Her brood of shadows stirred and echoed: “Aha! Aha!”

“You wish to see the Doors of Death?” Nyx asked. “They lie at the very heart of Tartarus.

Mortals such as you could never reach them, except through the halls of my palace—the Mansion of Night!”

She gestured behind her. Floating in the abyss, maybe three hundred feet below, was a doorway of black marble, leading into some sort of large room.

Annabeth’s heart pounded so strongly she felt it in her toes. That was the way forward—but it was so far down, an impossible jump. If they missed, they would fall into Chaos and be scattered into nothingness—a final death with no do-over. Even if they could make the jump, the goddess of night and her most fearsome children stood in their way.

With a jolt, Annabeth realized what needed to happen. Like everything she’d ever done, it was a long shot. In a way, that calmed her down. A crazy idea in the face of death?

Okay, her body seemed to say, relaxing. *This is familiar territory.*

She managed a bored sigh. “I suppose we could do one picture, but a group shot won’t work.

Nyx, how about one of you with your favorite child? Which one is that?” The

brood rustled. Dozens of horrible glowing eyes turned toward Nyx.

The goddess shifted uncomfortably, as if her chariot were heating up under her feet. Her shadow horses huffed and pawed at the void.

“My favorite child?” she asked. “*All* my children are terrifying!” Percy snorted. “Seriously? I’ve met the Fates. I’ve met Thanatos. They weren’t so scary. You’ve got to have somebody in this crowd who’s worse than that.”

“The darkest,” Annabeth said. “The most like you.”

“I am the darkest,” hissed Eris. “Wars and strife! I have caused all manner of death!”

“I am darker still!” snarled Geras. “I dim the eyes and addle the brain. Every mortal fears old age!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Annabeth said, trying to ignore her chattering teeth. “I’m not seeing enough dark. I mean, you’re the children of Night! Show me dark!”

The horde of *arai* wailed, flapping their leathery wings and stirring up clouds of blackness.

Geras spread his withered hands and dimmed the entire abyss. Eris breathed a shadowy spray of buckshot across the void.

“I am the darkest!” hissed one of the demons.

“No, I!”

“No! Behold my darkness!”

If a thousand giant octopuses had squirted ink at the same time, at the bottom of the deepest, most sunless ocean trench, it could not have been blacker. Annabeth might as well have been blind. She gripped Percy’s hand and steeled her nerves.

“Wait!” Nyx called, suddenly panicked. “I can’t see anything.”

“Yes!” shouted one of her children proudly. “I did that!”

“No, I did!”

“Fool, it was me!”

Dozens of voices argued in the darkness.

The horses whinnied in alarm.

“Stop it!” Nyx yelled. “Whose foot is that?”

“Eris is hitting me!” cried someone. “Mother, tell her to stop hitting me!”

“I did *not*!” yelled Eris. “Ouch!”

The sounds of scuffling got louder. If possible, the darkness became even deeper. Annabeth’s eyes dilated so much, they felt like they were being pulled out of their sockets.

She squeezed Percy’s hand. “Ready?”

“For what?” After a pause, he grunted unhappily. “Poseidon’s underpants, you can’t be serious.”

“Somebody give me light!” Nyx screamed. “Gah! I can’t believe I just said that!”

“It’s a trick!” Eris yelled. “The demigods are escaping!”

“I’ve got them,” screamed an *arai*.

“No, that’s my neck!” Geras gagged.

“Jump!” Annabeth told Percy.

They leaped into the darkness, aiming for the doorway far, far below.

L V

ANNABETH

AFTER THEIR FALL INTO TARTARUS, jumping three hundred feet to the Mansion of Night should have felt quick.

Instead, Annabeth's heart seemed to slow down. Between the beats she had ample time to write her own obituary.

Annabeth Chase, died age 17.

BA-BOOM.

(Assuming her birthday, July 12, had passed while she was in Tartarus; but honestly, she had no idea.)

BA-BOOM.

Died of massive injuries while leaping like an idiot into the abyss of Chaos and splattering on the entry hall floor of Nyx's mansion.

BA-BOOM.

Survived by her father, stepmother, and two stepbrothers who barely knew her.

BA-BOOM.

In lieu of flowers, please send donations to Camp Half-Blood, assuming Gaea hasn't already destroyed it.

Her feet hit solid floor. Pain shot up her legs, but she stumbled forward and broke into a run, hauling Percy after her.

Above them in the dark, Nyx and her children scuffled and yelled, "I've got them! My foot! Stop it!"

Annabeth kept running. She couldn't see anyway, so she closed her eyes. She used her other senses—listening for the echo of open spaces, feeling for cross-breezes against her face, sniffing for any scent of danger—smoke, or poison, or the stench of demons.

It wasn't the first time she'd plunged through darkness. She imagined she was back in the tunnels under Rome, searching out the Athena Parthenos. In retrospect, her journey to Arachne's cavern seemed like a trip to Disneyland.

The squabbling sounds of Nyx's children got farther away. That was good. Percy was still running at her side, holding her hand. Also good.

In the distance ahead of them, Annabeth began to hear a throbbing sound, like her own heartbeat echoing back, amplified so powerfully, the floor vibrated underfoot. The sound filled her with dread, so she figured it must be the right way to go. She ran toward it.

As the beat got louder, she smelled smoke and heard the flickering of torches on either side. She guessed there would be light, but a crawling sensation across her neck warned her it would be a mistake to open her eyes.

"Don't look," she told Percy.

"Wasn't planning on it," he said. "You can feel that, right? We're still in the Mansion of Night. I do *not* want to see it."

Smart boy, Annabeth thought. She used to tease Percy for being dumb, but in truth his instincts were usually right on target.

Whatever horrors lay in the Mansion of Night, they weren't meant for mortal eyes. Seeing them would be worse than staring at the face of Medusa. Better to

run in darkness.

The throbbing got louder still, sending vibrations straight up Annabeth's spine. It felt like someone was knocking on the bottom of the world, demanding to be let in. She sensed the walls opening up on either side of them. The air smelled fresher—or at least not quite as sulfurous. There was another sound, too, closer than the deep pulsing...the sound of flowing water.

Annabeth's heart raced. She knew the exit was close. If they could make it out of the Mansion of Night, maybe they could leave the dark brood of demons behind.

She began to run faster, which would have meant her death if Percy hadn't stopped her.

L V I

ANNABETH

“ANNABETH!” PERCY PULLED HER BACK just as her foot hit the edge of a drop-off. She almost pitched forward into who-knew-what, but Percy grabbed her and wrapped her in his arms.

“It's okay,” he promised.

She pressed her face into his shirt and kept her eyes closed tight. She was trembling, but not just from fear. Percy's embrace was so warm and comforting she wanted to stay there forever, safe and protected...but that wasn't reality. She couldn't afford to relax. She couldn't lean on Percy any more than she had to.

He needed *her*, too.

“Thanks...” She gently disentangled herself from his arms. “Can you tell what’s in front of us?”

“Water,” he said. “I’m still not looking. I don’t think it’s safe yet.”

“Agreed.”

“I can sense a river...or maybe it’s a moat. It’s blocking our path, flowing left to right through a channel cut in the rock. The opposite side is about twenty feet away.” Annabeth mentally scolded herself. She’d heard the flowing water, but she had never considered she might be running headlong into it.

“Is there a bridge, or—?”

“I don’t think so,” Percy said. “And there’s something wrong with the water. Listen.” Annabeth concentrated. Within the roaring current, thousands of voices cried out—shrieking in agony, pleading for mercy.

Help! they groaned. *It was an accident!*

The pain! their voices wailed. *Make it stop!*

Annabeth didn’t need her eyes to visualize the river—a black briny current filled with tortured souls being swept deeper and deeper into Tartarus.

“The River Acheron,” she guessed. “The fifth river of the Underworld.”

“I liked the Phlegethon better than this,” Percy muttered.

“It’s the River of Pain. The ultimate punishment for the souls of the damned—murderers, especially.”

Murderers! the river wailed. *Yes, like you!*

Join us, another voice whispered. *You are no better than we are.*

Annabeth’s head was flooded with images of all the monsters she’d killed over the years.

That wasn't murder, she protested. I was defending myself!

The river changed course through her mind—showing her Zoë Nightshade, who had been slain on Mount Tamalpais because she'd come to rescue Annabeth from the Titans.

She saw Nico's sister, Bianca di Angelo, dying in the collapse of the metal giant Talos, because she also had tried to save Annabeth.

Michael Yew and Silena Beauregard...who had died in the Battle of Manhattan.

You could have prevented it, the river told Annabeth. You should have seen a better way.

Most painful of all: Luke Castellan. Annabeth remembered Luke's blood on her dagger after he'd sacrificed himself to stop Kronos from destroying Olympus.

His blood is on your hands! the river wailed. There should have been another way!

Annabeth had wrestled with the same thought many times. She'd tried to convince herself Luke's death wasn't her fault. Luke had chosen his fate. Still... she didn't know if his soul had found peace in the Underworld, or if he'd been reborn, or if he'd been washed into Tartarus because of his crimes.

He might be one of the tortured voices flowing past right now.

You murdered him! the river cried. Jump in and share his punishment!

Percy gripped her arm. "Don't listen."

"But—"

"I know." His voice sounded as brittle as ice. "They're telling me the same stuff. I think...I think this moat must be the border of Night's territory. If we get across, we should be okay. We'll have to jump."

"You said it was twenty feet!"

"Yeah. You'll have to trust me. Put your arms around my neck and hang on."

“How can you possibly—”

“There!” cried a voice behind them. “Kill the ungrateful tourists!” The children of Nyx had found them. Annabeth wrapped her arms around Percy’s neck. “Go!” With her eyes closed, she could only guess how he managed it. Maybe he used the force of the river somehow. Maybe he was just scared out of his mind and charged with adrenaline. Percy leaped with more strength than she would have thought possible. They sailed through the air as the river churned and wailed below them, splashing Annabeth’s bare ankles with stinging brine.

Then— *CLUMP*. They were on solid ground again.

“You can open your eyes,” Percy said, breathing hard. “But you won’t like what you see.” Annabeth blinked. After the darkness of Nyx, even the dim red glow of Tartarus seemed blinding.

Before them stretched a valley big enough to fit the San Francisco Bay. The booming noise came from the entire landscape, as if thunder were echoing from beneath the ground. Under poisonous clouds, the rolling terrain glistened purple with dark red and blue scar lines.

“It looks like...” Annabeth fought down her revulsion. “Like a giant heart.”

“The heart of Tartarus,” Percy murmured.

The center of the valley was covered with a fine black fuzz of peppery dots. They were so far away, it took Annabeth a moment to realize she was looking at an army—thousands, maybe tens of thousands of monsters, gathered around a central pinpoint of darkness. It was too far to see any details, but Annabeth had no doubt what the pinpoint was. Even from the edge of the valley, Annabeth could feel its power tugging at her soul.

“The Doors of Death.”

“Yeah.” Percy’s voice was hoarse. He still had the pale, wasted complexion of a corpse...

which meant he looked about as good as Annabeth felt.

She realized she’d forgotten all about their pursuers. “What happened to

Nyx...?” She turned. Somehow they’d landed several hundred yards from the banks of Acheron, which flowed through a channel cut into black volcanic hills. Beyond that was nothing but darkness.

No sign of anyone coming after them. Apparently even the minions of Night didn’t like to cross the Acheron.

She was about to ask Percy how he had jumped so far when she heard the skittering of a rockslide in the hills to their left. She drew her drakon-bone sword. Percy raised Riptide.

A patch of glowing white hair appeared over the ridge, then a familiar grinning face with pure silver eyes.

“Bob?” Annabeth was so happy she actually jumped. “Oh my gods!”

“Friends!” The Titan lumbered toward them. The bristles of his broom had been burned off. His janitor’s uniform was slashed with new claw marks, but he looked delighted. On his shoulder, Small Bob the kitten purred almost as loudly as the pulsing heart of Tartarus.

“I found you!” Bob gathered them both in a rib-crushing hug. “You look like smoking dead people. That is good!”

“Urf,” Percy said. “How did you get here? Through the Mansion of Night?”

“No, no.” Bob shook his head adamantly. “That place is too scary. Another way—only good for Titans and such.”

“Let me guess,” Annabeth said. “You went sideways.”

Bob scratched his chin, evidently at a loss for words. “Hmm. No. More... *diagonal*.” Annabeth laughed. Here they were at the heart of Tartarus, facing an impossible army—she would take any comfort she could get. She was ridiculously glad to have Bob the Titan with them again.

She kissed his immortal nose, which made him blink.

“We stay together now?” he asked.

“Yes,” Annabeth agreed. “Time to see if this Death Mist works.”

“And if it doesn’t...” Percy stopped himself.

There was no point in wondering about that. They were about to march into the middle of an enemy army. If they were spotted, they were dead.

Despite that, Annabeth managed a smile. Their goal was in sight. They had a Titan with a broom and a very loud kitten on their side. That had to count for something.

“Doors of Death,” she said, “here we come.”

L V I I

JASON

JASON WASN'T SURE WHAT TO HOPE FOR: storm or fire.

As he waited for his daily audience with the lord of the South Wind, he tried to decide which of the god’s personalities, Roman or Greek, was worse. But after five days in the palace, he was only certain about one thing: he and his crew were unlikely to get out of here alive.

He leaned against the balcony rail. The air was so hot and dry, it sucked the moisture right out of his lungs. Over the last week, his skin had gotten darker. His hair had turned as white as corn silk.

Whenever he glanced in the mirror, he was startled by the wild, empty look in his eyes, as if he'd gone blind wandering in the desert.

A hundred feet below, the bay glittered against a crescent of red sand beach. They were somewhere on the northern coast of Africa. That's as much as the wind spirits would tell him.

The palace itself stretched out on either side of him—a honeycomb of halls and tunnels, balconies, colonnades, and cavernous rooms carved into the sandstone cliffs, all designed for the wind to blow through and make as much noise as possible. The constant pipe-organ sounds reminded Jason of the floating lair of Aeolus, back in Colorado, except here the winds seemed in no hurry.

Which was part of the problem.

On their best days, the southern *venti* were slow and lazy. On their worst days, they were gusty and angry. They'd initially welcomed the *Argo II*, since any enemy of Boreas was a friend of the South Wind, but they seemed to have forgotten that the demigods were their guests. The *venti* had quickly lost interest in helping repair the ship. Their king's mood got worse every day.

Down at the dock, Jason's friends were working on the *Argo II*. The main sail had been repaired, the rigging replaced. Now they were mending the oars. Without Leo, they were unable to repair the more complicated parts of the ship, even with the help of Buford the table and Festus (who was now permanently activated thanks to Piper's charmspeak—and *none* of them understood that).

But they kept trying.

Hazel and Frank stood at the helm, tinkering with the controls. Piper relayed their commands to Coach Hedge, who was hanging over the side of the ship, banging out dents in the oars. Hedge was well suited for banging on things.

They didn't seem to be making much progress, but considering what they'd been through, it was a miracle the ship was in one piece.

Jason shivered when he thought about Khione's attack. He'd been rendered helpless—frozen solid not once but twice, while Leo was blasted into the sky and Piper was forced to save them all single-handedly.

Thank the gods for Piper. She considered herself a failure for not having stopped the wind bomb from exploding; but the truth was, she'd saved the entire crew from becoming ice sculptures in Quebec.

She'd also managed to direct the explosion of the icy sphere, so even though the ship had been pushed halfway across the Mediterranean, it had sustained relatively minor damage.

Down at the dock, Hedge yelled, "Try it now!"

Hazel and Frank pulled some of the levers. The port oars went crazy, chopping up and down and doing the wave. Coach Hedge tried to dodge, but one smacked him in the rear and launched him into the air. He came down screaming and splashed into the bay.

Jason sighed. At this rate, they'd never be able to sail, even if the southern *venti* allowed them to. Somewhere in the north, Reyna was flying toward Epirus, assuming she'd gotten his note at Diocletian's Palace. Leo was lost and in trouble. Percy and Annabeth...well, best-case scenario they were still alive, making their way to the Doors of Death. Jason couldn't let them down.

A rustling sound made him turn. Nico di Angelo stood in the shadow of the nearest column. He'd shed his jacket. Now he just wore his black T-shirt and black jeans. His sword and the scepter of Diocletian hung on either side of his belt.

Days in the hot sun hadn't tanned *his* skin. If anything, he looked paler. His dark hair fell over his eyes. His face was still gaunt, but he was definitely in better shape than when they'd left Croatia. He had regained enough weight not to look starved. His arms were surprisingly taut with muscles, as if he'd spent the past week sword fighting. For all Jason knew, he'd been slipping off to practice raising spirits with Diocletian's scepter, then sparring with them. After their expedition in Split, nothing would surprise him.

"Any word from the king?" Nico asked.

Jason shook his head. "Every day, he calls for me later and later."

"We need to leave," Nico said. "Soon."

Jason had been having the same feeling, but hearing Nico say it made him even edgier. “You sense something?”

“Percy is close to the Doors,” Nico said. “He’ll need us if he’s going to make it through alive.” Jason noticed that he didn’t mention Annabeth. He decided not to bring that up.

“All right,” Jason said. “But if we can’t repair the ship—”

“I promised I’d lead you to the House of Hades,” Nico said. “One way or another, I will.”

“You can’t shadow-travel with all of us. And it *will* take all of us to reach the Doors of Death.” The orb at the end of Diocletian’s scepter glowed purple. Over the past week, it seemed to have aligned itself to Nico di Angelo’s moods. Jason wasn’t sure that was a good thing.

“Then you’ve *got* to convince the king of the South Wind to help.” Nico’s voice seethed with anger. “I didn’t come all this way, suffer so many humiliations...” Jason had to make a conscious effort not to reach for his sword. Whenever Nico got angry, all of Jason’s instincts screamed, *Danger!*

“Look, Nico,” he said, “I’m here if you want to talk about, you know, what happened in Croatia.

I get how difficult—”

“You don’t get anything.”

“Nobody’s going to judge you.”

Nico’s mouth twisted in a sneer. “Really? That would be a first. I’m the son of *Hades*, Jason. I might as well be covered in blood or sewage, the way people treat me. I don’t belong anywhere. I’m not even from this *century*. But even that’s not enough to set me apart. I’ve got to be—to be—”

“Dude! It’s not like you’ve got a choice. It’s just who you are.”

“Just who I am...” The balcony trembled. Patterns shifted in the stone floor, like bones coming to the surface. “Easy for you to say. You’re everybody’s golden

boy, the son of *Jupiter*. The only person who ever accepted *me* was Bianca, and she *died*! I didn't choose any of this. My father, my feelings..."

Jason tried to think of something to say. He wanted to be Nico's friend. He knew that was the only way to help. But Nico wasn't making it easy.

He raised his hands in submission. "Yeah, okay. But, Nico, you *do* choose how to live your life.

You want to trust somebody? Maybe take a risk that I'm really your friend and I'll accept you. It's better than hiding."

The floor cracked between them. The crevice hissed. The air around Nico shimmered with spectral light.

"Hiding?" Nico's voice was deadly quiet.

Jason's fingers itched to draw his sword. He'd met plenty of scary demigods, but he was starting to realize that Nico di Angelo—as pale and gaunt as he looked—might be more than he could handle.

Nevertheless, he held Nico's gaze. "Yes, hiding. You've run away from both camps. You're so afraid you'll get rejected that you won't even try. Maybe it's time you come out of the shadows." Just when the tension became unbearable, Nico dropped his eyes. The fissure closed in the balcony floor. The ghostly light faded.

"I'm going to honor my promise," Nico said, not much louder than a whisper. "I'll take you to Epirus. I'll help you close the Doors of Death. Then that's it. I'm leaving—forever." Behind them, the doors of the throne room blasted open with a gust of scorching air.

A disembodied voice said: *Lord Auster will see you now.*

As much as he dreaded this meeting, Jason felt relieved. At the moment, arguing with a crazy wind god seemed safer than befriending an angry son of Hades. He turned to tell Nico good-bye, but Nico had disappeared—melting back into the darkness.

LVIII

JASON

SO IT WAS A STORM DAY. Auster, the Roman version of the South Wind, was holding court.

The two previous days, Jason had dealt with Notus. While the god's Greek version was fiery and quick to anger, at least he was *quick*. Auster...well, not so much.

White and red marble columns lined the throne room. The rough sandstone floor smoked under Jason's shoes. Steam hung in the air, like the bathhouse back at Camp Jupiter, except bathhouses usually didn't have thunderstorms crackling across the ceiling, lighting the room in disorienting flashes.

Southern *venti* swirled through the hall in clouds of red dust and superheated air. Jason was careful to stay away from them. On his first day here, he'd accidentally brushed his hand through one.

He'd gotten so many blisters, his fingers looked like tentacles.

At the end of the room was the strangest throne Jason had ever seen—made of equal parts fire and water. The dais was a bonfire. Flames and smoke curled up to form a seat. The back of the chair was a churning storm cloud. The armrests sizzled where moisture met fire. It didn't look very comfortable, but the god Auster lounged on it like he was ready for an easy afternoon of watching football.

Standing up, he would have been about ten feet tall. A crown of steam wreathed his shaggy white hair. His beard was made of clouds, constantly popping with lightning and raining down on the god's chest, soaking his sand-colored toga. Jason wondered if you could shave a thundercloud beard. He thought it might be annoying to rain on yourself all the time, but Auster didn't seem to care. He reminded Jason of a soggy Santa Claus, but more lazy than jolly.

"So..." The god's voice rumbled like an oncoming front. "The son of Jupiter returns." Auster made it sound like Jason was late. Jason was tempted to remind the stupid wind god that he had spent hours outside every day waiting to be called, but he just bowed.

"My lord," he said. "Have you received any news of my friend?"

"Friend?"

"Leo Valdez." Jason tried to stay patient. "The one who was taken by the winds."

"Oh...yes. Or rather, no. We have had no word. He was not taken by *my* winds. No doubt this was the work of Boreas or his spawn."

"Uh, yes. We knew that."

"That is the only reason I took you in, of course." Auster's eyebrows rose into his wreath of steam. "Boreas must be opposed! The north winds must be driven back!"

"Yes, my lord. But to oppose Boreas, we really need to get our ship out of the harbor."

"Ship in the harbor!" The god leaned back and chuckled, rain pouring out of his beard. "You know the *last* time mortal ships came into my harbor? A king of Libya...Psyollos was his name. He blamed *me* for the scorching winds that burned his crops. Can you believe it?" Jason gritted his teeth. He'd learned that Auster couldn't be rushed. In his rainy form, he was sluggish and warm and random.

"And did you burn those crops, my lord?"

“Of course!” Auster smiled good-naturedly. “But what did Psyollos expect, planting crops at the edge of the Sahara? The fool launched his entire fleet against me. He intended to destroy my stronghold so the south wind could never blow again. I destroyed his fleet, of course.”

“Of course.”

Auster narrowed his eyes. “You aren’t with Psyollos, are you?”

“No, Lord Auster. I’m Jason Grace, son of—”

“Jupiter! Yes, of course. I like sons of Jupiter. But why are you still in my harbor?” Jason suppressed a sigh. “We don’t have your permission to leave, my lord. Also, our ship is damaged. We need our mechanic, Leo Valdez, to repair the engine, unless you know of another way.”

“Hmm.” Auster held up his fingers and let a dust devil swirl between them like a baton. “You know, people accuse me of being fickle. Some days I am the scorching wind, the destroyer of crops, the sirocco from Africa! Other days I am gentle, heralding the warm summer rains and cooling fogs of the southern Mediterranean. And in the off-season, I have a lovely place in Cancun! At any rate, in ancient times, mortals both feared me and loved me. For a god, unpredictability can be a strength.”

“Then you are truly strong,” Jason said.

“Thank you! Yes! But the same is not true of demigods.” Auster leaned forward, close enough so that Jason could smell rain-soaked fields and hot sandy beaches. “You remind me of my own children, Jason Grace. You have blown from place to place. You are undecided. You change day to day. If you could turn the wind sock, which way would it blow?” Sweat trickled between Jason’s shoulder blades. “Excuse me?”

“You say you need a navigator. You need my permission. I say you need neither. It is time to choose a direction. A wind that blows aimlessly is of no use to anyone.”

“I don’t...I don’t understand.”

Even as he said it, he *did* understand. Nico had talked about not belonging

anywhere. At least Nico was free of attachments. He could go wherever he chose.

For months, Jason had been wrestling with the question of where he belonged. He'd always chafed against the traditions of Camp Jupiter, the power plays, the infighting. But Reyna was a good person. She needed his help. If he turned his back on her...someone like Octavian could take over and ruin everything Jason *did* love about New Rome. Could he be so selfish as to leave? The very idea crushed him with guilt.

But in his heart, he *wanted* to be at Camp Half-Blood. The months he'd spent there with Piper and Leo had felt more satisfying, more *right* than all his years at Camp Jupiter. Besides, at Camp Half-Blood, there was at least a *chance* he might meet his father someday. The gods hardly ever stopped by Camp Jupiter to say hello.

Jason took a shaky breath. "Yes. I know the direction I want to take."

"Good! And?"

"Uh, we still need a way to fix the ship. Is there—?"

Auster raised an index finger. "Still expecting guidance from the wind lords? A son of Jupiter should know better."

Jason hesitated. "We're leaving, Lord Auster. Today."

The wind god grinned and spread his hands. "At last, you announce your purpose! Then you have my permission to go, though you do not need it. And how will you sail without your engineer, without your engines fixed?"

Jason felt the south winds zipping around him, whinnying in challenge like headstrong mustangs, testing his will.

All week he had been waiting, hoping Auster would decide to help. For months he had worried about his obligations to Camp Jupiter, hoping his path would become clear. Now, he realized, he simply had to take what he wanted. He had to control the winds, not the other way around.

"You're going to help us," Jason said. "Your *venti* can take the form of horses.

You'll give us a team to pull the *Argo II*. They'll lead us to wherever Leo is."

"Wonderful!" Auster beamed, his beard flashing with electricity. "Now...can you make good on those bold words? Can you control what you ask for, or will you be torn apart?" The god clapped his hands. Winds swirled around his throne and took the form of horses. These weren't dark and cold like Jason's friend Tempest. The South Wind horses were made of fire, sand, and hot thunderstorm. Four of them raced past, their heat singeing the hair off Jason's arms. They galloped around the marble columns, spitting flames, neighing with a sound like sandblasters. The more they ran, the wilder they became. They started to eye Jason.

Auster stroked his rainy beard. "Do you know why the *venti* can appear as horses, my boy?

Every so often, we wind gods travel the earth in equine form. On occasion, we've been known to sire the fastest of all horses."

"Thanks," Jason muttered, though his teeth were chattering with fear. "Too much information." One of the *venti* charged at Jason. He ducked aside, his clothes smoking from the close call.

"Sometimes," Auster continued cheerfully, "mortals recognize our divine blood. They will say, *That horse runs like the wind*. And for good reason. Like the fastest stallions, the *venti* are our children!"

The wind horses began to circle Jason.

"Like my friend Tempest," he ventured.

"Oh, well..." Auster scowled. "I fear that one is a child of Boreas. How you tamed him, I will never know. These are my own offspring, a fine team of southern winds. Control them, Jason Grace, and they will pull your ship from the harbor."

Control them, Jason thought. Yeah, right.

They ran back and forth, working up a frenzy. Like their master, the South Wind, they were conflicted—half hot, dry sirocco, half stormy thunderhead.

I need speed, Jason thought. I need purpose.

He envisioned Notus, the Greek version of the South Wind—blistering hot, but very fast.

In that moment, he *chose* Greek. He threw in his lot with Camp Half-Blood—and the horses changed. The storm clouds inside burned away, leaving nothing but red dust and shimmering heat, like mirages on the Sahara.

“Well done,” said the god.

On the throne now sat Notus—a bronze-skinned old man in a fiery Greek *chiton*, his head crowned with a wreath of withered, smoking barley.

“What are you waiting for?” the god prompted.

Jason turned toward the fiery wind steeds. Suddenly he wasn’t afraid of them.

He thrust out his hand. A swirl of dust shot toward the nearest horse. A lasso—a rope of wind, more tightly wound than any tornado—wrapped around the horse’s neck. The wind formed a halter and brought the beast to a stop.

Jason summoned another wind rope. He lashed a second horse, binding it to his will. In less than a minute, he had tethered all four *venti*. He reined them in, still whinnying and bucking, but they couldn’t break Jason’s ropes. It felt like flying four kites in a strong wind—hard, yes, but not impossible.

“Very good, Jason Grace,” Notus said. “You are a son of Jupiter, yet you have chosen your own path—as all the greatest demigods have done before you. You cannot control your parentage, but you *can* choose your legacy. Now, go. Lash your team to the prow and direct them toward Malta.”

“Malta?” Jason tried to focus, but the heat from the horses was making him light-headed. He knew nothing about Malta, except for some vague story about a Maltese falcon. Were malts invented there?

“Once you arrive in the city of Valletta,” Notus said, “you will no longer need these horses.”

“You mean...we’ll find Leo there?”

The god shimmered, slowly fading into waves of heat. “Your destiny grows clearer, Jason Grace. When the choice comes again—storm or fire—remember me. And do not despair.” The doors of the throne room burst open. The horses, smelling freedom, bolted for the exit.

L I X

JASON

AT SIXTEEN, MOST KIDS WOULD STRESS about parallel parking tests, getting a driver’s license, and affording a car.

Jason stressed about controlling a team of fiery horses with wind ropes.

After making sure his friends were aboard and safely below deck, he lashed the *venti* to the prow of the *Argo II* (which Festus was *not* happy about), straddled the figurehead, and yelled,

“Giddyup!”

The *venti* tore across the waves. They weren’t quite as fast as Hazel’s horse, Arion, but they had a lot more heat. They kicked up a rooster tail of steam that made it almost impossible for Jason to see where they were going. The ship shot out of the bay. In no time Africa was a hazy line on the horizon behind them.

Maintaining the wind ropes took all of Jason’s concentration. The horses strained to break free.

Only his willpower kept them in check.

Malta, he ordered. *Straight to Malta*.

By the time land finally appeared in the distance—a hilly island carpeted with low stone buildings—Jason was soaked in sweat. His arms felt rubbery, like he'd been holding a barbell straight out in front of him.

He hoped they'd reached the right place, because he couldn't keep the horses together any longer. He released the wind reins. The *venti* scattered into particles of sand and steam.

Exhausted, Jason climbed down from the prow. He leaned against Festus's neck. The dragon turned and gave him a chin hug.

"Thanks, man," Jason said. "Rough day, huh?"

Behind him, the deck boards creaked.

"Jason?" Piper called. "Oh, gods, your arms..."

He hadn't noticed, but his skin was dotted with blisters.

Piper unwrapped a square of ambrosia. "Eat this."

He chewed. His mouth was filled with the taste of fresh brownies—his favorite treat from the bakeries in New Rome. The blisters faded on his arms. His strength returned, but the brownie ambrosia tasted more bitter than usual, as if it somehow knew that Jason was turning his back on Camp Jupiter. This was no longer the taste of home.

"Thanks, Pipes," he murmured. "How long was I—?"

"About six hours."

Wow, Jason thought. No wonder he felt sore and hungry. "The others?"

"All fine. Tired of being cooped up. Should I tell them it's safe to come above deck?" Jason licked his dry lips. Despite the ambrosia, he felt shaky. He didn't want the others to see him like this.

“Give me a second,” he said. “...catch my breath.”

Piper leaned next to him. In her green tank top, her beige shorts, and her hiking boots, she looked like she was ready to climb a mountain—and then fight an army at the top. Her dagger was strapped to her belt. Her cornucopia was slung over one shoulder. She’d taken to wearing the jagged bronze sword she’d recovered from Zethes the Boread, which was only slightly less intimidating than an assault rifle.

During their time at Auster’s palace, Jason had watched Piper and Hazel spend hours sword fighting—something Piper had never been interested in before. Since her encounter with Khione, Piper seemed more wired, tensed up inside like a primed catapult, as if she were determined never to be caught off guard again.

Jason understood the feeling, but he worried she was being too hard on herself. Nobody could be ready for anything all the time. He should know. He’d spent the last fight as a freeze-dried throw rug.

He must have been staring, because she gave him a knowing smirk. “Hey, I’m fine. *We’re* fine.” She perched on her tiptoes and kissed him, which felt as good as the ambrosia. Her eyes were flecked with so many colors Jason could’ve stared into them all day, studying the changing patterns, the way people watched the northern lights.

“I’m lucky to have you,” he said.

“Yeah, you are.” She pushed his chest gently. “Now, how do we get this ship to the docks?” Jason frowned across the water. They were still half a mile from the island. He had no idea whether they could get the engines working, or the sails.
...

Fortunately, Festus had been listening. He faced front and blew a plume of fire. The ship’s engine clattered and hummed. It sounded like a massive bike with a busted chain—but they lurched forward. Slowly, the *Argo II* headed toward the shore.

“Good dragon.” Piper patted Festus’s neck.

The dragon’s ruby eyes glinted as if he was pleased with himself.

“He seems different since you woke him,” Jason said. “More...alive.”

“The way he *should* be.” Piper smiled. “I guess once in a while we all need a wake-up call from somebody who loves us.”

Standing next to her, Jason felt so good, he could almost imagine their future together at Camp Half-Blood, once the war was over—assuming they lived, assuming there was still a camp left to return to.

When the choice comes again, Notus had said, storm or fire—remember me. And do not despair.

The closer they got to Greece, the more dread settled in Jason’s chest. He was starting to think Piper was right about the *storm or fire* line in the prophecy—one of them, Jason or Leo, would not come back from this voyage alive.

Which was why they *had* to find Leo. As much as Jason loved his life, he couldn’t let his friend die for his sake. He could never live with the guilt.

Of course he hoped he was wrong. He hoped they both came out of this quest okay. But if not, Jason had to be prepared. He would protect his friends and stop Gaea—whatever it took.

Do not despair.

Yeah. Easy for an immortal wind god to say.

As the island got closer, Jason saw docks bristling with sails. From the rocky shoreline rose fortress-like seawalls—fifty or sixty feet tall. Above that sprawled a medieval-looking city of church spires, domes, and tightly wedged buildings, all made of the same golden stone. From where Jason stood, it looked as if the city covered every inch of the island.

He scanned the boats in the harbor. A hundred yards ahead, tied to the end of the longest dock, was a makeshift raft with a simple mast and a square canvas sail. On the back, the rudder was wired to some sort of machine. Even from this distance, Jason could see the glint of Celestial bronze.

Jason grinned. Only one demigod would make a boat like that, and he’d moored it as far out in the harbor as possible, where the *Argo II* couldn’t fail to spot it.

“Get the others,” Jason told Piper. “Leo is here.”

L X

JASON

THEY FOUND LEO AT THE TOP of the city fortifications. He was sitting at an open-air café, overlooking the sea, drinking a cup of coffee and dressed in... wow. Time warp. Leo’s outfit was identical to the one he’d worn the day they first arrived at Camp Half-Blood—jeans, a white shirt, and an old army jacket. Except that jacket had burned up months ago.

Piper nearly knocked him out of his chair with a hug. “Leo! Gods, where have you been?”

“Valdez!” Coach Hedge grinned. Then he seemed to remember he had a reputation to protect and he forced a scowl. “You ever disappear like that again, you little punk, I’ll knock you into next month!”

Frank patted Leo on the back so hard it made him wince. Even Nico shook his hand.

Hazel kissed Leo on the cheek. “We thought you were dead!” Leo mustered a faint smile. “Hey, guys. Nah, nah, I’m good.” Jason could tell he *wasn’t* good. Leo wouldn’t meet their eyes. His hands were perfectly still on the table. Leo’s hands were *never* still. All the nervous energy had drained right out of him, replaced by a kind of wistful sadness.

Jason wondered why his expression seemed familiar. Then he realized Nico di Angelo had looked the same way after facing Cupid in the ruins of Salona.

Leo was heartsick.

As the others grabbed chairs from the nearby tables, Jason leaned in and squeezed his friend's shoulder.

"Hey, man," he said, "what happened?"

Leo's eyes swept around the group. The message was clear: *Not here. Not in front of everyone.*

"I got marooned," Leo said. "Long story. How about you guys? What happened with Khione?" Coach Hedge snorted. "What happened? *Piper* happened! I'm telling you, this girl has skills!"

"Coach..." Piper protested.

Hedge began retelling the story, but in his version Piper was a kung fu assassin and there were a lot more Boreads.

As the coach talked, Jason studied Leo with concern. This café had a perfect view of the harbor.

Leo must have seen the *Argo II* sail in. Yet he sat here drinking coffee—which he didn't even *like*—

waiting for them to find him. That wasn't like Leo at all. The ship was the most important thing in his life. When he saw it coming to rescue him, Leo should have run down to the docks, whooping at the top of his lungs.

Coach Hedge was just describing how Piper had defeated Khione with a roundhouse kick when Piper interrupted.

"Coach!" she said. "It didn't happen like that at all. I couldn't have done *anything* without Festus."

Leo raised his eyebrows. "But Festus was deactivated."

“Um, about that,” Piper said. “I sort of woke him up.”

Piper explained her version of events—how she’d rebooted the metal dragon with charmspeak.

Leo tapped his fingers on the table, like some of his old energy was coming back.

“Shouldn’t be possible,” he murmured. “Unless the upgrades let him respond to voice commands. But if he’s permanently activated, that means the navigation system and the crystal...”

“Crystal?” Jason asked.

Leo flinched. “Um, nothing. Anyway, what happened after the wind bomb went off?” Hazel took up the story. A waitress came over and offered them menus. In no time they were chowing down on sandwiches and sodas, enjoying the sunny day almost like a group of regular teenagers.

Frank grabbed a tourist brochure stuck under the napkin dispenser. He began to read it. Piper patted Leo’s arm, like she couldn’t believe he was really here. Nico stood at the edge of the group, eyeing the passing pedestrians as if they might be enemies. Coach Hedge munched on the salt and pepper shakers.

Despite the happy reunion, everybody seemed more subdued than usual—like they were picking up on Leo’s mood. Jason had never really considered how important Leo’s sense of humor was to the group. Even when things were super serious, they could always depend on Leo to lighten things up.

Now, it felt like the whole team had dropped anchor.

“So then Jason harnessed the *venti*,” Hazel finished. “And here we are.” Leo whistled. “Hot-air horses? Dang, Jason. So basically, you held a bunch of gas together all the way to Malta, and then you let it loose.”

Jason frowned. “You know, it doesn’t sound so heroic when you put it that way.”

“Yeah, well. I’m an expert on hot air. I’m still wondering, why Malta? I just kind of ended up here on the raft, but was that a random thing, or—”

“Maybe because of this.” Frank tapped his brochure. “Says here Malta was where Calypso lived.”

A pint of blood drained from Leo’s face. “W-what now?”

Frank shrugged. “According to this, her original home was an island called Gozo just north of here. Calypso’s a Greek myth thingie, right?”

“Ah, a Greek myth thingie!” Coach Hedge rubbed his hands together. “Maybe we get to fight her!

Do we get to fight her? ’Cause I’m ready.”

“No,” Leo murmured. “No, we don’t have to fight her, Coach.” Piper frowned. “Leo, what’s wrong? You look—”

“Nothing’s wrong!” Leo shot to his feet. “Hey, we should get going. We’ve got work to do!”

“But...where did you go?” Hazel asked. “Where did you get those clothes? How —”

“Jeez, ladies!” Leo said. “I appreciate the concern, but I don’t need two extra moms!” Piper smiled uncertainly. “Okay, but—”

“Ships to fix!” Leo said. “Festus to check! Earth goddesses to punch in the face! What are we waiting for? Leo’s back!”

He spread his arms and grinned.

He was making a brave attempt, but Jason could see the sadness lingering in his eyes. Something had happened to him...something to do with Calypso.

Jason tried to remember the story about her. She was a sorceress of some sort, maybe like Medea or Circe. But if Leo had escaped from an evil sorceress’s lair, why did he seem so sad? Jason would have to talk to him later, make sure his buddy was okay. For now Leo clearly didn’t want to be interrogated.

Jason got up and clapped him on the shoulder. “Leo’s right. We should get going.” Everybody took the cue. They started wrapping up their food and

finishing their drinks.

Suddenly, Hazel gasped. “Guys...”

She pointed to the northeast horizon. At first, Jason saw nothing but the sea. Then a streak of darkness shot into the air like black lightning—as if pure night had torn through the daytime.

“I don’t see anything,” Coach Hedge grumbled.

“Me neither,” Piper said.

Jason scanned his friends’ faces. Most of them just looked confused. Nico was the only other one who seemed to have noticed the black lightning.

“That can’t be...” Nico muttered. “Greece is still hundreds of miles away.” The darkness flashed again, momentarily leaching the color from the horizon.

“You think it’s Epirus?” Jason’s whole skeleton tingled, the way he felt when he got hit by a thousand volts. He didn’t know why he could see the dark flashes. He wasn’t a child of the Underworld. But it gave him a very bad feeling.

Nico nodded. “The House of Hades is open for business.”

A few seconds later, a rumbling sound washed over them like distant artillery.

“It’s begun,” Hazel said.

“What has?” Leo asked.

When the next flash happened, Hazel’s gold eyes darkened like foil in fire. “Gaea’s final push,” she said. “The Doors of Death are working overtime. Her forces are entering the mortal world en masse.”

“We’ll never make it,” Nico said. “By the time we arrive, there’ll be too many monsters to fight.”

Jason set his jaw. “We’ll defeat them. And we’ll make it there fast. We’ve got Leo back. He’ll give us the speed we need.”

He turned to his friend. “Or is that just hot air?”

Leo managed a crooked grin. His eyes seemed to say: *Thanks*.

“Time to fly, boys and girls,” he said. “Uncle Leo’s still got a few tricks up his sleeves!”

L X I

PERCY

PERCY WASN’T DEAD YET, but he was already tired of being a corpse.

As they trudged toward the heart of Tartarus, he kept glancing down at his body, wondering how it could belong to him. His arms looked like bleached leather pulled over sticks. His skeletal legs seemed to dissolve into smoke with every step. He’d learned to move normally within the Death Mist, more or less, but the magical shroud still made him feel like he was wrapped in a coat of helium.

He worried that the Death Mist might cling to him forever, even if they somehow managed to survive Tartarus. He didn’t want to spend the rest of his life looking like an extra from *The Walking Dead*.

Percy tried to focus on something else, but there was no safe direction to look.

Under his feet, the ground glistened a nauseating purple, pulsing with webs of veins. In the dim red light of the blood clouds, Death Mist Annabeth looked like a freshly risen zombie.

Ahead of them was the most depressing view of all.

Spread to the horizon was an army of monsters—flocks of winged *arai*, tribes of lumbering Cyclopes, clusters of floating evil spirits. Thousands of baddies, maybe *tens* of thousands, all milling restlessly, pressing against one another, growling and fighting for space—like the locker area of an overcrowded school between classes, if all the students were 'roid-raging mutants who smelled *really* bad.

Bob led them toward the edge of the army. He made no effort to hide, not that it would have done any good. Being ten feet tall and glowing silver, Bob didn't do stealth very well.

About thirty yards from the nearest monsters, Bob turned to face Percy.

“Stay quiet and stay behind me,” he advised. “They will not notice you.”

“We hope,” Percy muttered.

On the Titan's shoulder, Small Bob woke up from a nap. He purred seismically and arched his back, turning skeletal then back to calico. At least *he* didn't seem nervous.

Annabeth examined her own zombie hands. “Bob, if we're invisible...how can *you* see us? I mean, you're technically, you know...”

“Yes,” Bob said. “But we are friends.”

“Nyx and her children could see us,” Annabeth said.

Bob shrugged. “That was in Nyx's realm. That is different.”

“Uh...right.” Annabeth didn't sound reassured, but they were here now. They didn't have any choice but to try.

Percy stared at the swarm of vicious monsters. “Well, at least we won't have to worry about bumping into any other *friends* in this crowd.”

Bob grinned. “Yes, that is good news! Now, let's go. Death is close.”

“The *Doors* of Death are close,” Annabeth corrected. “Let's watch the phrasing.” They plunged into the crowd. Percy trembled so badly, he was afraid

the Death Mist would shake right off him. He'd seen large groups of monsters before. He'd fought an army of them during the Battle of Manhattan. But this was different.

Whenever he'd fought monsters in the mortal world, Percy at least knew he was defending his home. That gave him courage, no matter how bad the odds were. Here, *Percy* was the invader. He didn't belong in this multitude of monsters any more than the Minotaur belonged in Penn Station at rush hour.

A few feet away, a group of *empousai* tore into the carcass of a gryphon while other gryphons flew around them, squawking in outrage. A six-armed Earthborn and a Laistrygonian giant pummeled each other with rocks, though Percy wasn't sure if they were fighting or just messing around. A dark wisp of smoke—Percy guessed it must be an eidolon—seeped into a Cyclops, made the monster hit himself in the face, then drifted off to possess another victim.

Annabeth whispered, "Percy, look."

A stone's throw away, a guy in a cowboy outfit was cracking a whip at some fire-breathing horses. The wrangler wore a Stetson hat on his greasy hair, an extra-large set of jeans, and a pair of black leather boots. From the side, he might have passed for human—until he turned, and Percy saw that his upper body was split into three different chests, each one dressed in a different-color Western shirt.

It was definitely Geryon, who had tried to kill Percy two years ago in Texas. Apparently the evil rancher was anxious to break in a new herd. The idea of that guy riding out of the Doors of Death made Percy's sides hurt all over again. His ribs throbbed where the *arai* had unleashed Geryon's dying curse back in the forest. He wanted to march up to the three-bodied rancher, smack him in the face, and yell, *Thanks a lot, Tex!*

Sadly, he couldn't.

How many other old enemies were in this crowd? Percy began to realize that every battle he'd ever won had only been a temporary victory. No matter how strong or lucky he was, no matter how many monsters he destroyed, Percy would eventually fail. He was only one mortal. He would get too old, too weak, or too slow. He would die. And these monsters...they lasted *forever*. They just kept coming back. Maybe it would take them months or years to re-form, maybe

even centuries. But they *would* be reborn.

Seeing them assembled in Tartarus, Percy felt as hopeless as the spirits in the River Cocytus. So what if he was a hero? So what if he did something brave? Evil was always here, regenerating, bubbling under the surface. Percy was no more than a minor annoyance to these immortal beings. They just had to outwait him. Someday, Percy's sons or daughters might have to face them all over again.

Sons and daughters.

The thought jarred him. As quickly as hopelessness had overtaken him, it disappeared. He glanced at Annabeth. She still looked like a misty corpse, but he imagined her true appearance—her gray eyes full of determination, her blond hair pulled back in a bandana, her face weary and streaked with grime, but as beautiful as ever.

Okay, maybe monsters kept coming back forever. But so did demigods. Generation after generation, Camp Half-Blood had endured. And Camp Jupiter. Even separately, the two camps had survived. Now, if the Greeks and Romans could come together, they would be even stronger.

There was still hope. He and Annabeth had come this far. The Doors of Death were almost within reach.

Sons and daughters. A ridiculous thought. An awesome thought. Right there in the middle of Tartarus, Percy grinned.

“What’s wrong?” Annabeth whispered.

With his zombie Death Mist disguise, Percy probably looked like he was grimacing in pain.

“Nothing,” he said. “I was just—”

Somewhere in front of them, a deep voice bellowed: “IAPETUS!”

PERCY

A TITAN STRODE TOWARD THEM, casually kicking lesser monsters out of his way. He was roughly the same height as Bob, with elaborate Stygian iron armor, a single diamond blazing in the center of his breastplate. His eyes were blue-white, like core samples from a glacier, and just as cold. His hair was the same color, cut military style. A battle helmet shaped like a bear's head was tucked under his arm. From his belt hung a sword the size of a surfboard.

Despite his battle scars, the Titan's face was handsome and strangely familiar. Percy was pretty sure he'd never seen the guy before, but his eyes and his smile reminded Percy of someone....

The Titan stopped in front of Bob. He clapped him on the shoulder. "Iapetus! Don't tell me you don't recognize your own brother!"

"No!" Bob agreed nervously. "I won't tell you that."

The other Titan threw back his head and laughed. "I heard you were thrown into the Lethe.

Must've been terrible! We all knew you would heal eventually. It's Koios! Koios!"

"Of course," Bob said. "Koios, Titan of..."

“The North!” Koios said.

“I know!” Bob shouted.

They laughed together and took turns hitting each other in the arm.

Apparently miffed by all the jostling, Small Bob crawled onto Bob’s head and began making a nest in the Titan’s silver hair.

“Poor old Iapetus,” said Koios. “They must have laid you low indeed. Look at you! A broom? A servant’s uniform? A cat in your hair? Truly, Hades must pay for these insults. Who was that demigod who took your memory? Bah! We must rip him to pieces, you and I, eh?”

“Ha-ha.” Bob swallowed. “Yes, indeed. Rip him to pieces.” Percy’s fingers closed around his pen. He didn’t think much of Bob’s brother, even without the *rip-him-to-pieces* threat. Compared to Bob’s simple way of speaking, Koios sounded like he was reciting Shakespeare. That alone was enough to make Percy irritated.

He was ready to uncap Riptide if he had to, but so far Koios didn’t seem to notice him. And Bob hadn’t betrayed them yet, though he’d had plenty of opportunities.

“Ah, it’s good to see you...” Koios drummed his fingers on his bear’s-head helmet. “You remember what fun we had in the old days?”

“Of course!” Bob chirped. “When we, uh...”

“Holding down our father, Ouranos,” Koios said.

“Yes! We loved wrestling with Dad...”

“We restrained him.”

“That’s what I meant!”

“While Kronos cut him to pieces with his scythe.”

“Yes, ha-ha.” Bob looked mildly ill. “What fun.”

“You grabbed Father’s right foot, as I recall,” Koios said. “And Ouranos kicked you in the face as he struggled. How we used to tease you about that!”

“Silly me,” Bob agreed.

“Sadly, our brother Kronos was dissolved by those impudent demigods.” Koios heaved a sigh.

“Bits and pieces of his essence remain, but nothing you could put together again. I suppose some injuries even Tartarus cannot heal.”

“Alas!”

“But the rest of us have another chance to shine, eh?” He leaned forward conspiratorially.

“These giants may *think* they will rule. Let them be our shock troops and destroy the Olympians—all well and good. But once the Earth Mother is awake, she will remember that *we* are her eldest children. Mark my words. The Titans will yet rule the cosmos.”

“Hmm,” Bob said. “The giants may not like that.”

“Spit on what *they* like,” Koios said. “They’ve already passed through the Doors of Death, anyway, back to the mortal world. Polybotes was the last one, not half an hour ago, still grumbling about missing his prey. Apparently some demigods he was after got swallowed by Nyx. Never see *them* again, I wager!”

Annabeth gripped Percy’s wrist. Through the Death Mist, he couldn’t read her expression very well, but he saw the alarm in her eyes.

If the giants had already passed through the Doors, then at least they wouldn’t be hunting through Tartarus for Percy and Annabeth. Unfortunately, that also meant their friends in the mortal world were in even greater danger. All of the earlier fights with the giants had been in vain. Their enemies would be reborn as strong as ever.

“Well!” Koios drew his massive sword. The blade radiated a cold deeper than the Hubbard Glacier. “I must be off. Leto should have regenerated by now. I will convince her to fight.”

“Of course,” Bob murmured. “Leto.”

Koios laughed. “You’ve forgotten my daughter, as well? I suppose it’s been too long since you’ve seen her. The peaceful ones like her always take the longest to re-form. This time, though, I’m sure Leto will fight for vengeance. The way Zeus treated her, after she bore him those fine twins?

Outrageous!”

Percy almost grunted out loud.

The twins.

He remembered the name Leto: the mother of Apollo and Artemis. This guy Koios looked vaguely familiar because he had Artemis’s cold eyes and Apollo’s smile. The Titan was their grandfather, Leto’s father. The idea gave Percy a migraine.

“Well! I’ll see you in the mortal world!” Koios chest-bumped Bob, almost knocking the cat off his head. “Oh, and our two *other* brothers are guarding this side of the Doors, so you’ll see them soon enough!”

“I will?”

“Count on it!” Koios lumbered off, almost knocking over Percy and Annabeth as they scrambled out of his way.

Before the crowd of monsters could fill the empty space, Percy motioned for Bob to lean in.

“You okay, big guy?” Percy whispered.

Bob frowned. “I do not know. In all this”—he gestured around them—“what is the meaning of *okay*?”

Fair point, Percy thought.

Annabeth peered toward the Doors of Death, though the crowd of monsters blocked them from view. “Did I hear correctly? Two more Titans guarding our exit? That’s not good.” Percy looked at Bob. The Titan’s distant expression worried him.

“Do you remember Koios?” he asked gently. “All that stuff he was talking about?” Bob gripped his broom. “When he told it, I remembered. He handed me my past like...like a spear. But I do not know if I should take it. Is it still mine, if I do not want it?”

“No,” Annabeth said firmly. “Bob, you’re different now. You’re *better*.” The kitten jumped off Bob’s head. He circled the Titan’s feet, bumping his head against the Titan’s pants cuffs. Bob didn’t seem to notice.

Percy wished he could be as certain as Annabeth. He wished he could tell Bob with absolute confidence that he should forget about his past.

But Percy understood Bob’s confusion. He remembered the day he’d opened his eyes at the Wolf House in California, his memory wiped clean by Hera. If somebody had been waiting for Percy when he first woke up, if they’d convinced Percy that his name was Bob, and he was a friend of the Titans and the giants...would Percy have believed it? Would he have felt betrayed once he found out his true identity?

This is different, he told himself. *We’re the good guys*.

But were they? Percy had left Bob in Hades’s palace, at the mercy of a new master who hated him. Percy didn’t feel like he had much right to tell Bob what to do now—even if their lives depended on it.

“I think you can choose, Bob,” Percy ventured. “Take the parts of Iapetus’s past that you want to keep. Leave the rest. Your future is what matters.”

“Future...” Bob mused. “That is a mortal concept. I am not meant to change, Percy Friend.” He gazed around him at the horde of monsters. “We are the same...forever.”

“If you were the same,” Percy said, “Annabeth and I would be dead already. Maybe we weren’t meant to be friends, but we *are*. You’ve been the best friend we could ask for.” Bob’s silver eyes looked darker than usual. He held out his hand, and Small Bob the kitten jumped into it. The Titan rose to his full height. “Let us go, then, friends. Not much farther.” Stomping on Tartarus’s heart wasn’t nearly as much fun as it sounded.

The purplish ground was slippery and constantly pulsing. It looked flat from a distance, but up close it was made of folds and ridges that got harder to navigate the farther they walked. Gnarled lumps of red arteries and blue veins gave Percy some footholds when he had to climb, but the going was slow.

And of course, the monsters were everywhere. Packs of hellhounds prowled the plains, baying and snarling and attacking any monster that dropped its guard. *Arai* wheeled overhead on leathery wings, making ghastly dark silhouettes in the poison clouds.

Percy stumbled. His hand touched a red artery, and a tingling sensation went up his arm.

“There’s water in here,” he said. “Actual water.”

Bob grunted. “One of the five rivers. His blood.”

“His blood?” Annabeth stepped away from the nearest clump of veins. “I knew the Underworld rivers all emptied into Tartarus, but—”

“Yes,” Bob agreed. “They all flow through his heart.”

Percy traced his hand across a web of capillaries. Was the water of the Styx flowing beneath his fingers, or maybe the Lethe? If one of those veins popped when he stepped on it... Percy shuddered.

He realized he was taking a stroll across the most dangerous circulatory system in the universe.

“We should hurry,” Annabeth said. “If we can’t...”

Her voice trailed off.

Ahead of them, jagged streaks of darkness tore through the air—like lightning, except pure black.

“The Doors,” Bob said. “Must be a large group going through.” Percy’s mouth tasted like gorgon’s blood. Even if his friends from the *Argo II* managed to find the other side of the Doors of Death, how could they possibly fight the waves of monsters that were coming through, especially if all the giants were already waiting for them?

“Do all the monsters go through the House of Hades?” he asked. “How big is that place?” Bob shrugged. “Perhaps they are sent elsewhere when they step through. The House of Hades is in the earth, yes? That is Gaea’s realm. She could send her minions wherever she wishes.” Percy’s spirits sank. Monsters coming through the Doors of Death to threaten his friends at Epirus—that was bad enough. Now he imagined the ground on the mortal side as one big subway system, depositing giants and other nasties anywhere Gaea wanted them to go—Camp Half-Blood, Camp Jupiter, or in the path of the *Argo II* before it could even reach Epirus.

“If Gaea has that much power,” Annabeth asked, “couldn’t she control where we end up?” Percy really hated that question. Sometimes he wished Annabeth weren’t so smart.

Bob scratched his chin. “You are not monsters. It may be different for you.” Great, Percy thought.

He didn’t relish the idea of Gaea waiting for them on the other side, ready to teleport them into the middle of a mountain; but at least the Doors were a chance to get out of Tartarus. It wasn’t like they had a better option.

Bob helped them over the top of another ridge. Suddenly the Doors of Death were in plain view

—a freestanding rectangle of darkness at the top of the next heart-muscle hill, about a quarter mile away, surrounded by a horde of monsters so thick Percy could've walked on their heads all the way across.

The Doors were still too far away to make out much detail, but the Titans flanking either side were familiar enough. The one on the left wore shining golden armor that shimmered with heat.

“Hyperion,” Percy muttered. “That guy just won't stay dead.” The one on the right wore dark-blue armor, with ram's horns curling from the sides of his helmet. Percy had only seen him in dreams before, but it was definitely Krios, the Titan that Jason had killed in the battle for Mount Tam.

“Bob's other brothers,” Annabeth said. The Death Mist shimmered around her, temporarily turning her face into a grinning skull. “Bob, if you have to fight them, can you?” Bob hefted his broom, like he was ready for a messy cleaning job. “We must hurry,” he said, which Percy noticed wasn't really an answer. “Follow me.”

L X I I I

P E R C Y

SO FAR, THEIR DEATH MIST camouflage plan seemed to be working. So, naturally, Percy expected a massive last-minute fail.

Fifty feet from the Doors of Death, he and Annabeth froze.

“Oh, gods,” Annabeth murmured. “They’re the *same*.” Percy knew what she meant. Framed in Stygian iron, the magical portal was a set of elevator doors—two panels of silver and black etched with art deco designs. Except for the fact that the colors were inverted, they looked exactly like the elevators in the Empire State Building, the entrance to Olympus.

Seeing them, Percy felt so homesick, he couldn’t breathe. He didn’t just miss Mount Olympus.

He missed everything he’d left behind: New York City, Camp Half-Blood, his mom and stepdad. His eyes stung. He didn’t trust himself to talk.

The Doors of Death seemed like a personal insult, designed to remind him of everything he couldn’t have.

As he got over his initial shock, he noticed other details: the frost spreading from the base of the Doors, the purplish glow in the air around them, and the chains that held them fast.

Cords of black iron ran down either side of the frame, like rigging lines on a suspension bridge.

They were tethered to hooks embedded in the fleshy ground. The two Titans, Krios and Hyperion, stood guard at the anchor points.

As Percy watched, the entire frame shuddered. Black lightning flashed into the sky. The chains shook, and the Titans planted their feet on the hooks to keep them secure. The Doors slid open, revealing the gilded interior of an elevator car.

Percy tensed, ready to charge forward, but Bob planted a hand on his shoulder. “Wait,” he cautioned.

Hyperion yelled to the surrounding crowd: “Group A-22! Hurry up, you sluggards!” A dozen Cyclopes rushed forward, waving little red tickets and shouting excitedly. They shouldn’t have been able to fit inside those human-sized doors, but as the Cyclopes got close, their bodies distorted and shrank, the Doors of Death sucking them inside.

The Titan Krios jabbed his thumb against the up button on the elevator’s right

side. The Doors slid closed.

The frame shuddered again. Dark lightning faded.

“You must understand how it works,” Bob muttered. He addressed the kitten in his palm, maybe so the other monsters wouldn’t wonder who he was talking to. “Each time the Doors open, they try to teleport to a new location. Thanatos made them this way, so only he could find them. But now they are chained. The Doors cannot relocate.”

“Then we cut the chains,” Annabeth whispered.

Percy looked at the blazing form of Hyperion. The last time he’d fought the Titan, it had taken every ounce of his strength. Even then Percy had almost died. Now there were *two* Titans, with several thousand monsters for backup.

“Our camouflage,” he said. “Will it disappear if we do something aggressive, like cutting the chains?”

“I do not know,” Bob told his kitten.

“Mrow,” said Small Bob.

“Bob, you’ll have to distract them,” Annabeth said. “Percy and I will sneak around the two Titans and cut the chains from behind.”

“Yes, fine,” Bob said. “But that is only one problem. Once you are inside the Doors, someone must stay outside to push the button and defend it.”

Percy tried to swallow. “Uh...defend the button?”

Bob nodded, scratching his kitten under the chin. “Someone must keep pressing the UP button for twelve minutes, or the journey will not finish.”

Percy glanced at the Doors. Sure enough, Krios still had his thumb jammed on the UP button.

Twelve minutes... Somehow, they would have to get the Titans away from those doors. Then Bob, Percy, or Annabeth would have to keep that button pushed for twelve long minutes, in the middle of an army of monsters in the heart of

Tartarus, while the other two rode to the mortal world. It was impossible.

“Why twelve minutes?” Percy asked.

“I do not know,” Bob said. “Why twelve Olympians, or twelve Titans?”

“Fair enough,” Percy said, though he had a bitter taste in his mouth.

“What do you mean the journey won’t finish?” Annabeth asked. “What happens to the passengers?”

Bob didn’t answer. Judging from his pained expression, Percy decided he didn’t want to be in that elevator if the car stalled between Tartarus and the mortal world.

“If we *do* push the button for twelve minutes,” Percy said, “and the chains are cut—”

“The Doors should reset,” Bob said. “That is what they are supposed to do. They will disappear from Tartarus. They will appear somewhere else, where Gaea cannot use them.”

“Thanatos can reclaim them,” Annabeth said. “Death goes back to normal, and the monsters lose their shortcut to the mortal world.”

Percy exhaled. “Easy-peasy. Except for...well, everything.” Small Bob purred.

“I will push the button,” Bob volunteered.

A mix of feelings churned in Percy’s gut—grief, sadness, gratitude, and guilt thickening into emotional cement. “Bob, we can’t ask you to do that. You want to go through the Doors too. You want to see the sky again, and the stars, and—”

“I would like that,” Bob agreed. “But someone must push the button. And once the chains are cut...my brethren will fight to stop your passage. They will not want the Doors to disappear.” Percy gazed at the endless horde of monsters. Even if he let Bob make this sacrifice, how could one Titan defend himself against so many for twelve minutes, all while keeping his finger on a button?

The cement settled in Percy’s stomach. He had always suspected how this would

end. He would have to stay behind. While Bob fended off the army, Percy would hold the elevator button and make sure Annabeth got to safety.

Somehow, he had to convince her to go without him. As long as she was safe and the Doors disappeared, he could die knowing he'd done something right.

"Percy...?" Annabeth stared at him, a suspicious edge to her voice.

She was too smart. If he met her eyes, she would see exactly what he was thinking.

"First things first," he said. "Let's cut those chains."

L X I V

P E R C Y

"IAPETUS!" HYPERION BELLOWED. "Well, well. I thought you were hiding under a cleaning bucket somewhere."

Bob lumbered forward, scowling. "I was not hiding."

Percy crept toward the right side of the Doors. Annabeth sneaked toward the left. The Titans gave no sign of noticing them, but Percy took no chances. He kept Riptide in pen form. He crouched low, stepping as quietly as possible. The lesser monsters kept a respectful distance from the Titans, so there was enough empty space to maneuver around the Doors; but Percy was keenly aware of the snarling mob at his back.

Annabeth had decided to take the side Hyperion was guarding, on the theory that Hyperion was more likely to sense Percy. After all, Percy was the last one to have killed him in the mortal world.

That was fine with Percy. After being in Tartarus for so long, he could barely look at Hyperion's burning golden armor without getting spots in his eyes.

On Percy's side of the Doors, Krios stood dark and silent, his ram's-headed helmet covering his face. He kept one foot planted on the chain's anchor and his thumb on the UP button.

Bob faced his brethren. He planted his spear and tried to look as fierce as possible with a kitten on his shoulder. "Hyperion and Krios. I remember you both."

"Do you, Iapetus?" The golden Titan laughed, glancing at Krios to share the joke. "Well, that's good to know! I heard Percy Jackson turned you into a brainwashed scullery maid. What did he rename you...Betty?"

"Bob," snarled Bob.

"Well, it's about time you showed up, *Bob*. Krios and I have been stuck here for *weeks*—"

"Hours," Krios corrected, his voice a deep rumble inside his helmet.

"Whatever!" Hyperion said. "It's boring work, guarding these doors, shuffling monsters through at Gaea's orders. Krios, what's our next group, anyway?"

"Double Red," said Krios.

Hyperion sighed. The flames glowed hotter across his shoulders. "Double Red. Why do we go from A-22 to Double Red? What kind of system is that?" He glared at Bob. "This is no job for me—"

the Lord of Light! Titan of the East! Master of Dawn! Why am I forced to wait in the darkness while the *giants* go into battle and get all the glory? Now, *Krios* I can understand—"

"I get all the worst assignments," Krios muttered, his thumb still on the button.

“But *me?*” Hyperion said. “Ridiculous! This should be your job, Iapetus. Here, take my place for a while.”

Bob stared at the Doors, but his gaze was distant—lost in the past. “The four of us held down our father, Ouranos,” he remembered. “Koios, and me, and the two of you. Kronos promised us mastery of the four corners of the earth for helping with the murder.”

“Indeed,” Hyperion said. “And I was happy to do it! I would’ve wielded the scythe myself if I’d had the chance! But you, *Bob*... you were always conflicted about that killing, weren’t you? The *soft* Titan of the West, soft as the sunset! Why our parents named you the *Piercer*, I will never know. More like the *Whimper*.”

Percy reached the anchor hook. He uncapped his pen and Riptide grew to full length. Krios didn’t react. His attention was firmly fixed on Bob, who had just leveled the point of his spear at Hyperion’s chest.

“I can still pierce,” Bob said, his voice low and even. “You brag too much, Hyperion. You are bright and fiery, but Percy Jackson defeated you anyway. I hear you became a nice tree in Central Park.”

Hyperion’s eyes smoldered. “Careful, brother.”

“At least a janitor’s work is honest,” Bob said. “I clean up after others. I leave the palace better than I found it. But you...you do not care what messes you make. You followed Kronos blindly. Now you take orders from Gaea.”

“She is our *mother!*” Hyperion bellowed.

“She did not wake for *our* war on Olympus,” Bob recalled. “She favors her second brood, the giants.”

Krios grunted. “That’s true enough. The children of the pit.”

“Both of you hold your tongues!” Hyperion’s voice was tinged with fear. “You never know when he is listening.”

The elevator dinged. All three Titans jumped.

Had it been twelve minutes? Percy had lost track of time. Krios took his finger off the button and called out, “Double Red! Where is Double Red?”

Hordes of monsters stirred and jostled one another, but none of them came forward.

Krios heaved a sigh. “I *told* them to hang on to their tickets. Double Red! You’ll lose your place in the queue!”

Annabeth was in position, right behind Hyperion. She raised her drakon-bone sword over the base of the chains. In the fiery light of the Titan’s armor, her Death Mist disguise made her look like a burning ghoul.

She held up three fingers, ready to count down. They had to cut the chains before the next group tried to take the elevator, but they also had to make sure the Titans were as distracted as possible.

Hyperion muttered a curse. “Just *wonderful*. This will completely mess up our schedule.” He sneered at Bob. “Make your choice, brother. Fight us or help us. I don’t have time for your lectures.” Bob glanced at Annabeth and Percy. Percy thought he might start a fight, but instead he raised the point of his spear. “Very well. I will take guard duty. Which of you wants a break first?”

“Me, of course,” Hyperion said.

“Me!” Krios snapped. “I’ve been holding that button so long my thumb is going to fall off.”

“I’ve been standing here longer,” Hyperion grumbled. “You two guard the Doors while *I* go up to the mortal world. I have some Greek heroes to wreak vengeance upon!”

“Oh, no!” Krios complained. “That Roman boy is on his way to Epirus—the one who killed me on Mount Othrys. Got lucky, he did. Now it’s my turn.”

“Bah!” Hyperion drew his sword. “I’ll gut you first, Ram-head!” Krios raised his own blade. “You can try, but I won’t be stuck in this stinking pit any longer!” Annabeth caught Percy’s eyes. She mouthed: *One, two—*

Before he could strike the chains, a high-pitched whine pierced his ears, like the

sound of an incoming rocket. Percy just had time to think: *Uh-oh*. Then an explosion rocked the hillside. A wave of heat knocked Percy backward. Dark shrapnel ripped through Krios and Hyperion, shredding them as easily as wood in a chipper.

STINKING PIT. A hollow voice rolled across the plains, shaking the warm fleshy ground.

Bob staggered to his feet. Somehow the explosion hadn't touched him. He swept his spear in front of him, trying to locate the source of the voice. Small Bob the kitten crawled into his coveralls.

Annabeth had landed about twenty feet from the Doors. When she stood, Percy was so relieved she was alive it took him a moment to realize she looked like herself. The Death Mist had evaporated.

He looked at his own hands. His disguise was gone too.

TITANS, said the voice disdainfully. *LESSER BEINGS. IMPERFECT AND WEAK*.

In front of the Doors of Death, the air darkened and solidified. The being who appeared was so massive, radiating such pure malevolence, that Percy wanted to crawl away and hide.

Instead, he forced his eyes to trace the god's form, starting with his black iron boots, each one as large as a coffin. His legs were covered in dark greaves; his flesh all thick purple muscle, like the ground. His armored skirt was made from thousands of blackened, twisted bones, woven together like chain links and clasped in place by a belt of interlocking monstrous arms.

On the surface of the warrior's breastplate, murky faces appeared and submerged—giants, Cyclopes, gorgons, and drakons—all pressing against the armor as if trying to get out.

The warrior's arms were bare—muscular, purple, and glistening—his hands as large as crane scoops.

Worst of all was his head: a helmet of twisted rock and metal with no particular shape—just jagged spikes and pulsing patches of magma. His entire face was a

whirlpool—an inward spiral of darkness. As Percy watched, the last particles of Titan essence from Hyperion and Krios were vacuumed into the warrior’s maw.

Somehow Percy found his voice. “Tartarus.”

The warrior made a sound like a mountain cracking in half: a roar or a laugh, Percy couldn’t be sure.

This form is only a small manifestation of my power, said the god. But it is enough to deal with you. I do not interfere lightly, little demigod. It is beneath me to deal with gnats such as yourself.

“Uh...” Percy’s legs threatened to collapse under him. “Don’t...you know...go to any trouble.” *You have proven surprisingly resilient, Tartarus said. You have come too far. I can no longer stand by and watch your progress.*

Tartarus spread his arms. Throughout the valley, thousands of monsters wailed and roared, clashing their weapons and bellowing in triumph. The Doors of Death shuddered in their chains.

Be honored, little demigods, said the god of the pit. Even the Olympians were never worthy of my personal attention. But you will be destroyed by Tartarus himself!

L X V

FRANK

FRANK WAS HOPING FOR FIREWORKS.

Or at least a big sign that read: WELCOME HOME!

More than three thousand years ago, his Greek ancestor—good old Periclymenus the shape-shifter—had sailed east with the Argonauts. Centuries later, Periclymenus’s descendants had served in the eastern Roman legions. Then, through a series of misadventures, the family had ended up in China, finally emigrating to Canada in the twentieth century. Now Frank was back in Greece, which meant that the Zhang family had completely circled the globe.

That seemed like cause for celebration, but the only welcoming committee was a flock of wild, hungry harpies who attacked the ship. Frank felt kind of bad as he shot them down with his bow. He kept thinking of Ella, their freakishly smart harpy friend from Portland. But these harpies weren’t Ella. They gladly would have chewed Frank’s face off. So he blasted them into clouds of dust and feathers.

The Greek landscape below was just as inhospitable. The hills were strewn with boulders and stunted cedars, all shimmering in the hazy air. The sun beat down as if trying to hammer the countryside into a Celestial bronze shield. Even from a hundred feet up, Frank could hear the drone of cicadas buzzing in the trees—a sleepy, otherworldly sound that made his eyes heavy. Even the dueling voices of the war gods inside his head seemed to have dozed off. They had hardly bothered Frank at all since the crew had crossed into Greece.

Sweat trickled down his neck. After being frozen below deck by that crazy snow goddess, Frank had thought he would never feel warm again; but now the back of his shirt was soaked.

“Hot and steamy!” Leo grinned at the helm. “Makes me homesick for Houston! What do you say, Hazel? All we need now are some giant mosquitoes, and it’ll feel just like the Gulf Coast!”

“Thanks a lot, Leo,” Hazel grumbled. “We’ll probably get attacked by Ancient Greek mosquito monsters now.”

Frank studied the two of them, quietly marveling how the tension between them had disappeared.

Whatever had happened to Leo during his five days of exile, it had changed him. He still joked around, but Frank sensed something different about him—like a ship with a new keel. Maybe you couldn't *see* the keel, but you could tell it was there by the way the ship cut through the waves.

Leo didn't seem so intent on teasing Frank. He chatted more easily with Hazel—not stealing those wistful, mooning glances that had always made Frank uncomfortable.

Hazel had diagnosed the problem privately to Frank: “He met someone.” Frank was incredulous. “How? Where? How could you possibly know?” Hazel smiled. “I just do.”

As if she were a child of Venus rather than Pluto. Frank didn't get it.

Of course he was relieved that Leo wasn't hitting on his girl, but Frank was also kind of worried about Leo. Sure, they'd had their differences; but after all they'd been through together, Frank didn't want to see Leo get his heart broken.

“There!” Nico's voice shook Frank out of his thoughts. As usual, di Angelo was perched atop the foremast. He pointed toward a glittering green river snaking through the hills a kilometer away.

“Maneuver us that way. We're close to the temple. *Very* close.” As if to prove his point, black lightning ripped through the sky, leaving dark spots before Frank's eyes and making the hairs on his arms stand up.

Jason strapped on his sword belt. “Everyone, arm yourself. Leo, get us close, but don't land—no more contact with the ground than necessary. Piper, Hazel, get the mooring ropes.”

“On it!” Piper said.

Hazel gave Frank a peck on the cheek and ran to help.

“Frank,” Jason called, “get below and find Coach Hedge.”

“Yep!”

He climbed downstairs and headed for Hedge's cabin. As he neared the door, he

slowed down.

He didn't want to surprise the satyr with any loud noises. Coach Hedge had a habit of jumping into the gangway with his baseball bat if he thought attackers were on board. Frank had almost gotten his head taken off a couple of times on his way to the bathroom.

He raised his hand to knock. Then he realized the door was cracked open. He heard Coach Hedge talking inside.

“Come on, babe!” the satyr said. “You know it’s not like that!” Frank froze. He didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but he wasn’t sure what to do. Hazel had mentioned being worried about the coach. She’d insisted something was bothering him, but Frank hadn’t thought much of it until now.

He’d never heard the coach talk so *gently*. Usually the only sounds Frank heard from the coach’s cabin were sporting events on the TV, or the coach yelling, “Yeah! Get ’em!” as he watched his favorite martial arts movies. Frank was pretty sure the coach wouldn’t be calling Chuck Norris *babe*.

Another voice spoke—female, but barely audible, like it was coming from a long way away.

“I will,” Coach Hedge promised. “But, uh, we’re going into battle”—he cleared his throat

—“and it may get ugly. You just *stay safe*. I’ll get back. Honest.” Frank couldn’t stand it anymore. He knocked loudly. “Hey, Coach?” The talking stopped.

Frank counted to six. The door flew open.

Coach Hedge stood there scowling, his eyes bloodshot, like he’d been watching too much TV.

He wore his usual baseball cap and gym shorts, with a leather cuirass over his shirt and a whistle hanging from his neck, maybe in case he wanted to call a foul against the monster armies.

“Zhang. What do you want?”

“Uh, we’re getting ready for battle. We need you above deck.” The coach’s goatee quivered. “Yeah. ’Course you do.” He sounded strangely unexcited about the prospect of a fight.

“I didn’t mean to—I mean, I heard you talking,” Frank stammered. “Were you sending an Iris-message?”

Hedge looked like he might smack Frank in the face, or at least blow the whistle really loud.

Then his shoulders slumped. He heaved a sigh and turned inside, leaving Frank standing awkwardly in the doorway.

The coach plopped down on his berth. He cupped his chin in his hand and stared glumly around his cabin. The place looked like a college dorm room after a hurricane—the floor strewn with laundry (maybe for wearing, maybe for snacks; it was hard to tell with satyrs), DVDs and dirty dishes scattered around the TV on the dresser. Every time the ship tilted, a mismatched herd of sports equipment rolled across the floor—footballs, basketballs, baseballs, and for some reason, a single billiard ball. Tufts of goat hair floated through the air and collected under the furniture in clumps.

Dust goats? Goat bunnies?

On the coach’s nightstand sat a bowl of water, a stack of golden drachmas, a flashlight, and a glass prism for making rainbows. The coach had obviously come prepared to make a lot of Iris-messages.

Frank remembered what Piper had told him about the coach’s cloud nymph girlfriend who worked for Piper’s dad. What was the girlfriend’s name... Melinda? Millicent? No, Mellie.

“Uh, is your girlfriend Mellie all right?” Frank ventured.

“None of your business!” the coach snapped.

“Okay.”

Hedge rolled his eyes. “Fine! If you must know—yes, I was talking to Mellie. But she’s not my girlfriend anymore.”

“Oh...” Frank’s heart sank. “You broke up?”

“No, you dolt! We got married! She’s my wife!”

Frank would’ve been less stunned if the coach had smacked him. “Coach, that’s—that’s great!

When—how—?”

“None of your business!” he yelled again.

“Um...all right.”

“End of May,” the coach said. “Just before the *Argo II* sailed. We didn’t want to make a big deal out of it.”

Frank felt like the ship was tilting again, but it must have been just him. The herd of wild sports equipment stayed put against the far wall.

All this time the coach had been *married*? In spite of being a newlywed, he’d agreed to come on this quest. No wonder Hedge made so many calls back home. No wonder he was so cranky and belligerent.

Still... Frank sensed there was more going on. The coach’s tone during the Iris-message made it sound like they were discussing a problem.

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop,” Frank said. “But...is she okay?”

“It was a private conversation!”

“Yeah. You’re right.”

“Fine! I’ll tell you.” Hedge plucked some fur off his thigh and let it float through the air. “She took a break from her job in Il.A., went to Camp Half-Blood for the summer, because we figured—” His voice cracked. “We figured it would be safer. Now she’s stuck there, with the Romans about to attack. She’s...she’s pretty scared.”

Frank became very aware of the centurion badge on his shirt, the *SPQR* tattoo on his forearm.

“Sorry,” he murmured. “But if she’s a cloud spirit, couldn’t she just...you know, float away?” The coach curled his fingers around the grip of his baseball bat. “Normally, yeah. But see...

she’s in a delicate condition. It wouldn’t be safe.”

“A delicate...” Frank’s eyes widened. “She’s going to have a *baby*? You’re going to be a *dad*?”

“Shout it a little louder,” Hedge grumbled. “I don’t think they heard you in Croatia.” Frank couldn’t help grinning. “But, Coach, that’s awesome! A little baby satyr? Or maybe a nymph? You’ll be a fantastic dad.”

Frank wasn’t sure why he felt that way, considering the coach’s love of baseball bats and roundhouse kicks, but he *was* sure.

Coach Hedge scowled even deeper. “The war’s coming, Zhang. Nowhere is safe. I should be there for Mellie. If I gotta die somewhere—”

“Hey, nobody’s going to die,” Frank said.

Hedge met his eyes. Frank could tell the coach didn’t believe it.

“Always had a soft spot for children of Ares,” Hedge muttered. “Or Mars—whichever. Maybe that’s why I’m not pulverizing you for asking so many questions.”

“But I wasn’t—”

“Fine, I’ll tell you!” Hedge sighed again. “Back when I was on my first assignment as a seeker, I was way out in Arizona. Brought in this kid named Clarisse.”

“Clarisse?”

“Sibling of yours,” Hedge said. “Ares kid. Violent. Rude. Lots of potential. Anyway, while I was out, I had this dream about my mom. She—she was a cloud nymph like Mellie. I dreamed she was in trouble and needed my help right away. But I said to myself, *Nah, it’s just a dream. Who would hurt a sweet old cloud nymph? Besides, I gotta get this half-blood to safety.* So I finished my

mission, brought Clarisse to Camp Half-Blood. Afterward, I went looking for my mom. I was too late.”

Frank watched the tuft of goat hair settle on top of a basketball. “What happened to her?” Hedge shrugged. “No idea. Never saw her again. Maybe if I’d been there for her, if I’d got back sooner...”

Frank wanted to say something comforting, but he wasn’t sure what. He had lost his mom in the war in Afghanistan, and he knew how empty the words *I’m sorry* could sound.

“You were doing your job,” Frank offered. “You saved a demigod’s life.” Hedge grunted. “Now my wife and my unborn kid are in danger, halfway across the world, and I can’t do anything to help.”

“You *are* doing something,” Frank said. “We’re over here to stop the giants from waking Gaea.

That’s the best way we can keep our friends safe.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I suppose.”

Frank wished he could do more to lift Hedge’s spirits, but this talk was making *him* worry about everyone he’d left behind. He wondered who was defending Camp Jupiter now that the legion had marched east, especially with all the monsters Gaea was unleashing from the Doors of Death. He worried about his friends in the Fifth Cohort, and how they must be feeling as Octavian ordered them to march on Camp Half-Blood. Frank wanted to be back there, if only to stuff a teddy bear down the throat of that slimeball augur.

The ship listed forward. The herd of sports equipment rolled under the coach’s berth.

“We’re descending,” said Hedge. “We’d better get above.”

“Yeah,” Frank said, his voice hoarse.

“You’re a nosy Roman, Zhang.”

“But—”

“Come on,” Hedge said. “And not a word about this to the others, you blabbermouth.” As the others made fast the aerial moorings, Leo grabbed Frank and Hazel by the arms. He dragged them to the aft ballista. “Okay, here’s the plan.”

Hazel narrowed her eyes. “I *hate* your plans.”

“I need that piece of magic firewood,” Leo said. “Snappy!” Frank nearly choked on his own tongue. Hazel backed away, instinctively covering her coat pocket. “Leo, you can’t—”

“I found a solution.” Leo turned to Frank. “It’s your call, big guy, but I can protect you.” Frank thought about how many times he’d seen Leo’s fingers burst into flame. One false move, and Leo could incinerate the piece of tinder that controlled Frank’s life.

But for some reason, Frank wasn’t terrified. Since facing down the cow monsters in Venice, Frank had barely thought about his fragile lifeline. Yes, the smallest bit of fire might kill him. But he’d also survived some impossible things and made his dad proud. Frank had decided that whatever his fate was, he wouldn’t worry about it. He would just do the best he could to help his friends.

Besides, Leo sounded serious. His eyes were still full of that weird melancholy, like he was in two places at once; but nothing about his expression indicated any kind of joke.

“Go ahead, Hazel,” Frank said.

“But...” Hazel took a deep breath. “Okay.” She took out the piece of firewood and handed it to Leo.

In Leo’s hands, it wasn’t much bigger than a screwdriver. The tinder was still charred on one side from where Frank had used it to burn through the icy chains that had imprisoned the god Thanatos in Alaska.

From a pocket of his tool belt, Leo produced a piece of white cloth. “Behold!” Frank scowled. “A handkerchief?”

“A surrender flag?” Hazel guessed.

“No, unbelievers!” Leo said. “This is a pouch woven from seriously cool fabric—a gift from a friend of mine.”

Leo slipped the firewood into the pouch and pulled it closed with a tie of bronze thread.

“The drawstring was my idea,” Leo said proudly. “It took some work, lacing that into the fabric, but the pouch won’t open unless you want it to. The fabric breathes just like regular cloth, so the firewood isn’t any more sealed up than it would be in Hazel’s coat pocket.”

“Uh…” Hazel said. “How is that an improvement, then?”

“Hold this so I don’t give you a heart attack.” Leo tossed the pouch to Frank, who almost fumbled it.

Leo summoned a white-hot ball of fire into his right hand. He held his left forearm over the flames, grinning as they licked the sleeve of his jacket.

“See?” he said. “It doesn’t burn!”

Frank didn’t like to argue with a guy who was holding a ball of fire, but he said, “Uh…you’re *immune* to flames.”

Leo rolled his eyes. “Yeah, but I have to *concentrate* if I don’t want my clothes to burn. And I’m not concentrating, see? This is totally fireproof cloth. Which means your firewood won’t burn in that pouch.”

Hazel looked unconvinced. “How can you be sure?”

“Sheesh, tough audience.” Leo shut off the fire. “Guess there’s only one way to persuade you.” He held out his hand to Frank.

“Uh, no, no.” Frank backed off. Suddenly all those brave thoughts about accepting his fate seemed far away. “That’s okay, Leo. Thanks, but I—I can’t —”

“Man, you gotta trust me.”

Frank’s heart raced. Did he trust Leo? Well, sure…with an engine. With a

practical joke. But with his life?

He remembered the day they had gotten stuck in the underground workshop in Rome. Gaea had promised they would die in that room. Leo had promised he would get Hazel and Frank out of the trap. And he'd done it.

Now Leo spoke with the same kind of confidence.

“Okay.” Frank handed Leo the pouch. “Try not to kill me.” Leo’s hand blazed. The pouch didn’t blacken or burn.

Frank waited for something to go horribly wrong. He counted to twenty, but he was still alive.

He felt as if a block of ice were melting just behind his sternum—a frozen chunk of fear he’d gotten so used to he didn’t even think about it until it was gone.

Leo extinguished his fire. He wriggled his eyebrows at Frank. “Who’s your best buddy?”

“Don’t answer that,” Hazel said. “But, Leo, that *was* amazing.”

“It was, wasn’t it?” Leo agreed. “So who wants to take this newly ultra-safe piece of firewood?”

“I’ll keep it,” Frank said.

Hazel pursed her lips. She looked down, maybe so Frank wouldn’t see the hurt in her eyes.

She’d protected that firewood for him through a lot of hard battles. It was a sign of trust between them, a symbol of their relationship.

“Hazel, it’s not about you,” Frank said, as gently as he could. “I can’t explain, but I—I have a feeling I’m going to need to step up when we’re in the House of Hades. I need to carry my own burden.”

Hazel’s golden eyes were full of concern. “I understand. I just...I worry.” Leo tossed Frank the pouch. Frank tied it around his belt. He felt strange carrying his fatal weakness so openly, after months of keeping it hidden.

“And, Leo,” he said, “thanks.”

It seemed inadequate for the gift Leo had given him, but Leo grinned. “What are genius friends for?”

“Hey, guys!” Piper called from the bow. “Better get over here. You need to see this.” They’d found the source of the dark lightning.

The *Argo II* hovered directly over the river. A few hundred meters away at the top of the nearest hill stood a cluster of ruins. They didn’t look like much—just some crumbling walls encircling the limestone shells of a few buildings—but from somewhere within the ruins, tendrils of black ether curled into the sky, like a smoky squid peeking from its cave. As Frank watched, a bolt of dark energy ripped through the air, rocking the ship and sending a cold shockwave across the landscape.

“The Necromanteion,” Nico said. “The House of Hades.”

Frank steadied himself at the rail. He supposed it was too late to suggest turning back. He was starting to feel nostalgic about the monsters he’d fought in Rome. Heck, chasing poison cows through Venice had been more appealing than this place.

Piper hugged her arms. “I feel vulnerable floating up here like this. Couldn’t we set down in the river?”

“I wouldn’t,” Hazel said. “That’s the River Acheron.”

Jason squinted in the sunlight. “I thought the Acheron was in the Underworld.”

“It is,” Hazel said. “But its headwaters are in the mortal world. That river below us? Eventually it flows underground, straight into the realm of Pluto—er, Hades. Landing a demigod ship on those waters—”

“Yeah, let’s stay up here,” Leo decided. “I don’t want any zombie water on my hull.” Half a kilometer downstream, some fishing boats were pattering along. Frank guessed they didn’t know or care about the history of this river. Must be nice, being a regular mortal.

Next to Frank, Nico di Angelo raised the scepter of Diocletian. Its orb glowed

with purple light, as if in sympathy with the dark storm. Roman relic or not, the scepter troubled Frank. If it really had the power to summon a legion of the dead...well, Frank wasn't sure that was such a great idea.

Jason had once told him that the children of Mars had a similar ability. Supposedly, Frank could call on ghostly soldiers from the losing side of any war to serve him. He'd never had much luck with that power, probably because it freaked him out too much. He was worried he might *become* one of those ghosts if they lost this war—eternally doomed to pay for his failures, assuming there was anyone left to summon him.

“So, uh, Nico...” Frank gestured at the scepter. “Have you learned to use that thing?”

“We'll find out.” Nico stared at the tendrils of darkness undulating from the ruins. “I don't intend to try until I have to. The Doors of Death are already working overtime bringing in Gaea's monsters.

Any more activity raising the dead, and the Doors might shatter permanently, leaving a rip in the mortal world that can't be closed.”

Coach Hedge grunted. “I hate rips in the world. Let's go bust some monster heads.” Frank looked at the satyr's grim expression. Suddenly he had an idea. “Coach, you should stay on board, cover us with the ballistae.”

Hedge frowned. “Stay behind? Me? I'm your best soldier!”

“We might need air support,” Frank said. “Like we did in Rome. You saved our *braccae*.” He didn't add: *Plus, I'd like you to get back to your wife and baby alive.*

Hedge apparently got the message. His scowl relaxed. Relief showed in his eyes.

“Well...” he grumbled, “I suppose somebody's got to save your *braccae*.” Jason clapped the coach on the shoulder. Then he gave Frank an appreciative nod. “So that's settled. Everybody else—let's get to the ruins. Time to crash Gaea's party.”

L X V I

FRANK

DESPITE THE MIDDAY HEAT and the raging storm of death energy, a group of tourists was climbing over the ruins. Fortunately there weren't many, and they didn't give the demigods a second look.

After the crowds in Rome, Frank had stopped worrying too much about getting noticed. If they could fly their warship into the Roman Colosseum with ballistae blazing and not even cause a traffic slowdown, he figured they could get away with anything.

Nico led the way. At the top of the hill, they climbed over an old retaining wall and down into an excavated trench. Finally they arrived at a stone doorway leading straight into the side of the hill. The death storm seemed to originate right above their heads. Looking up at the swirling tentacles of darkness, Frank felt like he was trapped at the bottom of a flushing toilet bowl. That *really* didn't calm his nerves.

Nico faced the group. "From here, it gets tough."

"Sweet," Leo said. "'Cause so far I've totally been pulling my punches." Nico glared at him. "We'll see how long you keep your sense of humor. Remember, this is where pilgrims came to commune with dead ancestors. Underground, you may see things that are hard to look at, or hear voices trying to lead you astray in the tunnels. Frank, do you have the barley cakes?"

“What?” Frank had been thinking about his grandmother and his mom, wondering if they might appear to him. For the first time in days, the voices of Ares and Mars had started to argue again in the back of Frank’s mind, debating their favorite forms of violent death.

“I’ve got the cakes,” Hazel said. She pulled out the magical barley crackers they’d made from the grain Triptolemus had given them in Venice.

“Eat up,” Nico advised.

Frank chewed his cracker of death and tried not to gag. It reminded him of a cookie made with sawdust instead of sugar.

“Yum,” Piper said. Even the daughter of Aphrodite couldn’t avoid making a face.

“Okay.” Nico choked down the last of his barley. “That should protect us from the poison.”

“Poison?” Leo asked. “Did I miss the poison? ’Cause I love poison.”

“Soon enough,” Nico promised. “Just stick close together, and maybe we can avoid getting lost or going insane.”

On that happy note, Nico led them underground.

The tunnel spiraled gently downward, the ceiling supported by white stone arches that reminded Frank of a whale’s rib cage.

As they walked, Hazel ran her hands along the masonry. “This wasn’t part of a temple,” she whispered. “This was...the basement for a manor house, built in later Greek times.” Frank found it eerie how Hazel could tell so much about an underground place just by being there. He’d never known her to be mistaken.

“A manor house?” he asked. “Please don’t tell me we’re in the wrong place.”

“The House of Hades is below us,” Nico assured him. “But Hazel’s right, these upper levels are much newer. When the archaeologists first excavated this site, they thought they’d found the Necromanteion. Then they realized the ruins were too recent, so they decided it was the wrong spot.

They were right the first time. They just didn't dig deep enough." They turned a corner and stopped. In front of them, the tunnel ended in a huge block of stone.

"A cave-in?" Jason asked.

"A test," Nico said. "Hazel, would you do the honors?"

Hazel stepped forward. She placed her hand on the rock, and the entire boulder crumbled to dust.

The tunnel shuddered. Cracks spread across the ceiling. For a terrifying moment, Frank imagined they'd all be crushed under tons of earth—a disappointing way to die, after all they'd been through.

Then the rumbling stopped. The dust settled.

A set of stairs curved deeper into the earth, the barreled ceiling held up by more repeating arches, closer together and carved from polished black stone. The descending arches made Frank feel dizzy, as if he were looking into an endlessly reflecting mirror. Painted on the walls were crude pictures of black cattle marching downward.

"I really don't like cows," Piper muttered.

"Agreed," Frank said.

"Those are the cattle of Hades," Nico said. "It's just a symbol of—"

"Look." Frank pointed.

On the first step of the stairwell, a golden chalice gleamed. Frank was pretty sure it hadn't been there a moment before. The cup was full of dark-green liquid.

"Hooray," Leo said halfheartedly. "I suppose that's our poison." Nico picked up the chalice. "We're standing at the ancient entrance of the Necromanteion.

Odysseus came here, and dozens of other heroes, seeking advice from the dead."

"Did the dead advise them to leave immediately?" Leo asked.

"I would be fine with that," Piper admitted.

Nico drank from the chalice, then offered it to Jason. “You asked me about trust, and taking a risk? Well, here you go, son of Jupiter. How much do you trust me?” Frank wasn’t sure what Nico was talking about, but Jason didn’t hesitate. He took the cup and drank.

They passed it around, each taking a sip of poison. As he waited his turn, Frank tried to keep his legs from shaking and his gut from churning. He wondered what his grandmother would say if she could see him.

Stupid, Fai Zhang! she would probably scold. If all your friends were drinking poison, would you do it too?

Frank went last. The taste of the green liquid reminded him of spoiled apple juice. He drained the chalice. It turned to smoke in his hands.

Nico nodded, apparently satisfied. “Congratulations. Assuming the poison doesn’t kill us, we should be able to find our way through the Necromanteion’s first level.”

“Just the *first* level?” Piper asked.

Nico turned to Hazel and gestured at the stairs. “After you, sister.” In no time, Frank felt completely lost. The stairs split in three different directions. As soon as Hazel chose a path, the stairs split again. They wound their way through interconnecting tunnels and rough-hewn burial chambers that all looked the same—the walls carved with dusty niches that might once have held bodies. The arches over the doors were painted with black cows, white poplar trees, and owls.

“I thought the owl was Minerva’s symbol,” Jason murmured.

“The screech owl is one of Hades’s sacred animals,” Nico said. “Its cry is a bad omen.”

“This way.” Hazel pointed to a doorway that looked the same as all the others. “It’s the only one that won’t collapse on us.”

“Good choice, then,” Leo said.

Frank began to feel like he was leaving the world of the living. His skin tingled,

and he wondered if it was a side effect of the poison. The pouch with his firewood seemed heavier on his belt. In the eerie glow of their magic weapons, his friends looked like flickering ghosts.

Cold air brushed against his face. In his mind, Ares and Mars had gone silent, but Frank thought he heard other voices whispering in the side corridors, beckoning him to veer off course, to come closer and listen to them speak.

Finally they reached an archway carved in the shape of human skulls—or maybe they *were* human skulls embedded in the rock. In the purple light of Diocletian's scepter, the hollow eye sockets seemed to blink.

Frank almost hit the ceiling when Hazel put a hand on his arm.

"This is the entrance to the second level," she said. "I'd better take a look." Frank hadn't even realized that he'd moved in front of the doorway.

"Uh, yeah..." He made way for her.

Hazel traced her fingers across the carved skulls. "No traps on the doorway, but...something is strange here. My underground sense is—is fuzzy, like someone is working against me, hiding what's ahead of us."

"The sorceress that Hecate warned you about?" Jason guessed. "The one Leo saw in his dream?"

What was her name?"

Hazel chewed her lip. "It would be safer not to say her name. But stay alert. One thing I'm sure of: From this point on, the dead are stronger than the living." Frank wasn't sure how she knew that, but he believed her. The voices in the darkness seemed to whisper louder. He caught glimpses of movement in the shadows. From the way his friends' eyes darted around, he guessed they were seeing things too.

"Where are the monsters?" he wondered aloud. "I thought Gaea had an army guarding the Doors."

"Don't know," Jason said. His pale skin looked as green as the poison from the chalice. "At this point I'd almost prefer a straight-up fight."

“Careful what you wish for, man.” Leo summoned a ball of fire to his hand, and for once Frank was glad to see the flames. “Personally, I’m hoping nobody’s home. We walk in, find Percy and Annabeth, destroy the Doors of Death, and walk out. Maybe stop at the gift shop.”

“Yeah,” Frank said. “That’ll happen.”

The tunnel shook. Rubble rained down from the ceiling.

Hazel grabbed Frank’s hand. “That was close,” she muttered. “These passageways won’t take much more.”

“The Doors of Death just opened again,” Nico said.

“It’s happening like every fifteen minutes,” Piper noted.

“Every twelve,” Nico corrected, though he didn’t explain how he knew. “We’d better hurry.”

Percy and Annabeth are close. They’re in danger. I can sense it.” As they traveled deeper, the corridors widened. The ceilings rose to six meters high, decorated with elaborate paintings of owls in the branches of white poplars. The extra space should have made Frank feel better, but all he could think about was the tactical situation. The tunnels were big enough to accommodate large monsters, even giants. There were blind corners everywhere, perfect for ambushes. Their group could be flanked or surrounded easily. They would have no good options for retreat.

All of Frank’s instincts told him to get out of these tunnels. If no monsters were visible, that just meant they were hiding, waiting to spring a trap. Even though Frank knew that, there wasn’t much he could do about it. They *had* to find the Doors of Death.

Leo held his fire close to the walls. Frank saw Ancient Greek graffiti scratched into the stone.

He couldn’t read Ancient Greek, but he guessed they were prayers or supplications to the dead, written by pilgrims thousands of years ago. The tunnel floor was littered with ceramic shards and silver coins.

“Offerings?” Piper guessed.

“Yes,” Nico said. “If you wanted your ancestors to appear, you had to make an offering.”

“Let’s not make an offering,” Jason suggested.

Nobody argued.

“The tunnel from here is unstable,” Hazel warned. “The floor might...well, just follow me. Step *exactly* where I step.”

She made her way forward. Frank walked right behind her—not because he felt particularly brave, but because he wanted to be close if Hazel needed his help. The voices of the war gods were arguing again in his ears. He could sense danger—very close now.

Fai Zhang.

He stopped cold. That voice...it wasn’t Ares or Mars. It seemed to come from right next to him, like someone whispering in his ear.

“Frank?” Jason whispered behind him. “Hazel, hold up a second. Frank, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Frank murmured. “I just—”

Pylos, the voice said. I await you in Pylos.

Frank felt like the poison was bubbling back up his throat. He’d been scared plenty of times before. He’d even faced the god of Death.

But this voice terrified him in a different way. It resonated right down to his bones, as if it knew everything about him—his curse, his history, his future.

His grandmother had always been big on honoring the ancestors. It was a Chinese thing. You had to appease ghosts. You had to take them seriously.

Frank always thought his grandmother’s superstitions were silly. Now he changed his mind. He had no doubt...the voice that spoke to him was one of his

ancestors.

“Frank, don’t move.” Hazel sounded alarmed.

He looked down and realized he’d been about to step out of line.

To survive, you must lead, the voice said. At the break, you must take charge.

“Lead where?” he asked aloud.

Then the voice was gone. Frank could feel its absence, as if the humidity had suddenly dropped.

“Uh, big guy?” Leo said. “Could you not freak out on us? Please and thank you.” Frank’s friends were all looking at him with concern.

“I’m okay,” he managed. “Just...a voice.”

Nico nodded. “I *did* warn you. It’ll only get worse. We should—” Hazel held up her hand for silence. “Wait here, everybody.” Frank didn’t like it, but she forged ahead alone. He counted to twenty-three before she came back, her face drawn and pensive.

“Scary room ahead,” she warned. “Don’t panic.”

“Those two things don’t go together,” Leo murmured. But they followed Hazel into the cavern.

The place was like a circular cathedral, with a ceiling so high it was lost in the gloom. Dozens of other tunnels led off in different directions, each echoing with ghostly voices. The thing that made Frank nervous was the floor. It was a gruesome mosaic of bones and gems—human femurs, hip bones, and ribs twisted and fused together into a smooth surface, dotted with diamonds and rubies. The bones formed patterns, like skeletal contortionists tumbling together, curling to protect the precious stones—a dance of death and riches.

“Touch nothing,” Hazel said.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” Leo muttered.

Jason scanned the exits. “Which way now?”

For once, Nico looked uncertain. “This should be the room where the priests invoked the most powerful spirits. One of these passages leads deeper into the temple, to the third level and the altar of Hades himself. But which—?”

“That one.” Frank pointed. In a doorway at the opposite end of the room, a ghostly Roman legionnaire beckoned to them. His face was misty and indistinct, but Frank got the feeling the ghost was looking directly at him.

Hazel frowned. “Why that one?”

“You don’t see the ghost?” Frank asked.

“Ghost?” Nico asked.

Okay...if Frank was seeing a ghost that the Underworld kids couldn’t see, something was definitely wrong. He felt like the floor was vibrating underneath him. Then he realized it *was* vibrating.

“We need to get to that exit,” he said. “Now!”

Hazel almost had to tackle him to restrain him. “Wait, Frank! This floor is *not* stable, and underneath...well, I’m not sure *what’s* underneath. I need to scout a safe path.”

“Hurry, then,” he urged.

He drew his bow and herded Hazel along as fast as he dared. Leo scrambled behind him to provide light. The others guarded the rear. Frank could tell he was scaring his friends, but he couldn’t help it. He knew in his gut they had only seconds before...

In front of them, the legionnaire ghost vaporized. The cavern reverberated with monstrous roars

—dozens, maybe hundreds of enemies coming from every direction. Frank recognized the throaty bellow of the Earthborn, the screech of gryphons, the guttural war cries of Cyclopes—all sounds he remembered from the Battle of New Rome, amplified underground, echoing in his head even louder than the

war god's voices.

"Hazel, don't stop!" Nico ordered. He pulled the scepter of Diocletian from his belt. Piper and Jason drew their swords as the monsters spilled into the cavern.

A vanguard of six-armed Earthborn threw a volley of stones that shattered the bone-and-jewel floor like ice. A fissure spread across the center of the room, coming straight toward Leo and Hazel.

No time for caution. Frank tackled his friends, and the three of them skidded across the cavern, landing at the edge of the ghost's tunnel as rocks and spears flew overhead.

"Go!" Frank yelled. "Go, go!"

Hazel and Leo scrambled into the tunnel, which seemed to be the only one free of monsters.

Frank wasn't sure that was a good sign.

Two meters in, Leo turned. "The others!"

The entire cavern shuddered. Frank looked back and his courage crumbled to dust. Dividing the cavern was a new fifteen-meter-wide chasm, spanned only by two rickety stretches of bone flooring.

The bulk of the monster army was on the opposite side, howling in frustration and throwing whatever they could find, including each other. Some attempted to cross the bridges, which creaked and crackled under their weight.

Jason, Piper, and Nico stood on the near side of the chasm, which was good, but they were surrounded by a ring of Cyclopes and hellhounds. More monsters kept pouring in from the side corridors, while gryphons wheeled overhead, undeterred by the crumbling floor.

The three demigods would never make it to the tunnel. Even if Jason tried to fly them, they'd be shot out of the air.

Frank remembered the voice of his ancestor: *At the break, you must take charge.*

“We have to help them,” Hazel said.

Frank’s mind raced, doing battle calculations. He saw exactly what would happen—where and when his friends would be overwhelmed, how all six of them would die here in this cavern...unless Frank changed the equation.

“Nico!” he yelled. “The scepter.”

Nico raised Diocletian’s scepter, and the cavern air shimmered purple. Ghosts climbed from the fissure and seeped from the walls—an entire Roman legion in full battle gear. They began taking on physical form, like walking corpses, but they seemed confused. Jason yelled in Latin, ordering them to form ranks and attack. The undead just shuffled among the monsters, causing momentary confusion, but that wouldn’t last.

Frank turned to Hazel and Leo. “You two keep going.”

Hazel’s eyes widened. “What? No!”

“You have to.” It was the hardest thing Frank had ever done, but he knew it was the only choice.

“Find the Doors. Save Annabeth and Percy.”

“But—” Leo glanced over Frank’s shoulder. “Hit the deck!” Frank dove for cover as a volley of rocks slammed overhead. When he managed to get up, coughing and covered in dust, the entrance to the tunnel was gone. An entire section of wall had collapsed, leaving a slope of smoking rubble.

“Hazel...” Frank’s voice broke. He had to hope she and Leo were alive on the other side. He couldn’t afford to think otherwise.

Anger swelled in his chest. He turned and charged toward the monster army.

FRANK

FRANK WAS NO EXPERT ON GHOSTS, but the dead legionnaires must have all been demigods, because they were totally ADHD.

They clawed their way out of the pit, then milled about aimlessly, chest-bumping each other for no apparent reason, pushing one another back into the chasm, shooting arrows into the air as if trying to kill flies, and occasionally, out of sheer luck, throwing a javelin, a sword, or an ally in the direction of the enemy.

Meanwhile, the army of monsters got thicker and angrier. Earthborn threw volleys of stones that plowed into the zombie legionnaires, crushing them like paper. Female demons with mismatched legs and fiery hair (Frank guessed they were *empousai*) gnashed their fangs and shouted orders at the other monsters. A dozen Cyclopes advanced on the crumbling bridges, while seal-shaped humanoids—

telkhines, like Frank had seen in Atlanta—lobbed vials of Greek fire across the chasm. There were even some wild centaurs in the mix, shooting flaming arrows and trampling their smaller allies under hoof. In fact, most of the enemy seemed to be armed with some kind of fiery weapon. Despite his new fireproof pouch, Frank found that extremely uncool.

He pushed through the crowd of dead Romans, shooting down monsters until his arrows were spent, slowly making his way toward his friends.

A little late, he realized— *duh*—he should turn into something big and powerful, like a bear or a dragon. As soon as the thought occurred, pain flared in his arm. He stumbled, looked down, and was astonished to find an arrow shaft protruding from his left biceps. His sleeve was soaked with blood.

The sight made him dizzy. Mostly it made him angry. He tried to turn into a dragon, with no luck.

The pain made it too hard to focus. Maybe he couldn't change shape while wounded.

Great, he thought. Now I find out.

He dropped his bow and picked up a sword from a fallen...well, he actually wasn't sure *what* it was—some sort of reptilian lady warrior with snake trunks instead of legs. He slashed his way forward, trying to ignore the pain and the blood dripping down his arm.

About five meters ahead, Nico was swinging his black sword with one hand, holding the scepter of Diocletian aloft with the other. He kept shouting orders at the legionnaires, but they paid him no attention.

Of course not, Frank thought. He's *Greek*.

Jason and Piper stood at Nico's back. Jason summoned gusts of wind to blast aside javelins and arrows. He deflected a vial of Greek fire right up the throat of a gryphon, which burst into flames and spiraled into the pit. Piper put her new sword to good use, while spraying food from the cornucopia in her other hand—using hams, chickens, apples, and oranges as interceptor missiles. The air above the chasm turned into a fireworks show of flaming projectiles, exploding rocks, and fresh produce.

Still, Frank's friends couldn't hold out forever. Jason's face was already beaded with sweat. He kept shouting in Latin: "Form ranks!" But the dead legionnaires wouldn't listen to him, either. Some of the zombies were helpful just by standing in the way, blocking monsters and taking fire. If they kept getting mowed down, though, there wouldn't be enough of them left to organize.

"Make way!" Frank shouted. To his surprise, the dead legionnaires parted for him. The closest ones turned and stared at him with blank eyes, as if waiting for

further orders.

“Oh, great...” Frank mumbled.

In Venice, Mars had warned him that his true test of leadership was coming. Frank’s ghostly ancestor had urged him to take charge. But if these dead Romans wouldn’t listen to Jason, why should they listen to him? Because he was a child of Mars, or maybe because...

The truth hit him. Jason wasn’t quite Roman anymore. His time at Camp Half-Blood had changed him. Reyna had recognized that. Apparently, so did the undead legionnaires. If Jason no longer gave off the right sort of vibe, or the aura of a Roman leader...

Frank made it to his friends as a wave of Cyclopes crashed into them. He lifted his sword to parry a Cyclops’s club, then stabbed the monster in the leg, sending him backward into the pit.

Another one charged. Frank managed to impale him, but blood loss was making him weak. His vision blurred. His ears rang.

He was dimly aware of Jason on his left flank, deflecting the incoming missiles with wind; Piper on his right, yelling charmspeak commands—encouraging the monsters to attack each other or take a refreshing jump into the chasm.

“It’ll be fun!” she promised.

A few listened, but across the pit, the *empousai* were countering her orders. Apparently they had charmspeak too. The monsters crowded so thickly around Frank that he could barely use his sword.

The stench of their breath and body odor was almost enough to knock him out, even without the arrow throbbing in his arm.

What was Frank supposed to do? He’d had a plan, but his thoughts were getting fuzzy.

“Stupid ghosts!” Nico shouted.

“They won’t listen!” Jason agreed.

That was it. Frank had to make the ghosts listen.

He summoned all his strength and yelled, “Cohorts—lock shields!” The zombies around him stirred. They lined up in front of Frank, putting their shields together in a ragged defensive formation. But they were moving too slowly, like sleepwalkers, and only a few had responded to his voice.

“Frank, how did you do that?” Jason yelled.

Frank’s head swam with pain. He forced himself not to pass out. “I’m the ranking Roman officer,” he said. “They—uh, they don’t recognize you. Sorry.” Jason grimaced, but he didn’t look particularly surprised. “How can we help?” Frank wished he had an answer. A gryphon soared overhead, almost decapitating him with its talons. Nico smacked it with the scepter of Diocletian, and the monster veered into a wall.

“*Orbem formate!*” Frank ordered.

About two dozen zombies obeyed, struggling to form a defensive ring around Frank and his friends. It was enough to give the demigods a little respite, but there were too many enemies pressing forward. Most of the ghostly legionnaires were still wandering around in a daze.

“My rank,” Frank realized.

“*All* these monsters are rank!” Piper yelled, stabbing a wild centaur.

“No,” Frank said. “I’m only a centurion.”

Jason cursed in Latin. “He means he can’t control a whole legion. He’s not of high enough rank.” Nico swung his black sword at another gryphon. “Well, then, promote him!” Frank’s mind was sluggish. He didn’t understand what Nico was saying. *Promote* him? How?

Jason shouted in his best drill-sergeant voice: “Frank Zhang! I, Jason Grace, praetor of the Twelfth Legion Fulminata, give you my final order: I resign my post and give you emergency field promotion to praetor, with the full powers of that rank. Take command of this legion!” Frank felt as if a door had opened somewhere in the House of Hades, letting in a blast of fresh air that swept through the tunnels. The arrow in his arm suddenly didn’t matter. His thoughts

cleared.

His eyesight sharpened. The voices of Mars and Ares spoke in his mind, strong and unified: *Break them!*

Frank hardly recognized his own voice when he yelled: “Legion, *agmen formate!*” Instantly, every dead legionnaire in the cavern drew his sword and raised his shield. They scrambled toward Frank’s position, pushing and hacking monsters out of their way until they stood shoulder to shoulder with the comrades, arranging themselves in a square formation. Stones, javelins, and fire rained down, but now Frank had a disciplined defensive line sheltering them behind a wall of bronze and leather.

“Archers!” Frank yelled. “*Eiaculare flammas!*”

He didn’t hold out much hope the command would work. The zombies’ bows couldn’t be in good shape. But to his surprise, several dozen ghostly skirmishers nocked arrows in unison. Their arrowheads caught fire spontaneously and a flaming wave of death arced over the legion’s line, straight into the enemy. Cyclopes fell. Centaurs stumbled. A telkhine shrieked and ran in circles with a burning arrow impaled in his forehead.

Frank heard a laugh behind him. He glanced back and couldn’t believe what he saw. Nico di Angelo was actually smiling.

“That’s more like it,” Nico said. “Let’s turn this tide!”

“*Cuneum formate!*” Frank yelled. “Advance with *pila!*” The zombie line thickened in the center, forming a wedge designed to break through the enemy host. They lowered their spears in a bristling row and pushed forward.

Earthborn wailed and threw boulders. Cyclopes smashed their fists and clubs against the locked shields, but the zombie legionnaires were no longer paper targets. They had inhuman strength, hardly wavering under the fiercest attacks. Soon the floor was covered with monster dust. The line of javelins chewed through the enemy like a set of giant teeth, felling ogres and snake women and hellhounds. Frank’s archers shot gryphons out of the air and caused chaos in the main body of the monster army across the chasm.

Frank’s forces began to take control of their side of the cavern. One of the stone

bridges collapsed, but more monsters kept pouring over the other one. Frank would have to stop that.

“Jason,” he called, “can you fly a few legionnaires across the pit? The enemy’s left flank is weak—see? Take it!”

Jason smiled. “With pleasure.”

Three dead Romans rose into the air and flew across the chasm. Then three more joined them.

Finally Jason flew himself across and his squad began cutting through some very surprised-looking telkhines, spreading fear through the enemy’s ranks.

“Nico,” Frank said, “keep trying to raise the dead. We need more numbers.”

“On it.” Nico lifted the scepter of Diocletian, which glowed even darker purple. More ghostly Romans seeped from the walls to join the fight.

Across the chasm, *empousai* shouted commands in a language Frank didn’t know, but the gist was obvious. They were trying to shore up their allies and keep them charging across the bridge.

“Piper!” Frank yelled. “Counter those *empousai*! We need some chaos.”

“Thought you’d never ask.” She started catcalling at the female demons: “Your makeup is smeared! Your friend called you ugly! That one is making a face behind your back!” Soon the vampire ladies were too busy fighting one another to shout any commands.

The legionnaires moved forward, keeping up the pressure. They had to take the bridge before Jason got overwhelmed.

“Time to lead from the front,” Frank decided. He raised his borrowed sword and called for a charge.

L X V I I I

FRANK

FRANK DIDN'T NOTICE THAT HE WAS GLOWING. Later Jason told him that the blessing of Mars had shrouded him in red light, like it had in Venice. Javelins couldn't touch him. Rocks somehow got deflected. Even with an arrow sticking out of his left biceps, Frank had never felt so full of energy.

The first Cyclops he met went down so quickly it was almost a joke. Frank sliced him in half from shoulder to waist. The big guy exploded into dust. The next Cyclops backed up nervously, so Frank cut his legs out from under him and sent him into the pit.

The remaining monsters on their side of the chasm tried to retreat, but the legion cut them down.

“Tetsudo formation!” Frank shouted. “Single file, advance!” Frank was the first one across the bridge. The dead followed, their shields locked on either side and over their heads, deflecting all attacks. As the last of the zombies crossed, the stone bridge crumbled into the darkness, but by then it didn't matter.

Nico kept summoning more legionnaires to join the fight. Over the history of the empire, thousands of Romans had served and died in Greece. Now they were back, answering the call of Diocletian's scepter.

Frank waded forward, destroying everything in his path.

“I will burn you!” a telkhine squeaked, desperately waving a vial of Greek fire. “I have fire!” Frank took him down. As the vial dropped toward the ground, Frank kicked it over the cliff before it could explode.

An *empousa* raked her claws across Frank’s chest, but Frank felt nothing. He sliced the demon into dust and kept moving. Pain was unimportant. Failure was unthinkable.

He was a leader of the legion now, doing what he was born to do—fighting the enemies of Rome, upholding its legacy, protecting the lives of his friends and comrades. He was Praetor Frank Zhang.

His forces swept the enemy away, breaking their every attempt to regroup. Jason and Piper fought at his side, yelling defiantly. Nico waded through the last group of Earthborn, slashing them into mounds of wet clay with his black Stygian sword.

Before Frank knew it, the battle was over. Piper chopped through the last *empousa*, who vaporized with an anguished wail.

“Frank,” Jason said, “you’re on fire.”

He looked down. A few drops of oil must have splattered on his pants, because they were starting to smolder. Frank batted at them until they stopped smoking, but he wasn’t particularly worried. Thanks to Leo, he no longer had to fear fire.

Nico cleared his throat. “Uh...you also have an arrow sticking through your arm.”

“I know.” Frank snapped off the point of the arrow and pulled out the shaft by the tail. He felt only a warm, tugging sensation. “I’ll be fine.”

Piper made him eat a piece of ambrosia. As she bandaged his wound, she said, “Frank, you were amazing. Completely terrifying, but amazing.”

Frank had trouble processing her words. *Terrifying* couldn’t apply to him. He was just Frank.

His adrenaline drained away. He looked around him, wondering where all the enemies had gone.

The only monsters left were his own undead Romans, standing in a stupor with their weapons lowered.

Nico held up his scepter, its orb dark and dormant. “The dead won’t stay much longer, now that the battle is over.”

Frank faced his troops. “Legion!”

The zombie soldiers snapped to attention.

“You fought well,” Frank told them. “Now you may rest. Dismissed.” They crumbled into piles of bones, armor, shields, and weapons. Then even those disintegrated.

Frank felt as if he might crumble too. Despite the ambrosia, his wounded arm began to throb. His eyes were heavy with exhaustion. The blessing of Mars faded, leaving him depleted. But his work wasn’t done yet.

“Hazel and Leo,” he said. “We need to find them.”

His friends peered across the chasm. At the other end of the cavern, the tunnel Hazel and Leo had entered was buried under tons of rubble.

“We can’t go that way,” Nico said. “Maybe...”

Suddenly he staggered. He would have fallen, if Jason hadn’t caught him.

“Nico!” Piper said. “What is it?”

“The Doors,” Nico said. “Something’s happening. Percy and Annabeth...we need to go *now*.”

“But how?” Jason said. “That tunnel is *gone*.”

Frank clenched his jaw. He hadn’t come this far to stand around helplessly while his friends were in trouble. “It won’t be fun,” he said, “but there’s another way.”

ANNABETH

GETTING KILLED BY TARTARUS didn't seem like much of an honor.

As Annabeth stared up at his dark whirlpool face, she decided she'd rather die in some less memorable way—maybe falling down the stairs, or going peacefully in her sleep at age eighty, after a nice quiet life with Percy. Yes, that sounded good.

It wasn't the first time Annabeth had faced an enemy she couldn't defeat by force. Normally, this would've been her cue to stall for time with some clever Athena-like chitchat.

Except her voice wouldn't work. She couldn't even close her mouth. For all she knew, she was drooling as badly as Percy did when he slept.

She was dimly aware of the army of monsters swirling around her, but after their initial roar of triumph, the horde had fallen silent. Annabeth and Percy should have been ripped to pieces by now.

Instead, the monsters kept their distance, waiting for Tartarus to act.

The god of the pit flexed his fingers, examining his own polished black talons. He had no expression, but he straightened his shoulders as if he were pleased.

It is good to have form, he intoned. With these hands, I can eviscerate you.

His voice sounded like a backward recording—as if the words were being sucked into the vortex of his face rather than projected. In fact, *everything* seemed to be drawn toward the face of this god—the dim light, the poisonous clouds, the essence of the monsters, even Annabeth’s own fragile life force. She looked around and realized that every object on this vast plain had grown a vaporous comet’s tail—all pointing toward Tartarus.

Annabeth knew she should say something, but her instincts told her to hide, to avoid doing anything that would draw the god’s attention.

Besides, what could she say? *You won’t get away with this!*

That wasn’t true. She and Percy had only survived this long because Tartarus was savoring his new form. He wanted the pleasure of physically ripping them to pieces. If Tartarus wished, Annabeth had no doubt he could devour her existence with a single thought, as easily as he’d vaporized Hyperion and Krios. Would there be any rebirth from that? Annabeth didn’t want to find out.

Next to her, Percy did something she’d never seen him do. He dropped his sword. It just fell out of his hand and hit the ground with a thud. Death Mist no longer shrouded his face, but he still had the complexion of a corpse.

Tartarus hissed again—possibly laughing.

Your fear smells wonderful, said the god. I see the appeal of having a physical body with so many senses. Perhaps my beloved Gaea is right, wishing to wake from her slumber.

He stretched out his massive purple hand and might have plucked up Percy like a weed, but Bob interrupted.

“Begone!” The Titan leveled his spear at the god. “You have no right to meddle!” *Meddle?* Tartarus turned. *I am the lord of all creatures of the darkness, puny Iapetus. I can do as I please.*

His black cyclone face spun faster. The howling sound was so horrible, Annabeth fell to her knees and clutched her ears. Bob stumbled, the wispy comet tail of his life force growing longer as it was sucked toward the face of the god.

Bob roared in defiance. He charged and thrust his spear at Tartarus’s chest.

Before it could connect, Tartarus swatted Bob aside like he was a pesky insect. The Titan went sprawling.

Why do you not disintegrate? Tartarus mused. *You are nothing. You are even weaker than Krios and Hyperion.*

“I am Bob,” said Bob.

Tartarus hissed. *What is that? What is Bob?*

“I choose to be more than Iapetus,” said the Titan. “You do not control me. I am not like my brothers.”

The collar of his coveralls bulged. Small Bob leaped out. The kitten landed on the ground in front of his master, then arched his back and hissed at the lord of the abyss.

As Annabeth watched, Small Bob began to grow, his form flickering until the little kitten had become a full-sized, translucent skeletal saber-toothed tiger.

“Also,” Bob announced, “I have a good cat.”

No-Longer-Small Bob sprang at Tartarus, sinking his claws into Tartarus’s thigh. The tiger scrambled up his leg, straight under the god’s chain-link skirt. Tartarus stomped and howled, apparently no longer enamored with having a physical form. Meanwhile, Bob thrust his spear into the god’s side, right below his breastplate.

Tartarus roared. He swatted at Bob, but the Titan backed out of reach. Bob thrust out his fingers.

His spear yanked itself free of the god’s flesh and flew back to Bob’s hand, which made Annabeth gulp in amazement. She’d never imagined a broom could have so many useful features. Small Bob dropped out of Tartarus’s skirt. He ran to his master’s side, his saber-toothed fangs dripping with golden ichor.

You will die first, Iapetus, Tartarus decided. *Afterward, I will add your soul to my armor, where it will slowly dissolve, over and over, in eternal agony.*

Tartarus pounded his fist against his breastplate. Milky faces swirled in the

metal, silently screaming to get out.

Bob turned toward Percy and Annabeth. The Titan grinned, which probably would not have been Annabeth's reaction to a threat of eternal agony.

"Take the Doors," Bob said. "I will deal with Tartarus." Tartarus threw back his head and bellowed—creating a vacuum so strong that the nearest flying demons were pulled into his vortex face and shredded.

Deal with me? the god mocked. *You are only a Titan, a lesser child of Gaea! I will make you suffer for your arrogance. And as for your tiny mortal friends...*

Tartarus swept his hand toward the monster army, beckoning them forward.
DESTROY THEM!

L X X

ANNABETH

DESTROY THEM.

Annabeth had heard those words often enough that they shocked her out of her paralysis. She raised her sword and yelled, "Percy!"

He snatched up Riptide.

Annabeth dove for the chains holding the Doors of Death. Her drakon-bone blade cut through the left-side moorings in a single swipe. Meanwhile, Percy

drove back the first wave of monsters. He stabbed an *arai* and yelled, “Gah! Stupid curses!” Then he scythed down a half dozen telkhines.

Annabeth lunged behind him and sliced through the chains on the other side.

The Doors shuddered, then opened with a pleasant *Ding!*

Bob and his saber-toothed sidekick continued to weave around Tartarus’s legs, attacking, and dodging to stay out of his clutches. They didn’t seem to be doing much damage, but Tartarus lurched around, obviously not used to fighting in a humanoid body. He swiped and missed, swiped and missed.

More monsters surged toward the Doors. A spear flew past Annabeth’s head. She turned and stabbed an *empousa* through the gut, then dove for the Doors as they started to close.

She kept them open with her foot as she fought. At least with her back to the elevator car, she didn’t have to worry about attacks from behind.

“Percy, get over here!” she yelled.

He joined her in the doorway, his face dripping with sweat, and blood from several cuts.

“You okay?” she asked.

He nodded. “Got some kind of *pain* curse from that *arai*.” He hacked a gryphon out of the air.

“Hurts, but it won’t kill me. Get in the elevator. I’ll hold the button.”

“Yeah, right!” She smacked a carnivorous horse in the snout with the butt of her sword and sent the monster stampeding through the crowd. “You promised, Seaweed Brain. We would *not* get separated! Ever again!”

“You’re impossible!”

“Love you too!”

An entire phalanx of Cyclopes charged forward, knocking smaller monsters out

of the way.

Annabeth figured she was about to die. “It had to be Cyclopes,” she grumbled.

Percy gave a battle cry. At the Cyclopes’ feet, a red vein in the ground burst open, spraying the monsters with liquid fire from the Phlegethon. The firewater might have healed mortals, but it didn’t do the Cyclopes any favors. They combusted in a tidal wave of heat. The burst vein sealed itself, but nothing remained of the monsters except a row of scorch marks.

“Annabeth, you *have* to go!” Percy said. “We can’t both stay!”

“No!” she cried. “Duck!”

He didn’t ask why. He crouched, and Annabeth vaulted over him, bringing her sword down on the head of a heavily tattooed ogre.

She and Percy stood shoulder to shoulder in the doorway, waiting for the next wave. The exploding vein had given the monsters pause, but it wouldn’t be long before they remembered: *Hey, wait, there’s seventy-five gazillion of us, and only two of them.*

“Well, then,” Percy said, “you have a better idea?”

Annabeth wished she did.

The Doors of Death stood right behind them—their exit from this nightmarish world. But they couldn’t use the Doors without someone manning the controls for twelve long minutes. If they stepped inside and let the Doors close without someone holding the button, Annabeth didn’t think the results would be healthy. And if they stepped away from the Doors for any reason, she imagined the elevator would close and disappear without them.

The situation was so pathetically sad, it was almost funny.

The crowd of monsters inched forward, snarling and gathering their courage.

Meanwhile, Bob’s attacks were getting slower. Tartarus was learning to control his new body.

Saber-toothed Small Bob lunged at the god, but Tartarus smacked the cat sideways. Bob charged, bellowing with rage, but Tartarus grabbed his spear and yanked it out of his hands. He kicked Bob downhill, knocking over a row of telkhines like sea mammal bowling pins.

YIELD! Tartarus thundered.

“I will not,” Bob said. “You are not my master.”

Die in defiance, then, said the god of the pit. *You Titans are nothing to me. My children the giants were always better, stronger, and more vicious. They will make the upper world as dark as my realm!*

Tartarus snapped the spear in half. Bob wailed in agony. Saber-toothed Small Bob leaped to his aid, snarling at Tartarus and baring his fangs. The Titan struggled to rise, but Annabeth knew it was over. Even the monsters turned to watch, as if sensing that their master Tartarus was about to take the spotlight. The death of a Titan was worth seeing.

Percy gripped Annabeth’s hand. “Stay here. I’ve got to help him.”

“Percy, you can’t,” she croaked. “Tartarus *can’t* be fought. Not by us.” She knew she was right. Tartarus was in a class by himself. He was more powerful than the gods or Titans. Demigods were nothing to him. If Percy charged to help Bob, he would get squashed like an ant.

But Annabeth also knew that Percy wouldn’t listen. He couldn’t leave Bob to die alone. That just wasn’t him—and that was one of the many reasons she loved him, even if he was an Olympian-sized pain in the *podex*.

“We’ll go together,” Annabeth decided, knowing this would be their final battle. If they stepped away from the Doors, they would never leave Tartarus. At least they would die fighting side by side.

She was about to say: *Now*.

A ripple of alarm passed through the army. In the distance, Annabeth heard shrieks, screams, and a persistent *boom, boom, boom* that was too fast to be the heartbeat in the ground—more like something large and heavy, running at full speed. An Earthborn spun into the air as if he’d been tossed. A plume of bright-

green gas billowed across the top of the monstrous horde like the spray from a poison riot hose. Everything in its path dissolved.

Across the swath of sizzling, newly empty ground, Annabeth saw the cause of the commotion.

She started to grin.

The Maeonian drakon spread its frilled collar and hissed, its poison breath filling the battlefield with the smell of pine and ginger. It shifted its hundred-foot-long body, flicking its dappled green tail and wiping out a battalion of ogres.

Riding on its back was a red-skinned giant with flowers in his rust-colored braids, a jerkin of green leather, and a drakon-rib lance in his hand.

“Damasen!” Annabeth cried.

The giant inclined his head. “Annabeth Chase, I took your advice. I chose myself a new fate.”

L X X I

ANNABETH

WHAT IS THIS? THE GOD OF THE PIT HISSED. *Why have you come, my disgraced son?*

Damasen glanced at Annabeth, a clear message in his eyes: *Go. Now.*

He turned toward Tartarus. The Maeonian drakon stamped its feet and snarled.

“Father, you wished for a more worthy opponent?” Damasen asked calmly. “I am one of the giants you are so proud of. You wished me to be more warlike? Perhaps I will start by destroying you!”

Damasen leveled his lance and charged.

The monstrous army swarmed him, but the Maeonian drakon flattened everything in its path, sweeping its tail and spraying poison while Damasen jabbed at Tartarus, forcing the god to retreat like a cornered lion.

Bob stumbled away from the battle, his saber-toothed cat at his side. Percy gave them as much cover as he could—causing blood vessels in the ground to burst one after the other. Some monsters were vaporized in Styx water. Others got a Cocytus shower and collapsed, weeping hopelessly.

Others were doused with liquid Lethe and stared blankly around them, no longer sure where they were or even *who* they were.

Bob limped to the Doors. Golden ichor flowed from the wounds on his arms and chest. His janitor’s outfit hung in tatters. His posture was twisted and hunched, as if Tartarus’s breaking the spear had broken something inside him. Despite all that, he was grinning, his silver eyes bright with satisfaction.

“Go,” he ordered. “I will hold the button.”

Percy gawked at him. “Bob, you’re in no condition—”

“Percy.” Annabeth’s voice threatened to break. She hated herself for letting Bob do this, but she knew it was the only way. “We have to.”

“We can’t just leave them!”

“You must, friend.” Bob clapped Percy on the arm, nearly knocking him over. “I can still press a button. And I have a good cat to guard me.”

Small Bob the saber-toothed tiger growled in agreement.

“Besides,” Bob said, “it is your destiny to return to the world. Put an end to this

madness of Gaea.”

A screaming Cyclops, sizzling from poison spray, sailed over their heads.

Fifty yards away, the Maeonian drakon trampled through monsters, its feet making sickening *squish squish* noises as if stomping grapes. On its back, Damasen yelled insults and jabbed at the god of the pit, taunting Tartarus farther away from the Doors.

Tartarus lumbered after him, his iron boots making craters in the ground.

You cannot kill me! he bellowed. *I am the pit itself. You might as well try to kill the earth.*

Gaea and I—we are eternal. We own you, flesh and spirit!

He brought down his massive fist, but Damasen sidestepped, impaling his javelin in the side of Tartarus’s neck.

Tartarus growled, apparently more annoyed than hurt. He turned his swirling vacuum face toward the giant, but Damasen got out of the way in time. A dozen monsters were sucked into the vortex and disintegrated.

“Bob, don’t!” Percy said, his eyes pleading. “He’ll destroy you permanently. No coming back.

No regeneration.”

Bob shrugged. “Who knows what will be? You must go now. Tartarus is right about one thing.

We cannot defeat him. We can only buy you time.”

The Doors tried to close on Annabeth’s foot.

“Twelve minutes,” said the Titan. “I can give you that.”

“Percy...hold the Doors.” Annabeth jumped and threw her arms around the Titan’s neck. She kissed his cheek, her eyes so full of tears, she couldn’t see straight. Bob’s stubbly face smelled of cleaning supplies—fresh lemony

furniture polish and Murphy Oill wood soap.

“Monsters are eternal,” she told him, trying to keep herself from sobbing. “We will remember you and Damasen as heroes, as the *best* Titan and the *best* giant. We’ll tell our children. We’ll keep the story alive. Someday, you will regenerate.”

Bob ruffled her hair. Smile lines crinkled around his eyes. “That is good. Until then, my friends, tell the sun and the stars hello for me. And be strong. This may not be the last sacrifice you must make to stop Gaea.”

He pushed her away gently. “No more time. Go.”

Annabeth grabbed Percy’s arm. She dragged him into the elevator car. She had one last glimpse of the Maeonian drakon shaking an ogre like a sock puppet, Damasen jabbing at Tartarus’s legs.

The god of the pit pointed at the Doors of Death and yelled: *Monsters, stop them!*

Small Bob the saber-toothed crouched and snarled, ready for action.

Bob winked at Annabeth. “Hold the Doors closed on your side,” he said. “They will resist your passage. Hold them—”

The panels slid shut.

ANNABETH

“PERCY, HELP ME!” ANNABETH YELPED.

She shoved her entire body against the left door, pressing it toward the center. Percy did the same on the right. There were no handles, or anything else to hold on to. As the elevator car ascended, the Doors shook and tried to open, threatening to spill them into whatever was between life and death.

Annabeth’s shoulders ached. The elevator’s easy-listening music didn’t help. If all monsters had to hear that song about liking piña coladas and getting caught in the rain, no wonder they were in the mood for carnage when they reached the mortal world.

“We left Bob and Damasen,” Percy croaked. “They’ll die for us, and we just—”

“I know,” she murmured. “Gods of Olympus, Percy, I know.” Annabeth was almost glad for the job of keeping the Doors closed. The terror racing through her heart at least kept her from dissolving into misery. Abandoning Damasen and Bob had been the hardest thing she’d ever done.

For years at Camp Half-Blood, she had chafed as other campers went on quests while she stayed behind. She’d watched as others gained glory...or failed and didn’t come back. Since she was seven years old, she had thought: *Why don’t I get to prove my skills? Why can’t I lead a quest?*

Now she realized that the hardest test for a child of Athena wasn't leading a quest or facing death in combat. It was making the strategic decision to step back, to let someone else take the brunt of the danger—especially when that person was your friend. She had to face the fact that she couldn't protect everyone she loved. She couldn't solve every problem.

She hated it, but she didn't have time for self-pity. She blinked away her tears.

"Percy, the Doors," she warned.

The panels had started to slide apart, letting in a whiff of...ozone? Sulfur?

Percy pushed on his side furiously and the crack closed. His eyes blazed with anger. She hoped he wasn't mad at her, but if he was, she couldn't blame him.

If it keeps him going, she thought, then let him be angry.

"I will kill Gaea," he muttered. "I will tear her apart with my bare hands." Annabeth nodded, but she was thinking about Tartarus's boast. He could not be killed. Neither could Gaea. Against such power, even Titans and giants were hopelessly outmatched. Demigods stood no chance.

She also remembered Bob's warning: *This may not be the last sacrifice you must make to stop Gaea.*

She felt that truth deep in her bones.

"Twelve minutes," she murmured. "Just twelve minutes."

She prayed to Athena that Bob could hold the UP button that long. She prayed for strength and wisdom. She wondered what they would find once they reached the top of this elevator ride.

If their friends weren't there, controlling the other side...

"We can do this," Percy said. "We *have* to."

"Yeah," Annabeth said. "Yeah, we do."

They held the Doors shut as the elevator shuddered and the music played, while

somewhere below them, a Titan and a giant sacrificed their lives for their escape.

L X X I I I

HAZEL

HAZEL WASN'T PROUD OF CRYING.

After the tunnel collapsed, she wept and screamed like a two-year-old throwing a tantrum. She couldn't move the debris that separated her and Leo from the others. If the earth shifted any more, the entire complex might collapse on their heads. Still, she pounded her fists against the stones and yelled curses that would've earned her a mouth-washing with lye soap back at St. Agnes Academy.

Leo stared at her, wide-eyed and speechless.

She wasn't being fair to him.

The last time the two of them had been together, she'd zapped him into her past and shown him Sammy, his great-grandfather—Hazel's first boyfriend. She'd burdened him with emotional baggage he didn't need, and left him so dazed they had almost gotten killed by a giant shrimp monster.

Now here they were, alone again, while their friends might be dying at the hands of a monster army, and she was throwing a fit.

“Sorry.” She wiped her face.

“Hey, you know...” Leo shrugged. “I’ve attacked a few rocks in my day.” She swallowed with difficulty. “Frank is...he’s—”

“Listen,” Leo said. “Frank Zhang has *moves*. He’s probably gonna turn into a kangaroo and do some marsupial jujitsu on their ugly faces.”

He helped her to her feet. Despite the panic simmering inside her, she knew Leo was right. Frank and the others weren’t helpless. They would find a way to survive. The best thing she and Leo could do was carry on.

She studied Leo. His hair had grown out longer and shaggier, and his face was leaner, so he looked less like an imp and more like one of those willowy elves in the fairy tales. The biggest difference was his eyes. They constantly drifted, as if Leo was trying to spot something over the horizon.

“Leo, I’m sorry,” she said.

He raised an eyebrow. “Okay. For what?”

“For...” She gestured around her helplessly. “Everything. For thinking you were Sammy, for leading you on. I mean, I didn’t mean to, but if I did—”

“Hey.” He squeezed her hand, though Hazel sensed nothing romantic in the gesture. “Machines are designed to work.”

“Uh, what?”

“I figure the universe is basically like a machine. I don’t know who made it, if it was the Fates, or the gods, or capital-G God, or whatever. But it chugs along the way it’s supposed to most of the time. Sure, little pieces break and stuff goes haywire once in a while, but mostly...things happen for a reason. Like you and me meeting.”

“Leo Valdez,” Hazel marveled, “you’re a philosopher.”

“Nah,” he said. “I’m just a mechanic. But I figure my *bisabuelo* Sammy knew what was what. He let you go, Hazel. My job is to tell you that it’s okay. You and Frank—you’re good together. We’re all going to get through this. I hope you guys get a chance to be happy. Besides, Zhang couldn’t tie his shoes without your help.”

“That’s mean,” Hazel chided, but she felt like something was untangling inside her—a knot of tension she’d been carrying for weeks.

Leo really *had* changed. Hazel was starting to think she’d found a good friend.

“What happened to you when you were on your own?” she asked. “Who did you meet?” Leo’s eye twitched. “Long story. I’ll tell you sometime, but I’m still waiting to see how it shakes out.”

“The universe is a machine,” Hazel said, “so it’ll be fine.”

“Hopefully.”

“As long as it’s not one of *your* machines,” Hazel added. “Because your machines *never* do what they’re supposed to.”

“Yeah, ha-ha.” Leo summoned fire into his hand. “Now, which way, Miss Underground?” Hazel scanned the path in front of them. About thirty feet down, the tunnel split into four smaller arteries, each one identical, but the one on the left radiated cold.

“That way,” she decided. “It feels the most dangerous.”

“I’m sold,” said Leo.

They began their descent.

As soon as they reached the first archway, the polecat Gale found them.

She scurried up Hazel’s side and curled around her neck, chittering crossly as if to say: *Where have you been? You’re late.*

“Not the farting weasel again,” Leo complained. “If that thing lets loose in close quarters like this, with my fire and all, we’re gonna explode.”

Gale barked a polecat insult at Leo.

Hazel hushed them both. She could sense the tunnel ahead, sloping gently down for about three hundred feet, then opening into a large chamber. In that chamber was a presence...cold, heavy, and powerful. Hazel hadn’t felt anything like it

since the cave in Alaska where Gaea had forced her to resurrect Porphyron the giant king. Hazel had thwarted Gaea's plans that time, but she'd had to pull down the cavern, sacrificing her life and her mother's. She wasn't anxious to have a similar experience.

"Leo, be ready," she whispered. "We're getting close."

"Close to what?"

A woman's voice echoed down the corridor: "Close to *me*." A wave of nausea hit Hazel so hard her knees buckled. The whole world shifted. Her sense of direction, usually flawless underground, became completely unmoored.

She and Leo didn't seem to move, but suddenly they were three hundred feet down the corridor, at the entrance of the chamber.

"Welcome," said the woman's voice. "I've looked forward to this." Hazel's eyes swept the cavern. She couldn't see the speaker.

The room reminded her of the Pantheon in Rome, except this place had been decorated in Hades Modern.

The obsidian walls were carved with scenes of death: plague victims, corpses on the battlefield, torture chambers with skeletons hanging in iron cages—all of it embellished with precious gems that somehow made the scenes even more ghastly.

As in the Pantheon, the domed roof was a waffle pattern of recessed square panels, but here each panel was a stela—a grave marker with Ancient Greek inscriptions. Hazel wondered if actual bodies were buried behind them. With her underground senses out of whack, she couldn't be sure.

She saw no other exits. At the apex of the ceiling, where the Pantheon's skylight would've been, a circle of pure black stone gleamed, as if to reinforce the sense that there was no way out of this place—no sky above, only darkness.

Hazel's eyes drifted to the center of the room.

"Yep," Leo muttered. "Those are doors, all right."

Fifty feet away was a set of freestanding elevator doors, their panels etched in silver and iron.

Rows of chains ran down either side, bolting the frame to large hooks in the floor.

The area around the doors was littered with black rubble. With a tightening sense of anger, Hazel realized that an ancient altar to Hades had once stood there. It had been destroyed to make room for the Doors of Death.

“Where are you?” she shouted.

“Don’t you see us?” taunted the woman’s voice. “I thought Hecate chose you for your skill.” Another bout of queasiness churned through Hazel’s gut. On her shoulder, Gale barked and passed gas, which didn’t help.

Dark spots floated in Hazel’s eyes. She tried to blink them away, but they only turned darker.

The spots consolidated into a twenty-foot-tall shadowy figure looming next to the Doors.

The giant Clytius was shrouded in the black smoke, just as she’d seen in her vision at the crossroads, but now Hazel could dimly make out his form—dragon-like legs with ash-colored scales; a massive humanoid upper body encased in Stygian armor; long, braided hair that seemed to be made from smoke. His complexion was as dark as Death’s (Hazel should know, since she had met Death personally). His eyes glinted cold as diamonds. He carried no weapon, but that didn’t make him any less terrifying.

Leo whistled. “You know, Clytius...for such a big dude, you’ve got a beautiful voice.”

“Idiot,” hissed the woman.

Halfway between Hazel and the giant, the air shimmered. The sorceress appeared.

She wore an elegant sleeveless dress of woven gold, her dark hair piled into a cone, encircled with diamonds and emeralds. Around her neck hung a pendant

like a miniature maze, on a cord set with rubies that made Hazel think of crystallized blood drops.

The woman was beautiful in a timeless, regal way—like a statue you might admire but could never love. Her eyes sparkled with malice.

“Pasiphaë,” Hazel said.

The woman inclined her head. “My dear Hazel Levesque.”

Leo coughed. “You two know each other? Like Underworld chums, or—”

“Silence, fool.” Pasiphaë’s voice was soft, but full of venom. “I have no use for demigod boys—

always so full of themselves, so brash and destructive.”

“Hey, lady,” Leo protested. “I don’t destroy things much. I’m a son of Hephaestus.”

“A tinkerer,” snapped Pasiphaë. “Even worse. I knew Daedalus. His inventions brought me nothing but trouble.”

Leo blinked. “Daedalus...like, *the* Daedalus? Well, then, you should know all about us *tinkerers*. We’re more into fixing, building, occasionally sticking wads of oilcloth in the mouths of rude ladies—”

“Leo.” Hazel put her arm across his chest. She had a feeling the sorceress was about to turn him into something unpleasant if he didn’t shut up. “Let me take this, okay?”

“Listen to your friend,” Pasiphaë said. “Be a good boy and let the women talk.” Pasiphaë paced in front of them, examining Hazel, her eyes so full of hate it made Hazel’s skin tingle. The sorceress’s power radiated from her like heat from a furnace. Her expression was unsettling and vaguely familiar....

Somehow, though, the giant Clytius unnerved Hazel more.

He stood in the background, silent and motionless except for the dark smoke pouring from his body, pooling around his feet. *He* was the cold presence Hazel

had felt earlier—like a vast deposit of obsidian, so heavy that Hazel couldn't possibly move it, powerful and indestructible and completely devoid of emotion.

“Your—your friend doesn't say much,” Hazel noted.

Pasiphaë looked back at the giant and sniffed with disdain. “Pray he stays silent, my dear. Gaea has given me the pleasure of dealing with you; but Clytius is my, ah, insurance. Just between you and me, as sister sorceresses, I think he's also here to keep my powers in check, in case I forget my new mistress's orders. Gaea is careful that way.”

Hazel was tempted to protest that she wasn't a sorceress. She didn't want to know how Pasiphaë planned to “deal” with them, or how the giant kept her magic in check. But she straightened her back and tried to look confident.

“Whatever you're planning,” Hazel said, “it won't work. We've cut through every monster Gaea's put in our path. If you're smart, you'll get out of our way.” Gale the polecat gnashed her teeth in approval, but Pasiphaë didn't seem impressed.

“You don't look like much,” the sorceress mused. “But then you demigods never do. My husband, Minos, king of Crete? He was a son of Zeus. You would never have known it by looking at him. He was almost as scrawny as that one.” She flicked a hand toward Leo.

“Wow,” muttered Leo. “Minos must've done something really horrible to deserve *you*.” Pasiphaë's nostrils flared. “Oh...you have no *idea*. He was too proud to make the proper sacrifices to Poseidon, so the gods punished *me* for his arrogance.”

“The Minotaur,” Hazel suddenly remembered.

The story was so revolting and grotesque Hazel had always shut her ears when they told it at Camp Jupiter. Pasiphaë had been cursed to fall in love with her husband's prize bull. She'd given birth to the Minotaur—half man, half bull.

Now, as Pasiphaë glared daggers at her, Hazel realized why her expression was so familiar.

The sorceress had the same bitterness and hatred in her eyes that Hazel's mother

sometimes had.

In her worst moments, Marie Levesque would look at Hazel as if *Hazel* were a monstrous child, a curse from the gods, the source of all Marie's problems. That's why the Minotaur story bothered Hazel—not just the repellent idea of Pasiphaë and the bull, but the idea that a child, *any* child, could be considered a monster, a punishment to its parents, to be locked away and hated. To Hazel, the Minotaur had always seemed like a victim in the story.

“Yes,” Pasiphaë said at last. “My disgrace was unbearable. After my son was born and locked in the Labyrinth, Minos refused to have anything to do with me. He said I had ruined *his* reputation!

And do you know what happened to Minos, Hazel Levesque? For his crimes and his pride? He was *rewarded*. He was made a judge of the dead in the Underworld, as if he had any right to judge others!

Hades gave him that position. *Your father.*”

“Pluto, actually.”

Pasiphaë sneered. “Irrelevant. So you see, I hate demigods as much as I hate the gods. Any of your brethren who survive the war, Gaea has promised to me, so that I may watch them die slowly in my new domain. I only wish I had more time to torture you two properly. Alas—” In the center of the room, the Doors of Death made a pleasant chiming sound. The green UP

button on the right side of the frame began to glow. The chains shook.

“There, you see?” Pasiphaë shrugged apologetically. “The Doors are in use. Twelve minutes, and they will open.”

Hazel's gut trembled almost as much as the chains. “More giants?”

“Thankfully, no,” said the sorceress. “They are all accounted for—back in the mortal world and in place for the final assault.” Pasiphaë gave her a cold smile. “No, I would imagine the Doors are being used by someone else...someone unauthorized.”

Leo inched forward. Smoke rose from his fists. “Percy and Annabeth.” Hazel

couldn't speak. She wasn't sure whether the lump in her throat was from joy or frustration.

If their friends had made it to the Doors, if they were really going to show up here in twelve minutes...

"Oh, not to worry." Pasiphaë waved her hand dismissively. "Clytius will handle them. You see, when the chime sounds again, someone on *our* side needs to push the UP button or the Doors will fail to open and whoever is inside—*poof*. Gone. Or perhaps Clytius will let them out and deal with them in person. That depends on *you* two."

Hazel's mouth tasted like tin. She didn't want to ask, but she had to. "How exactly does it depend on us?"

"Well, obviously, we need only one set of demigods alive," Pasiphaë said. "The lucky two will be taken to Athens and sacrificed to Gaea at the Feast of Hope."

"Obviously," Leo muttered.

"So will it be you two, or your friends in the elevator?" The sorceress spread her hands. "Let's see who is still alive in twelve...actually, eleven minutes, now." The cavern dissolved into darkness.

L X X I V

H A Z E L

HAZEL'S INTERNAL COMPASS SPUN WILDLY.

She remembered when she was very small, in New Orleans in the late 1930s, her mother had taken her to the dentist to get a bad tooth pulled. It was the first and only time Hazel had ever received ether. The dentist promised it would make her sleepy and relaxed, but Hazel felt like she was floating away from her own body, panicky and out of control. When the ether wore off, she'd been sick for three days.

This felt like a massive dose of ether.

Part of her knew she was still in the cavern. Pasiphaë stood only a few feet in front of them.

Clytius waited silently at the Doors of Death.

But layers of Mist enfolded Hazel, twisting her sense of reality. She took one step forward and bumped into a wall that shouldn't have been there.

Leo pressed his hands against the stone. "What the heck? Where are we?" A corridor stretched out to their left and right. Torches guttered in iron sconces. The air smelled of mildew, as in an old tomb. On Hazel's shoulder, Gale barked angrily, digging her claws into Hazel's collarbone.

"Yes, I know," Hazel muttered to the weasel. "It's an illusion." Leo pounded on the wall. "Pretty solid illusion."

Pasiphaë laughed. Her voice sounded watery and far away. "Is it an illusion, Hazel Levesque, or something more? Don't you see what I have created?"

Hazel felt so off-balance she could barely stand, much less think straight. She tried to extend her senses, to see through the Mist and find the cavern again, but all she felt were tunnels splitting off in a dozen directions, going everywhere *except* forward.

Random thoughts glinted in her mind, like gold nuggets coming to the surface: *Daedalus. The Minotaur locked away. Die slowly in my new domain.*

"The Labyrinth," Hazel said. "She's remaking the Labyrinth."

“*What* now?” Leo had been tapping the wall with a ball-peen hammer, but he turned and frowned at her. “I thought the Labyrinth collapsed during that battle at Camp Half-Blood—like, it was connected to Daedalus’s life force or something, and then he died.” Pasiphaë’s voice clucked disapprovingly. “Ah, but *I* am still alive. You credit Daedalus with all the maze’s secrets? *I* breathed magical life into his Labyrinth. Daedalus was nothing compared to me

—the immortal sorceress, daughter of Helios, sister of Circe! Now the Labyrinth will be *my* domain.”

“It’s an illusion,” Hazel insisted. “We just have to break through it.” Even as she said it, the walls seemed to grow more solid, the smell of mildew more intense.

“Too late, too late,” Pasiphaë crooned. “The maze is already awake. It will spread under the skin of the earth once more while your mortal world is leveled. You demigods...you *heroes*... will wander its corridors, dying slowly of thirst and fear and misery. Or perhaps, if I am feeling merciful, you will die quickly, in great pain!”

Holes opened in the floor beneath Hazel’s feet. She grabbed Leo and pushed him aside as a row of spikes shot upward, impaling the ceiling.

“Run!” she yelled.

Pasiphaë’s laughter echoed down the corridor. “Where are you going, young sorceress? Running from an illusion?”

Hazel didn’t answer. She was too busy trying to stay alive. Behind them, row after row of spikes shot toward the ceiling with a persistent *thunk, thunk, thunk*.

She pulled Leo down a side corridor, leaped over a trip wire, then stumbled to a halt in front of a pit twenty feet across.

“How deep is that?” Leo gasped for breath. His pants leg was ripped where one of the spikes had grazed him.

Hazel’s senses told her that the pit was at least fifty feet straight down, with a pool of poison at the bottom. Could she trust her senses? Whether or not Pasiphaë had created a new Labyrinth, Hazel believed they were still in the same cavern, being made to run aimlessly back and forth while Pasiphaë and Clytius

watched in amusement. Illusion or not: unless Hazel could figure out how to get out of this maze, the traps would kill them.

“Eight minutes now,” said the voice of Pasiphaë. “I’d love to see you survive, truly. That would prove you worthy sacrifices to Gaea in Athens. But then, of course, we wouldn’t need your friends in the elevator.”

Hazel’s heart pounded. She faced the wall to her left. Despite what her senses told her, that *should* be the direction of the Doors. Pasiphaë should be right in front of her.

Hazel wanted to burst through the wall and throttle the sorceress. In eight minutes, she and Leo needed to be at the Doors of Death to let their friends out.

But Pasiphaë was an immortal sorceress with thousands of years of experience in weaving spells. Hazel couldn’t defeat her through sheer willpower. She’d managed to fool the bandit Sciron by showing him what he expected to see. Hazel needed to figure out what Pasiphaë wanted most.

“Seven minutes now,” Pasiphaë lamented. “If only we had more time! So many indignities I’d like you to suffer.”

That was it, Hazel realized. She had to run the gauntlet. She had to make the maze *more* dangerous, *more* spectacular—make Pasiphaë focus on the traps rather than the direction the Labyrinth was leading.

“Leo, we’re going to jump,” Hazel said.

“But—”

“It’s not as far as it looks. Go!” She grabbed his hand and they launched themselves across the pit. When they landed, Hazel looked back and saw no pit at all—just a three-inch crack in the floor.

“Come on!” she urged.

They ran as the voice of Pasiphaë droned on. “Oh, dear, no. You’ll never survive *that* way. Six minutes.”

The ceiling above them cracked apart. Gale the weasel squeaked in alarm, but

Hazel imagined a new tunnel leading off to the left—a tunnel even more dangerous, going the wrong direction. The Mist softened under her will. The tunnel appeared, and they dashed to one side.

Pasiphaë sighed with disappointment. “You really aren’t very good at this, my dear.” But Hazel felt a spark of hope. She’d created a tunnel. She’d driven a small wedge into the magic fabric of the Labyrinth.

The floor collapsed under them. Hazel jumped to one side, dragging Leo with her. She imagined another tunnel, veering back the way they’d come, but full of poisonous gas. The maze obliged.

“Leo, hold your breath,” she warned.

They plunged through the toxic fog. Hazel’s eyes felt like they were being rinsed in pepper juice, but she kept running.

“Five minutes,” Pasiphaë said. “Alas! If only I could watch you suffer longer.” They burst into a corridor with fresh air. Leo coughed. “If only she would shut up.” They ducked under a bronze garrote wire. Hazel imagined the tunnel curving back toward Pasiphaë, ever so slightly. The Mist bent to her will.

The walls of the tunnel began to close in on either side. Hazel didn’t try to stop them. She made them close faster, shaking the floor and cracking the ceiling. She and Leo ran for their lives, following the curve as it brought them closer to what she hoped was the center of the room.

“A pity,” said Pasiphaë. “I wish I could kill you *and* your friends in the elevator, but Gaea has insisted that two of you must be kept alive until the Feast of Hope, when your blood will be put to good use! Ah, well. I will have to find other victims for my Labyrinth. You two have been second-rate failures.”

Hazel and Leo stumbled to a stop. In front of them stretched a chasm so wide, Hazel couldn’t see the other side. From somewhere below in the darkness came the sound of hissing—thousands and thousands of snakes.

Hazel was tempted to retreat, but the tunnel was closing behind them, leaving them stranded on a tiny ledge. Gale the weasel paced across Hazel’s shoulders and farted with anxiety.

“Okay, okay,” Leo muttered. “The walls are moving parts. They gotta be mechanical. Give me a second.”

“No, Leo,” Hazel said. “There’s no way back.”

“But—”

“Hold my hand,” she said. “On three.”

“But—”

“Three!”

“*What?*”

Hazel leaped into the pit, pulling Leo with her. She tried to ignore his screaming and the flatulent weasel clinging to her neck. She bent all her will into redirecting the magic of the Labyrinth.

Pasiphaë laughed with delight, knowing that any moment they would be crushed or bitten to death in a pit of snakes.

Instead, Hazel imagined a chute in the darkness, just to their left. She twisted in midair and fell toward it. She and Leo hit the chute hard and slid into the cavern, landing right on top of Pasiphaë.

“Ack!” The sorceress’s head smacked against the floor as Leo sat down hard on her chest.

For a moment, the three of them and the weasel were a pile of sprawling bodies and flailing limbs. Hazel tried to draw her sword, but Pasiphaë managed to extricate herself first. The sorceress backed away, her hairdo bent sideways like a collapsed cake. Her dress was smeared with grease stains from Leo’s tool belt.

“You *miserable* wretches!” she howled.

The maze was gone. A few feet away, Clytius stood with his back to them, watching the Doors of Death. By Hazel’s calculation, they had about thirty seconds until their friends arrived. Hazel felt exhausted from her run through the maze while controlling the Mist, but she needed to pull off one more trick.

She had successfully made Pasiphaë see what she most desired. Now Hazel had to make the sorceress see what she most feared.

“You must really hate demigods,” Hazel said, trying to mimic Pasiphaë’s cruel smile. “We always get the best of you, don’t we, Pasiphaë?”

“Nonsense!” screamed Pasiphaë. “I will tear you apart! I will—”

“We’re always pulling the rug out from under your feet,” Hazel sympathized. “Your husband betrayed you. Theseus killed the Minotaur and stole your daughter Ariadne. Now two second-rate failures have turned your own maze against you. But you knew it would come to this, didn’t you? You always fall in the end.”

“I am immortal!” Pasiphaë wailed. She took a step back, fingering her necklace. “You cannot stand against me!”

“You can’t stand at all,” Hazel countered. “Look.”

She pointed at the feet of the sorceress. A trapdoor opened underneath Pasiphaë. She fell, screaming, into a bottomless pit that didn’t really exist.

The floor solidified. The sorceress was gone.

Leo stared at Hazel in amazement. “How did you—”

Just then the elevator dinged. Rather than pushing the UP button, Clytius stepped back from the controls, keeping their friends trapped inside.

“Leo!” Hazel yelled.

They were thirty feet away—much too far to reach the elevator—but Leo pulled out a screwdriver and chucked it like a throwing knife. An impossible shot. The screwdriver spun straight past Clytius and slammed into the UP button.

The Doors of Death opened with a hiss. Black smoke billowed out, and two bodies spilled face-first onto the floor—Percy and Annabeth, limp as corpses.

Hazel sobbed. “Oh, gods...”

She and Leo started forward, but Clytius raised his hand in an unmistakable gesture— *stop*. He lifted his massive reptilian foot over Percy’s head.

The giant’s smoky shroud poured over the floor, covering Annabeth and Percy in a pool of dark fog.

“Clytius, you’ve lost,” Hazel snarled. “Let them go, or you’ll end up like Pasiphaë.” The giant tilted his head. His diamond eyes gleamed. At his feet, Annabeth lurched like she’d hit a power line. She rolled on her back, black smoke coiling from her mouth.

“I am not Pasiphaë.” Annabeth spoke in a voice that wasn’t hers—the words as deep as a bass guitar. *“You have won nothing.”*

“Stop that!” Even from thirty feet away, Hazel could sense Annabeth’s life force waning, her pulse becoming thready. Whatever Clytius was doing, pulling words from her mouth—it was killing her.

Clytius nudged Percy’s head with his foot. Percy’s face lolled to one side.

“Not quite dead.” The giant’s words boomed from Percy’s mouth. *“A terrible shock to the mortal body, I would imagine, coming back from Tartarus. They’ll be out for a while.”* He turned his attention back to Annabeth. More smoke poured from between her lips. *“I’ll tie them up and take them to Porphyryon in Athens. Just the sacrifice we need. Unfortunately, that means I have no further use for you two.”*

“Oh, yeah?” Leo growled. “Well, maybe you got the smoke, buddy, but I’ve got the fire.” His hands blazed. He shot white-hot columns of flame at the giant, but Clytius’s smoky aura absorbed them on impact. Tendrils of black haze traveled back up the lines of fire, snuffing out the light and heat and covering Leo in darkness.

Leo fell to his knees, clutching at his throat.

“No!” Hazel ran toward him, but Gale chattered urgently on her shoulder—a clear warning.

“I would not.” Clytius’s voice reverberated from Leo’s mouth. *“You do not understand, Hazel Levesque. I devour magic. I destroy the voice and the soul.”*

You cannot oppose me.” Black fog spread farther across the room, covering Annabeth and Percy, billowing toward Hazel.

Blood roared in Hazel’s ears. She had to act—but how? If that black smoke could incapacitate Leo so quickly, what chance did she have?

“F-fire,” she stammered in a small voice. “You’re supposed to be weak against it.” The giant chuckled, using Annabeth’s vocal cords this time. “*You were counting on that, eh? It is true I do not like fire. But Leo Valdez’s flames are not strong enough to trouble me.*” Somewhere behind Hazel, a soft, lyrical voice said, “What about *my* flames, old friend?” Gale squeaked excitedly and jumped from Hazel’s shoulder, scampering to the entrance of the cavern where a blond woman stood in a black dress, the Mist swirling around her.

The giant stumbled backward, bumping into the Doors of Death.

“*You,*” he said from Percy’s mouth.

“Me,” Hecate agreed. She spread her arms. Blazing torches appeared in her hands. “It has been millennia since I fought at the side of a demigod, but Hazel Levesque has proven herself worthy. What do you say, Clytius? Shall we play with fire?”

L X X V

HAZEL

IF THE GIANT HAD RUN AWAY SCREAMING, Hazel would’ve been

grateful. Then they all could have taken the rest of the day off.

Clytius disappointed her.

When he saw the goddess's torches blazing, the giant seemed to recover his wits. He stomped his foot, shaking the floor and almost stepping on Annabeth's arm. Dark smoke billowed around him until Annabeth and Percy were totally hidden. Hazel could see nothing but the giant's gleaming eyes.

"Bold words." Clytius spoke from Leo's mouth. *"You forget, goddess. When we last met, you had the help of Hercules and Dionysus—the most powerful heroes in the world, both of them destined to become gods. Now you bring...these?"*

Leo's unconscious body contorted in pain.

"Stop it!" Hazel yelled.

She didn't plan what happened next. She simply knew she had to protect her friends. She imagined them behind her, the same way she'd imagined new tunnels appearing in Pasiphaë's Labyrinth. Leo dissolved. He reappeared at Hazel's feet, along with Percy and Annabeth. The Mist whirled around her, spilling over the stones and enveloping her friends. Where the white Mist met the dark smoke of Clytius, it steamed and sizzled, like lava rolling into the sea.

Leo opened his eyes and gasped. "Wh-what...?"

Annabeth and Percy remained motionless, but Hazel could sense their heartbeats getting stronger, their breath coming more evenly.

On Hecate's shoulder, Gale the polecat barked with admiration.

The goddess stepped forward, her dark eyes glittering in the torchlight. "You're right, Clytius.

Hazel Levesque is not Hercules or Dionysus, but I think you will find her just as formidable." Through the smoky shroud, Hazel saw the giant open his mouth. No words came out. Clytius sneered in frustration.

Leo tried to sit up. "What's going on? What can I—"

“Watch Percy and Annabeth.” Hazel drew her *spatha*. “Stay behind me. Stay in the Mist.”

“But—”

The look Hazel gave him must have been more severe than she realized.

Leo gulped. “Yeah, got it. White Mist good. Black smoke bad.” Hazel advanced. The giant spread his arms. The domed ceiling shook, and the giant’s voice echoed through the room, magnified a hundred times.

Formidable? the giant demanded. It sounded as if he were speaking through a chorus of the dead, using all the unfortunate souls who’d been buried behind the dome’s stelae. *Because the girl has learned your magic tricks, Hecate? Because you allow these weaklings to hide in your Mist?*

A sword appeared in the giant’s hand—a Stygian iron blade much like Nico’s, except five times the size. *I do not understand why Gaea would find any of these demigods worthy of sacrifice. I will crush them like empty nutshells.*

Hazel’s fear turned to rage. She screamed. The walls of the chamber made a crackling sound like ice in warm water, and dozens of gems streaked toward the giant, punching through his armor like buckshot.

Clytius staggered backward. His disembodied voice bellowed with pain. His iron breastplate was peppered with holes.

Golden ichor trickled from a wound on his right arm. His shroud of darkness thinned. Hazel could see the murderous expression on his face.

You, Clytius growled. You worthless—

“Worthless?” Hecate asked quietly. “I’d say Hazel Levesque knows a few tricks even *I* could not teach her.”

Hazel stood in front of her friends, determined to protect them, but her energy was fading. Her sword was already heavy in her hand, and she hadn’t even swung it yet. She wished Arion were here.

She could use the horse’s speed and strength. Unfortunately, her equine friend

would not be able to help her this time. He was a creature of the wide-open spaces, not the underground.

The giant dug his fingers into the wound on his biceps. He pulled out a diamond and flicked it aside. The wound closed.

So, daughter of Pluto, Clytius rumbled, do you really believe Hecate has your interests at heart? Circe was a favorite of hers. And Medea. And Pasiphaë. How did they end up, eh?

Behind her, Hazel heard Annabeth stirring, groaning in pain. Percy muttered something that sounded like, “Bob-bob-bob?”

Clytius stepped forward, holding his sword casually at his side as if they were comrades rather than enemies. Hecate will not tell you the truth. She sends acolytes like you to do her bidding and take all the risk. If by some miracle you incapacitate me, only then will she be able to set me on fire. Then she will claim the glory of the kill. You heard how Bacchus dealt with the Alodai twins in the Colosseum. Hecate is worse. She is a Titan who betrayed the Titans. Then she betrayed the gods. Do you really think she will keep faith with you?

Hecate’s face was unreadable.

“I cannot answer his accusations, Hazel,” said the goddess. “This is *your* crossroads. You must choose.”

Yes, crossroads. The giant’s laughter echoed. His wounds seemed to have healed completely.

Hecate offers you obscurity, choices, vague promises of magic. I am the anti-Hecate. I will give you truth. I will eliminate choices and magic. I will strip away the Mist, once and for all, and show you the world in all its true horror.

Leo struggled to his feet, coughing like an asthmatic. “I’m loving this guy,” he wheezed.

“Seriously, we should keep him around for inspirational seminars.” His hands ignited like blowtorches. “Or I could just light him up.”

“Leo, no,” Hazel said. “My father’s temple. My call.”

“Yeah, okay. But—”

“Hazel...” Annabeth wheezed.

Hazel was so elated to hear her friend’s voice that she almost turned, but she knew she shouldn’t take her eyes off Clytius.

“The chains...” Annabeth managed.

Hazel inhaled sharply. She’d been a fool! The Doors of Death were still open, shuddering against the chains that held them in place. Hazel had to cut them free so they would disappear—and finally be beyond Gaea’s reach.

The only problem: a big smoky giant stood in her way.

You can’t seriously believe you have the strength, Clytius chided. *What will you do, Hazel Levesque—pelt me with more rubies? Shower me with sapphires?*

Hazel gave him an answer. She raised her *spatha* and charged.

Apparently, Clytius hadn’t expected her to be quite so suicidal. He was slow raising his sword.

By the time he slashed, Hazel had ducked between his legs and jabbed her Imperial gold blade into his *gluteus maximus*. Not very ladylike. The nuns at St. Agnes would never have approved. But it worked.

Clytius roared and arched his back, waddling away from her. Mist still swirled around Hazel, hissing as it met the giant’s black smoke.

Hazel realized that Hecate *was* assisting her—lending her the strength to keep up a defensive shroud. Hazel also knew that the instant her own concentration wavered and that darkness touched her, she would collapse. If that happened, she wasn’t sure Hecate would be able—or willing—to stop the giant from crushing her and her friends.

Hazel sprinted toward the Doors of Death. Her blade shattered the chains on the left side like they were made of ice. She lunged to the right, but Clytius yelled, *NO!*

By sheer luck, she wasn't cut in half. The flat of the giant's blade caught her in the chest and sent her flying. She slammed into the wall and felt bones crack.

Across the room, Leo screamed her name.

Through her blurry vision, she saw a flash of fire. Hecate stood nearby, her form shimmering as if she were about to dissolve. Her torches seemed to be flickering out, but that might have just been that Hazel was starting to lose consciousness.

She couldn't give up now. She forced herself to stand. Her side felt like it was embedded with razor blades. Her sword lay on the ground about five feet away. She staggered toward it.

"Clytius!" she shouted.

She meant it to sound like a brave challenge, but it came out as more of a croak.

At least it got his attention. The giant turned from Leo and the others. When he saw her limping forward, he laughed.

A good try, Hazel Levesque, Clytius admitted. You did better than I anticipated. But magic alone cannot defeat me, and you do not have sufficient strength. Hecate has failed you, as she fails all of her followers in the end.

The Mist around her was thinning. At the other end of the room, Leo tried to force-feed Percy some ambrosia, though Percy was still pretty much out of it. Annabeth was awake but struggling, barely able to lift her head.

Hecate stood with her torches, watching and waiting—which infuriated Hazel so much, she found one last burst of energy.

She threw her sword—not at the giant, but at the Doors of Death. The chains on the right side shattered. Hazel collapsed in agony, her side burning, as the Doors shuddered and disappeared in a flash of purple light.

Clytius roared so loudly that a half dozen stelae fell from the ceiling and shattered.

"That was for my brother, Nico," Hazel gasped. "And for destroying my father's altar." *You have forfeited your right to a quick death, the giant snarled. I will*

suffocate you in darkness, slowly, painfully. Hecate cannot help you. NO ONE can help you!

The goddess raised her torches. “I would not be so certain, Clytius. Hazel’s friends simply needed a little time to reach her—time you have given them with your boasting and bragging.” Clytius snorted. *What friends? These weaklings? They are no challenge.*

In front of Hazel, the air rippled. The Mist thickened, creating a doorway, and four people stepped through.

Hazel wept with relief. Frank’s arm was bleeding and bandaged, but he was alive. Next to him stood Nico, Piper, and Jason—all with their swords drawn.

“Sorry we’re late,” Jason said. “Is this the guy who needs killing?”

L X X V I

HAZEL

HAZEL ALMOST FELT SORRY FOR CLYTIUS.

They attacked him from every direction—Leo shooting fire at his legs, Frank and Piper jabbing at his chest, Jason flying into the air and kicking him in the face. Hazel was proud to see how well Piper remembered her sword-fighting lessons.

Each time the giant’s smoky veil started creeping around one of them, Nico was

there, slashing through it, drinking in the darkness with his Stygian blade.

Percy and Annabeth were on their feet, looking weak and dazed, but their swords were drawn.

When did Annabeth get a sword? And what was it made of— *ivory*? They looked like they wanted to help, but there was no need. The giant was surrounded.

Clytius snarled, turning back and forth as if he couldn't decide which of them to kill first. *Wait!*

Hold still! No! Ouch!

The darkness around him dispelled completely, leaving nothing to protect him except his battered armor. Ichor oozed from a dozen wounds. The damage healed almost as fast as it was inflicted, but Hazel could tell the giant was tiring.

One last time Jason flew at him, kicking him in the chest, and the giant's breastplate shattered.

Clytius staggered backward. His sword dropped to the floor. He fell to his knees, and the demigods encircled him.

Only then did Hecate step forward, her torches raised. Mist curled around the giant, hissing and bubbling as it touched his skin.

"And so it ends," Hecate said.

It does not end. Clytius's voice echoed from somewhere above, muffled and slurred. *My brethren have risen. Gaea waits only for the blood of Olympus. It took all of you together to defeat me. What will you do when the Earth Mother opens her eyes?*

Hecate turned her torches upside down. She thrust them like daggers at Clytius's head. The giant's hair went up faster than dry tinder, spreading down his head and across his body until the heat of the bonfire made Hazel wince. Clytius fell without a sound, face-first in the rubble of Hades's altar. His body crumbled to ashes.

For a moment, no one spoke. Hazel heard a ragged, painful noise and realized it was her own breathing. Her side felt like it had been kicked in with a battering ram.

The goddess Hecate faced her. “You should go now, Hazel Levesque. Lead your friends out of this place.”

Hazel gritted her teeth, trying to hold in her anger. “Just like that? No ‘thank you’? No ‘good work’?”

The goddess tilted her head. Gale the weasel chittered—maybe a good-bye, maybe a warning—

and disappeared in the folds of her mistress’s skirts.

“You look in the wrong place for gratitude,” Hecate said. “As for ‘good work,’ that remains to be seen. Speed your way to Athens. Clytius was not wrong. The giants have risen— *all* of them, stronger than ever. Gaea is on the very edge of waking. The Feast of Hope will be poorly named unless you arrive to stop her.”

The chamber rumbled. Another stela crashed to the floor and shattered.

“The House of Hades is unstable,” Hecate said. “Leave now. We shall meet again.” The goddess dissolved. The Mist evaporated.

“She’s friendly,” Percy grumbled.

The others turned toward him and Annabeth, as if just realizing they were there.

“Dude.” Jason gave Percy a bear hug.

“Back from Tartarus!” Leo whooped. “That’s my peeps!”

Piper threw her arms around Annabeth and cried.

Frank ran to Hazel. He gently folded his arms around her. “You’re hurt,” he said.

“Ribs probably broken,” she admitted. “But Frank—what happened to your arm?” He managed a smile. “Long story. We’re alive. That’s what matters.” She was so giddy with relief it took her a moment to notice Nico, standing by

himself, his expression full of pain and conflict.

“Hey,” she called to him, beckoning with her good arm.

He hesitated, then came over and kissed her forehead. “I’m glad you’re okay,” he said. “The ghosts were right. Only one of us made it to the Doors of Death. You...you would have made Dad proud.”

She smiled, cupping her hand gently to his face. “We couldn’t have defeated Clytius without you.”

She brushed her thumb under Nico’s eye and wondered if he had been crying. She wanted so badly to understand what was going on with him—what had happened to him over the last few weeks.

After all they’d just been through, Hazel was more grateful than ever to have a brother.

Before she could say that, the ceiling shuddered. Cracks appeared in the remaining tiles.

Columns of dust spilled down.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Jason said. “Uh, Frank...?” Frank shook his head. “I think one favor from the dead is all I can manage today.”

“Wait, what?” Hazel asked.

Piper raised her eyebrows. “Your *unbelievable* boyfriend called in a favor as a child of Mars.

He summoned the spirits of some dead warriors, made them lead us here through...um, well, I’m not sure, actually. The passages of the dead? All I know is that it was *very, very* dark.” To their left, a section of the wall split. Two ruby eyes from a carved stone skeleton popped out and rolled across the floor.

“We’ll have to shadow-travel,” Hazel said.

Nico winced. “Hazel, I can barely manage that with only myself. With seven more people—”

“I’ll help you.” She tried to sound confident. She’d never shadow-traveled before, had no idea if she could; but after working with the Mist, altering the Labyrinth—she had to believe it was possible.

An entire section of tiles peeled loose from the ceiling.

“Everyone, grab hands!” Nico yelled.

They made a hasty circle. Hazel envisioned the Greek countryside above them. The cavern collapsed, and she felt herself dissolving into shadow.

They appeared on the hillside overlooking the River Acheron. The sun was just rising, making the water glitter and the clouds glow orange. The cool morning air smelled of honeysuckle.

Hazel was holding hands with Frank on her left, Nico on her right. They were all alive and mostly whole. The sunlight in the trees was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. She wanted to live in that moment—free of monsters and gods and evil spirits.

Then her friends began to stir.

Nico realized that he was holding Percy’s hand and quickly let go.

Leo staggered backward. “You know...I think I’ll sit down.” He collapsed. The others joined him. The *Argo II* still floated over the river a few hundred yards away. Hazel knew that they should signal Coach Hedge and tell him they were alive. Had they been in the temple all night? Or *several* nights? But at the moment, the group was too tired to do anything except sit and relax and marvel at the fact that they were okay.

They began to exchange stories.

Frank explained what had happened with the ghostly legion and the army of monsters—how Nico had used the scepter of Diocletian, and how bravely Jason and Piper had fought.

“Frank is being modest,” Jason said. “He controlled the entire legion. You should’ve seen him.

Oh, by the way..." Jason glanced at Percy. "I resigned my office, gave Frank a field promotion to praetor. Unless you want to contest that ruling."

Percy grinned. "No argument here."

"*Praetor?*" Hazel stared at Frank.

He shrugged uncomfortably. "Well...yeah. I know it seems weird." She tried to throw her arms around him, then winced as she remembered her busted ribs. She settled for kissing him. "It seems *perfect*."

Leo clapped Frank on the shoulder. "Way to go, Zhang. Now you can order Octavian to fall on his sword."

"Tempting," Frank agreed. He turned apprehensively to Percy. "But, you guys... Tartarus has to be the *real* story. What happened down there? How did you...?" Percy laced his fingers through Annabeth's.

Hazel happened to glance at Nico and saw pain in his eyes. She wasn't sure, but maybe he was thinking how lucky Percy and Annabeth were to have each other. Nico had gone through Tartarus *alone*.

"We'll tell you the story," Percy promised. "But not yet, okay? I'm not ready to remember that place."

"No," Annabeth agreed. "Right now..." She gazed toward the river and faltered. "Uh, I think our ride is coming."

Hazel turned. The *Argo II* veered to port, its aerial oars in motion, its sails catching the wind.

Festus's head glinted in the sunlight. Even from a distance, Hazel could hear him creaking and clanking in jubilation.

"That's my boy!" Leo yelled.

As the ship got closer, Hazel saw Coach Hedge standing at the prow.

"About time!" the coach yelled down. He was doing his best to scowl, but his eyes gleamed as if maybe, just maybe, he was happy to see them. "What took

you so long, cupcakes? You kept your visitor waiting!”

“Visitor?” Hazel murmured.

At the rail next to Coach Hedge, a dark-haired girl appeared wearing a purple cloak, her face so covered with soot and bloody scratches that Hazel almost didn’t recognize her.

Reyna had arrived.

L X X V I I

PERCY

PERCY STARED AT THE ATHENA PARTHENOS, waiting for it to strike him down.

Leo’s new mechanical hoist system had lowered the statue onto the hillside with surprising ease.

Now the forty-foot-tall goddess gazed serenely over the River Acheron, her gold dress like molten metal in the sun.

“Incredible,” Reyna admitted.

She was still red-eyed from crying. Soon after she’d landed on the *Argo II*, her pegasus Scipio had collapsed, overwhelmed by poisoned claw marks from a gryphon attack the night before. Reyna had put the horse out of his misery with

her golden knife, turning the pegasus into dust that scattered in the sweet-smelling Greek air. Maybe not a bad end for a flying horse, but Reyna had lost a loyal friend. Percy figured that she'd given up too much in her life already.

The praetor circled the Athena Parthenos warily. "It looks newly made."

"Yeah," Leo said. "We brushed off the cobwebs, used a little Windex. It wasn't hard." The *Argo II* hovered just overhead. With Festus keeping watch for threats on the radar, the entire crew had decided to eat lunch on the hillside while they discussed what to do. After the last few weeks, Percy figured they'd earned a good meal together—really anything that wasn't fire water or drakon meat soup.

"Hey, Reyna," Annabeth called. "Have some food. Join us." The praetor glanced over, her dark eyebrows furrowed, as if *join us* didn't quite compute. Percy had never seen Reyna without her armor before. It was on board the ship, being repaired by Buford the Wonder Table. She wore a pair of jeans and a purple Camp Jupiter T-shirt and looked almost like a normal teenager—except for the knife at her belt and that guarded expression, like she was ready for an attack from any direction.

"All right," she said finally.

They scooted over to make room for her in the circle. She sat cross-legged next to Annabeth, picked up a cheese sandwich, and nibbled at the edge.

"So," Reyna said. "Frank Zhang...praetor."

Frank shifted, wiping crumbs from his chin. "Well, yeah. Field promotion."

"To lead a different legion," Reyna noted. "A legion of ghosts." Hazel put her arm protectively through Frank's. After an hour in sick bay, they both looked a lot better; but Percy could tell they weren't sure what to think about their old boss from Camp Jupiter dropping in for lunch.

"Reyna," Jason said, "you should've seen him."

"He was *amazing*," Piper agreed.

"Frank is a leader," Hazel insisted. "He makes a great praetor." Reyna's eyes stayed on Frank, like she was trying to guess his weight. "I believe you," she

said.

“I approve.”

Frank blinked. “You do?”

Reyna smiled dryly. “A son of Mars, the hero who helped to bring back the eagle of the legion...

I can work with a demigod like that. I’m just wondering how to convince the Twelfth Fulminata.” Frank scowled. “Yeah. I’ve been wondering the same thing.” Percy still couldn’t get over how much Frank had changed. A “growth spurt” was putting it mildly. He was at least three inches taller, less pudgy, and more bulky, like a linebacker. His face looked sturdier, his jawline more rugged. It was as if Frank had turned into a bull and then back to human, but he’d kept some of the bullishness.

“The legion will listen to you, Reyna,” Frank said. “You made it here alone, across the ancient lands.”

Reyna chewed her sandwich as if it were cardboard. “In doing so, I broke the laws of the legion.”

“Caesar broke the law when he crossed the Rubicon,” Frank said. “Great leaders have to think outside the box sometimes.”

She shook her head. “I’m not Caesar. After finding Jason’s note in Diocletian’s Palace, tracking you down was easy. I only did what I thought was necessary.” Percy couldn’t help smiling. “Reyna, you’re too modest. Flying halfway across the world by yourself to answer Annabeth’s plea, because you knew it was our best chance for peace? That’s pretty freaking heroic.”

Reyna shrugged. “Says the demigod who fell into Tartarus and found his way back.”

“He had help,” Annabeth said.

“Oh, obviously,” Reyna said. “Without you, I doubt Percy could find his way out of a paper bag.”

“True,” Annabeth agreed.

“Hey!” Percy complained.

The others started laughing, but Percy didn’t mind. It felt good to see them smile. Heck, just being in the mortal world felt good, breathing un-poisonous air, enjoying actual sunshine on his back.

Suddenly he thought of Bob. *Tell the sun and stars hello for me.*

Percy’s smile melted. Bob and Damasen had sacrificed their lives so that Percy and Annabeth could sit here now, enjoying the sunlight and laughing with their friends.

It wasn’t fair.

Leo pulled a tiny screwdriver from his tool belt. He stabbed a chocolate-covered strawberry and passed it to Coach Hedge. Then he pulled out another screwdriver and speared a second strawberry for himself.

“So, the twenty-million-peso question,” Leo said. “We got this slightly used forty-foot-tall statue of Athena. What do we do with it?”

Reyna squinted at the Athena Parthenos. “As fine as it looks on this hill, I didn’t come all this way to admire it. According to Annabeth, it must be returned to Camp Half-Blood by a Roman leader.

Do I understand correctly?”

Annabeth nodded. “I had a dream down in...you know, Tartarus. I was on Half-Blood Hill, and Athena’s voice said, *I must stand here. The Roman must bring me.*” Percy studied the statue uneasily. He’d never had the best relationship with Annabeth’s mom. He kept expecting Big Mama Statue to come alive and chew him out for getting her daughter into so much trouble—or maybe just step on him without a word.

“It makes sense,” Nico said.

Percy flinched. It almost sounded like Nico had read his mind and was agreeing that Athena should step on him.

The son of Hades sat at the other end of the circle, eating nothing but half a pomegranate, the fruit of the Underworld. Percy wondered if that was Nico's idea of a joke.

"The statue is a powerful symbol," Nico said. "A Roman returning it to the Greeks...that could heal the historic rift, maybe even heal the gods of their split personalities." Coach Hedge swallowed his strawberry along with half the screwdriver. "Now, hold on. I like peace as much as the next satyr—"

"You *hate* peace," Leo said.

"The point is, Valdez, we're only—what, a few days from Athens? We got an army of giants waiting for us there. We went to all the trouble of saving this statue—"

"I went to most of the trouble," Annabeth reminded him.

"—because that prophecy called it the *giants' bane*," the coach continued. "So why aren't we taking it to Athens with us? It's obviously our secret weapon." He eyed the Athena Parthenos. "It looks like a ballistic missile to me. Maybe if Valdez strapped some engines to it—" Piper cleared her throat. "Uh, great idea, Coach, but a lot of us have had dreams and visions of Gaea rising at Camp Half-Blood..."

She unsheathed her dagger Katoptris and set it on her plate. At the moment, the blade showed nothing except sky, but looking at it still made Percy uncomfortable.

"Since we got back to the ship," Piper said, "I've been seeing some bad stuff in the knife. The Roman legion is almost within striking distance of Camp Half-Blood. They're gathering reinforcements: spirits, eagles, wolves."

"Octavian," Reyna growled. "I *told* him to wait."

"When we take over command," Frank suggested, "our first order of business should be to load Octavian into the nearest catapult and fire him as far away as possible."

"Agreed," Reyna said. "But for now—"

“He’s intent on war,” Annabeth put in. “He’ll have it, unless we stop him.” Piper turned the blade of her knife. “Unfortunately, that’s not the worst of it. I saw images of a possible future—the camp in flames, Roman and Greek demigods lying dead. And Gaea...” Her voice failed her.

Percy remembered the god Tartarus in physical form, looming over him. He’d never felt such helplessness and terror. He still burned with shame, remembering how his sword had slipped out of his hand.

You might as well try to kill the earth, Tartarus had said.

If Gaea was that powerful, and she had an army of giants at her side, Percy didn’t see how seven demigods could stop her, especially when most of the gods were incapacitated. They had to stop the giants *before* Gaea woke, or it was game over.

If the Athena Parthenos was a secret weapon, taking it to Athens was pretty tempting. Heck, Percy kind of liked the coach’s idea of using it as a missile and sending Gaea up in a godly nuclear mushroom cloud.

Unfortunately, his gut told him that Annabeth was right. The statue belonged back on Long Island, where it might be able to stop the war between the two camps.

“So Reyna takes the statue,” Percy said. “And we continue on to Athens.” Leo shrugged. “Cool with me. But, uh, a few pesky logistical problems. We got what—two weeks until that Roman feast day when Gaea is supposed to rise?”

“The Feast of Spes,” Jason said. “That’s on the first of August. Today is—”

“July eighteenth,” Frank offered. “So, yeah, from tomorrow, exactly fourteen days.” Hazel winced. “It took us *eighteen* days to get from Rome to here—a trip that should’ve only taken two or three days, max.”

“So, given our usual luck,” Leo said, “*maybe* we have enough time to get the *Argo II* to Athens, find the giants, and stop them from waking Gaea. *Maybe*. But how is Reyna supposed to get this massive statue back to Camp Half-Blood before the Greeks and Romans put each other through the blender? She doesn’t even have her pegasus anymore. Uh, sorry—”

“Fine,” Reyna snapped. She might be treating them like allies rather than enemies, but Percy could tell Reyna still had a not-so-soft spot for Leo, probably because he’d blown up half the Forum in New Rome.

She took a deep breath. “Unfortunately, Leo is correct. I don’t see how I can transport something so large. I was assuming—well, I was hoping you all would have an answer.”

“The Labyrinth,” Hazel said. “I—I mean, if Pasiphaë really has reopened it, and I think she *has*...” She looked at Percy apprehensively. “Well, you said the Labyrinth could take you anywhere.

So maybe—”

“No.” Percy and Annabeth spoke in unison.

“Not to shoot you down, Hazel,” Percy said. “It’s just...” He struggled to find the right words. How could he describe the Labyrinth to someone who’d never explored it? Daedalus had created it to be a living, growing maze. Over the centuries it had spread like the roots of a tree under the entire surface of the world. Sure, it could take you anywhere.

Distance inside was meaningless. You could enter the maze in New York, walk ten feet, and exit the maze in Los Angeles—but only if you found a reliable way to navigate. Otherwise the Labyrinth would trick you and try to kill you at every turn. When the tunnel network collapsed after Daedalus died, Percy had been relieved. The idea that the maze was regenerating itself, honeycombing its way under the earth again and providing a spacious new home for monsters...that didn’t make him happy.

He had enough problems already.

“For one thing,” he said, “the passages in the Labyrinth are way too small for the Athena Parthenos. There’s no chance you could take it down there—”

“And even if the maze *is* reopening,” Annabeth continued, “we don’t know what it might be like now. It was dangerous enough before, under Daedalus’s control, and he wasn’t evil. If Pasiphaë has remade the Labyrinth the way she wanted...” She shook her head. “Hazel, *maybe* your underground senses could guide Reyna through, but no one else would stand a chance. And we need you here.

Besides, if you got lost down there—”

“You’re right,” Hazel said glumly. “Never mind.”

Reyna cast her eyes around the group. “Other ideas?”

“I could go,” Frank offered, not sounding very happy about it. “If I’m a praetor, I *should* go.

Maybe we could rig some sort of sled, or—”

“No, Frank Zhang.” Reyna gave him a weary smile. “I hope we will work side by side in the future, but for now your place is with the crew of this ship. You are one of the seven of the prophecy.”

“I’m not,” Nico said.

Everybody stopped eating. Percy stared across the circle at Nico, trying to decide if he was joking.

Hazel set down her fork. “Nico—”

“I’ll go with Reyna,” he said. “I can transport the statue with shadow-travel.”

“Uh...” Percy raised his hand. “I mean, I know you just got all eight of us to the surface, and that was awesome. But a year ago you said transporting just *yourself* was dangerous and unpredictable. A couple of times you ended up in China. Transporting a forty-foot statue and two people halfway across the world —”

“I’ve changed since I came back from Tartarus.” Nico’s eyes glittered with anger—more intensely than Percy understood. He wondered if he’d done something to offend the guy.

“Nico,” Jason intervened, “we’re not questioning your power. We just want to make sure you don’t kill yourself trying.”

“I can do it,” he insisted. “I’ll make short jumps—a few hundred miles each time. It’s true, after each jump I won’t be in any shape to fend off monsters. I’ll need Reyna to defend me and the statue.” Reyna had an excellent poker face.

She studied the group, scanning their faces, but betraying none of her own thoughts. “Any objections?”

No one spoke.

“Very well,” she said, with the finality of a judge. If she had a gavel, Percy suspected she would have banged it. “I see no better option. But there will be *many* monster attacks. I would feel better taking a third person. That’s the optimal number for a quest.”

“Coach Hedge,” Frank blurted.

Percy stared at him, not sure he’d heard correctly. “Uh, what, Frank?”

“The coach is the best choice,” Frank said. “The *only* choice. He’s a good fighter. He’s a certified protector. He’ll get the job done.”

“A faun,” Reyna said.

“Satyr!” barked the coach. “And, yeah, I’ll go. Besides, when you get to Camp Half-Blood, you’ll need somebody with connections and diplomatic skills to keep the Greeks from attacking you.

Just let me go make a call—er, I mean, get my baseball bat.” He got up and shot Frank an unspoken message that Percy couldn’t quite read. Despite the fact that he’d just been volunteered for a likely suicide mission, the coach looked *grateful*. He jogged off toward the ship’s ladder, tapping his hooves together like an excited kid.

Nico rose. “I should go, too, and rest before the first passage. We’ll meet at the statue at sunset.” Once he was gone, Hazel frowned. “He’s acting strangely. I’m not sure he’s thinking this through.”

“He’ll be okay,” Jason said.

“I hope you’re right.” She passed her hand over the ground. Diamonds broke the surface—a glittering milky way of stones. “We’re at another crossroads. The Athena Parthenos goes west. The *Argo II* goes east. I hope we chose correctly.”

Percy wished he could say something encouraging, but he felt unsettled. Despite

all they'd been through and all the battles they'd won, they still seemed no closer to defeating Gaea. Sure, they'd released Thanatos. They'd closed the Doors of Death. At least now they could kill monsters and make them *stay* in Tartarus for a while. But the giants were back— *all* the giants.

“One thing bothers me,” he said. “If the Feast of Spes is in two weeks, and Gaea needs the blood of two demigods to wake—what did Clytius call it? The blood of Olympus?—then aren't we doing exactly what Gaea wants, heading to Athens? If we don't go, and she can't sacrifice any of us, doesn't that mean she can't wake up fully?”

Annabeth took his hand. He drank in the sight of her now that they were back in the mortal world, without the Death Mist, her blond hair catching the sunlight—even if she was still thin and wan, like him, and her gray eyes were stormy with thought.

“Percy, prophecies cut both ways,” she said. “If we *don't* go, we may lose our best and only chance to stop her. Athens is where our battle lies. We can't avoid it. Besides, trying to thwart prophecies never works. Gaea could capture us somewhere else, or spill the blood of some other demigods.”

“Yeah, you're right,” Percy said. “I don't like it, but you're right.” The mood of the group became as gloomy as Tartarus air, until Piper broke the tension.

“Well!” She sheathed her blade and patted her cornucopia. “Good picnic. Who wants dessert?”

L X X V I I I

PERCY

AT SUNSET, PERCY FOUND NICO tying ropes around the pedestal of the Athena Parthenos.

“Thank you,” Percy said.

Nico frowned. “What for?”

“You promised to lead the others to the House of Hades,” Percy said. “You did it.” Nico tied the ends of the ropes together, making a halter. “You got me out of that bronze jar in Rome. Saved my life yet again. It was the least I could do.” His voice was steely, guarded. Percy wished he could figure out what made this guy tick, but he’d never been able to. Nico was no longer the geeky kid from Westover Hall with the Mythomagic cards. Nor was he the angry loner who’d followed the ghost of Minos through the Labyrinth. But who was he?

“Also,” Percy said, “you visited Bob...”

He told Nico about their trip through Tartarus. He figured if anyone could understand, Nico could. “You convinced Bob that I could be trusted, even though *I* never visited him. I never gave him a second thought. You probably saved our lives by being nice to him.”

“Yeah, well,” Nico said, “not giving people a second thought...that can be dangerous.”

“Dude, I’m trying to say thank you.”

Nico laughed without humor. “I’m trying to say you don’t need to. Now I need to finish this, if you could give me some space?”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay.” Percy stepped back while Nico took up the slack on his ropes. He slipped them over his shoulders as if the Athena Parthenos were a giant backpack.

Percy couldn’t help feeling a little hurt, being told to take a hike. Then again, Nico had been through a lot. The guy had survived in Tartarus on his own. Percy understood firsthand just how much strength that must have taken.

Annabeth walked up the hill to join them. She took Percy’s hand, which made him feel better.

“Good luck,” she told Nico.

“Yeah.” He didn’t meet her eyes. “You too.”

A minute later, Reyna and Coach Hedge arrived in full armor with packs over their shoulders.

Reyna looked grim and ready for combat. Coach Hedge grinned like he was expecting a surprise party.

Reyna gave Annabeth a hug. “We will succeed,” she promised.

“I know you will,” Annabeth said.

Coach Hedge shouldered his baseball bat. “Yeah, don’t worry. I’m going to get to camp and see my baby! Uh, I mean I’m going to get this baby to camp!” He patted the leg of the Athena Parthenos.

“All right,” said Nico. “Grab the ropes, please. Here we go.” Reyna and Hedge took hold. The air darkened. The Athena Parthenos collapsed into its own shadow and disappeared, along with its three escorts.

The *Argo II* sailed after nightfall.

They veered southwest until they reached the coast, then splashed down in the Ionian Sea. Percy was relieved to feel the waves beneath him again.

It would have been a shorter trip to Athens over land, but after the crew's experience with mountain spirits in Italy, they'd decided not to fly over Gaea's territory any more than they had to.

They would sail around the Greek mainland, following the routes that Greek heroes had taken in the ancient times.

That was fine with Percy. He loved being back in his father's element—with the fresh sea air in his lungs and the salty spray on his arms. He stood at the starboard rail and closed his eyes, sensing the currents beneath them. But images of Tartarus kept burning in his mind—the River Phlegethon, the blistered ground where monsters regenerated, the dark forest where *arai* circled overhead in the blood-mist clouds. Most of all, he thought about a hut in the swamp with a warm fire and racks of drying herbs and drakon jerky. He wondered if that hut was empty now.

Annabeth pressed next to him at the rail, her warmth reassuring.

"I know," she murmured, reading his expression. "I can't get that place out of my head, either."

"Damasen," Percy said. "And Bob..."

"I know." Her voice was fragile. "We have to make their sacrifice worth it. We have to beat Gaea."

Percy stared into the night sky. He wished they were looking at it from the beach on Long Island rather than from halfway around the world, sailing toward almost certain death.

He wondered where Nico, Reyna, and Hedge were now, and how long it would take them to make it back—assuming they survived. He imagined the Romans drawing up battle lines right now, encircling Camp Half-Blood.

Fourteen days to reach Athens. Then one way or another, the war would be decided.

Over in the bow, Leo whistled happily as he tinkered with Festus's mechanical brain, muttering something about a crystal and an astrolabe. Amidships, Piper and Hazel practiced their swordplay, gold and bronze blades ringing in the night. Jason and Frank stood at the helm, talking in low tones—

maybe telling stories of the legion, or sharing thoughts on being praetor.

“We've got a good crew,” Percy said. “If I have to sail to my death—”

“You're not dying on me, Seaweed Brain,” Annabeth said. “Remember? Never separated again.

And after we get home...”

“What?” Percy asked.

She kissed him. “Ask me again, once we defeat Gaea.”

He smiled, happy to have something to look forward to. “Whatever you say.” As they sailed farther from the coast, the sky darkened and more stars came out.

Percy studied the constellations—the ones Annabeth had taught him so many years ago.

“Bob says hello,” he told the stars.

The *Argo II* sailed into the night.

Glossary

Achelous a *potamus*, or river god

Aegis Thalia Grace's terror-inducing shield

Aeolus god of all winds

Akhlys Greek goddess of misery; goddess of poisons; controller of the Death Mist; daughter of Chaos and Night

Alcyoneus the eldest of the giants born to Gaea, destined to fight Pluto **Alodai** twin giants who attempted to storm Mount Olympus by piling three Greek

mountains on top of each other. Ares tried to stop them, but he was defeated and imprisoned in a bronze urn, until Hermes rescued him. Artemis later brought about the giants' destruction when she raced between them in the form of a deer. They both took aim with their spears, but missed and instead struck each other.

Aphrodite the Greek goddess of love and beauty. She was married to Hephaestus, but she loved Ares, the god of war. Roman form: Venus

Aquilo Roman god of the North Wind. Greek form: Boreas **Arachne** a weaver who claimed to have skills superior to Athena's. This angered the goddess, who destroyed Arachne's tapestry and loom. Arachne hung herself, and Athena brought her back to life as a spider.

arai female spirits of curses; wrinkled hags with batlike wings, brass talons, and glowing red eyes; daughters of Nyx (Night)

Archimedes a Greek mathematician, physicist, engineer, inventor, and astronomer who lived between 287–212 BCE and is regarded as one of the leading scientists in classical antiquity; he discovered how to determine the volume of a sphere

Ares the Greek god of war; the son of Zeus and Hera, and half brother to Athena. Roman form: Mars

argentum silver; the name of one of Reyna's two metallic greyhounds that can detect lies

Argo II the fantastical ship built by Leo, which can both sail and fly and has Festus the bronze dragon as its figurehead. The ship was named after the *Argo*, the vessel used by a band of Greek heroes who accompanied Jason on his quest to find the Golden Fleece.

Argonauts in Greek mythology, a band of heroes who sailed with Jason on the *Argo*, in search of the Golden Fleece

Ariadne a daughter of Minos who helped Theseus escape from the Labyrinth

Arion an incredibly fast magical horse that runs wild and free, but occasionally answers Hazel's summons; his favorite snack is gold nuggets

astrolabe an instrument used to navigate based on the position of planets and

stars **Athena** the Greek goddess of wisdom. Roman form: Minerva **Athena Parthenos** a giant statue of Athena, the most famous Greek statue of all time **augury** a sign of something coming, an omen; the practice of divining the future

aurum gold; the name of one of Reyna's two metallic greyhounds that can detect lies **Auster** Roman god of the South Wind. Greek form: Notus **Bacchus** the Roman god of wine and revelry. Greek form: Dionysus **ballista** (**ballistae**, pl.) a Roman missile siege weapon that launched a large projectile at a distant target (*see also scorpion ballista*)

barracks the living quarters of Roman soldiers

Bellona a Roman goddess of war

Boreads Calais and Zethes, sons of Boreas, god of the North Wind **Boreas** god of the North Wind. Roman form: Aquilo

braccae Latin for *trousers*

Bunker Nine a hidden workshop Leo discovered at Camp Half-Blood, filled with tools and weapons. It is at least two hundred years old and was used during the Demigod Civil War.

Cadmus a demigod whom Ares turned into a snake when Cadmus killed his dragon son **Calypso** the goddess nymph of the mythical island of Ogygia; a daughter of the Titan Atlas. She detained the hero Odysseus for many years.

Camp Half-Blood the training ground for Greek demigods, located on Long Island, New York **Camp Jupiter** the training ground for Roman demigods, located between the Oakland Hills and the Berkeley Hills, in California

catapult a military machine used to hurl objects

Celestial bronze a rare metal deadly to monsters

centaur a race of creatures that is half human, half horse **centurion** an officer of the Roman army

Ceres the Roman goddess of agriculture. Greek form: Demeter **charmspeak** a blessing bestowed by Aphrodite on her children that enables them to persuade

others with their voice

chiton a Greek garment; a sleeveless piece of linen or wool secured at the shoulders by brooches and at the waist by a belt

Circe a Greek goddess of magic

Clytius a giant created by Gaea to absorb and defeat all of Hecate's magic
Cocytus the River of Lamentation in Tartarus, made of pure misery
cohort one of ten divisions in a Roman legion; a group of soldiers
Colosseum an elliptical amphitheater in the center of Rome, Italy. Capable of seating fifty thousand spectators, the Colosseum was used for gladiatorial contests and public spectacles, such as mock sea battles, animal hunts, executions, reenactments of famous battles, and dramas.

cornucopia a large horn-shaped container overflowing with edibles or wealth in some form. The cornucopia was created when Heracles (Roman: Hercules) wrestled with the river god Achelous and wrenched off one of his horns.

Cupid Roman god of love. Greek form: Eros

Cyclops a member of a primordial race of giants (**Cyclopes**, pl.), each with a single eye in the middle of his or her forehead

Daedalus in Greek mythology, a skilled craftsman who created the Labyrinth on Crete in which the Minotaur (part man, part bull) was kept

Damascus giant son of Tartarus and Gaea; created to oppose Ares; condemned to Tartarus for slaying a drakon that was ravaging the land

Demeter the Greek goddess of agriculture; a daughter of the Titans Rhea and Kronos. Roman form: Ceres

denarius (denarii, pl.) the most common coin in the Roman currency system

Diocletian the last great pagan emperor, and the first to retire peacefully; a demigod (son of Jupiter).

According to legend, his scepter could raise a ghost army.

Diomedes a principal Greek hero in the Trojan War
Dionysus the Greek god of

wine and revelry; a son of Zeus. Roman form: Bacchus **Doors of Death** the doorway to the House of Hades, located in Tartarus. The Doors have two sides—one in the mortal world and one in the Underworld.

drachma the silver coin of Ancient Greece

drakon a gigantic yellow and green serpent-like monster, with frills around its neck, reptilian eyes, and huge talons; it spits poison

dryads tree nymphs

Earthborn *Gegenees* in Greek; monsters that wear only a loincloth and have six arms

eidolons possessing spirits

Elysium the section of the Underworld where those who are blessed by the gods are sent to rest in eternal peace after death

empousa a vampire with fangs, claws, a bronze left leg, a donkey right leg, hair made of fire, and skin as white as bone. **Empousai** [pl.] have the ability to manipulate the Mist, change shape, and charmspeak in order to attract their mortal victims.

Epirus a region presently in northwestern Greece and southern Albania **Eris** goddess of strife

Eros Greek god of love. Roman form: Cupid

faun a Roman forest god, part goat and part man. Greek form: satyr **Favonius** Roman god of the West Wind. Greek form: Zephyros **Fields of Asphodel** the section of the Underworld where people who lived neither a good nor a bad life are sent after death

Fields of Punishment the section of the Underworld where people who were evil during their lives are sent after death to face eternal punishment for their crimes **Furies** Roman goddesses of vengeance; usually characterized as three sisters—Alecto, Tisiphone, and Megaera; the children of Gaia and Uranus. They reside in the Underworld, tormenting evildoers and sinners. Greek form: the

Erinyes

Gaea the Greek earth goddess; mother of Titans, giants, Cyclopes, and other monsters. Roman form: Terra

Geras god of old age

Geryon a monster with three bodies that was slain by Heracles/Hercules

gladius a short sword

Graecus the word Romans used for *Greek greaves* shin armor

Greek fire an incendiary weapon used in naval battles because it can continue burning in water

gris-gris In this New Orleans Voodoo practice named after the French word for gray (*gris*), special herbs and other ingredients are combined and put into a small red flannel bag that is worn or stored to restore the balance between the black and white aspects of a person's life.

gryphon a creature with the forequarters (including talons) and wings of an eagle and the hindquarters of a lion

Hades the Greek god of death and riches. Roman form: Pluto **Hannibal** a Carthaginian commander who lived between 247 and 183/182 BCE and is generally considered to be one of the greatest military strategists in history. One of his most famous achievements was marching an army, which included war elephants, from Iberia over the Pyrenees and the Alps into northern Italy.

harpy a winged female creature that snatches things **Hecate** goddess of magic and crossroads; controls the Mist; daughter of Titans Perses and Asteria **Hemera** goddess of day; daughter of Night

Hephaestus the Greek god of fire and crafts and of blacksmiths; the son of Zeus and Hera, and married to Aphrodite. Roman form: Vulcan

Hera the Greek goddess of marriage; Zeus's wife and sister. Roman form: Juno

Heracles the son of Zeus and Alcmene; the strongest of all mortals. Roman form: Hercules **Hercules** the son of Jupiter and Alcmene, who was born with

great strength. Greek form: Heracles **Hermes** Greek god of travelers; guide to spirits of the dead; god of communication. Roman form: Mercury

Hesiod a Greek poet who speculated that it would take nine days to fall to the bottom of Tartarus **Horatius** a Roman general who single-handedly held off a horde of invaders, sacrificing himself on a bridge to keep the barbarians from crossing the Tiber River. By giving his fellow Romans time to finish their defenses, he saved the Republic.

House of Hades a place in the Underworld where Hades, the Greek god of death, and his wife, Persephone, rule over the souls of the departed; an old temple in Epirus in Greece **Hyperion** one of the twelve Titans; Titan lord of the east **Hypnos** Greek god of sleep. Roman form: Somnus

hypogeum the area under a coliseum that housed set pieces and machinery used for special effects **Iapetus** one of the twelve Titans; lord of the west; his name means *the Piercer*. When Percy fought him in Hades's realm, Iapetus fell into the River Lethe and lost his memory; Percy renamed him Bob.

ichor the golden fluid that is the blood of gods and immortals **Imperial gold** a rare metal deadly to monsters, consecrated at the Pantheon; its existence was a closely guarded secret of the emperors

Janus Roman god of doorways, beginnings, and transitions; depicted as having two faces, because he looks to the future and to the past

Juno the Roman goddess of women, marriage, and fertility; sister and wife of Jupiter; mother of Mars. Greek form: Hera

Jupiter the Roman king of the gods; also called Jupiter Optimus Maximus (the best and the greatest).

Greek form: Zeus

Kampê a monster with the upper body of a snake-haired woman and the lower body of a drakon; appointed by the Titan Kronos to guard the Cyclopes of Tartarus. Zeus slew her and freed the giants from their prison to aid him in his war against the Titans.

katobleps a cow monster whose name means "down-looker" (*katoblepones*,

pl.). They were accidentally imported to Venice from Africa. They eat poisonous roots that grow by the canals and have a poisonous gaze and poisonous breath.

Katoptris Piper's dagger

Kerkopes a pair of chimpanzee-like dwarfs who steal shiny things and create chaos **Khione** the Greek goddess of snow; daughter of Boreas **Koios** one of the twelve Titans; Titan lord of the north **Krios** one of the twelve Titans; Titan lord of the south **Kronos** the youngest of the twelve Titans; the son of Ouranos and Gaea; the father of Zeus. He killed his father at his mother's bidding. Titan lord of fate, harvest, justice, and time. Roman form: Saturn

Labyrinth an underground maze originally built on the island of Crete by the craftsman Daedalus to hold the Minotaur (part man, part bull)

Laistrygonian giant a monstrous cannibal from the far north **Lar** a house god, ancestral spirit (**Lares**, pl.) **legionnaire** Roman soldier

lemures Roman term for angry ghosts

Leto daughter of the Titan Koios; mother of Artemis and Apollo with Zeus; goddess of motherhood **Lotus Hotel** a casino in Las Vegas where Percy, Annabeth, and Grover lost valuable time during their quest after eating enchanted lotus blossoms

Mansion of Night Nyx's palace

manticore a creature with a human head, a lion's body, and a scorpion's tail **Mars** the Roman god of war; also called Mars Ultor. Patron of the empire; divine father of Romulus and Remus. Greek form: Ares

Medea a follower of Hecate and one of the great sorceresses of the ancient world **Mercury** Roman messenger of the gods; god of trade, profit, and commerce. Greek form: Hermes **Minerva** the Roman goddess of wisdom. Greek form: Athena **Minos** king of Crete; son of Zeus; every year he made King Aegus pick seven boys and seven girls to be sent to the Labyrinth, where they would be eaten by the Minotaur. After his death he became a judge in the Underworld.

Minotaur a monster with the head of a bull on the body of a man **Mist** a magic force that disguises things from mortals **Mount Tamalpais** the site in the Bay

Area (Northern California) where the Titans built a palace **naiads** water nymphs

Necromanteion the Oracle of Death, or House of Hades in Greek; a multileveled temple where people went to consult with the dead

Neptune the Roman god of the sea. Greek form: Poseidon **New Rome** a community near Camp Jupiter where demigods can live together in peace, without interference from mortals or monsters

Notus Greek god of the South Wind. Roman form: Auster

numina montanum Roman mountain god (*montana*, pl). Greek form: *ourae*
nymph a female nature deity who animates nature

nymphaeum a shrine to nymphs

Nyx goddess of night; one of the ancient, firstborn elemental gods **Odysseus** legendary Greek king of Ithaca and the hero of Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*. Roman form: Ulysses

Ogygia the island home—and prison—of the nymph Calypso

ourae Greek for mountain god. Roman form: *numina montanum* **Ouranos** father of the Titans

Pasiphaë the wife of Minos, cursed to fall in love with his prize bull and give birth to the Minotaur (part man, part bull); mistress of magical herbal arts

Pegasus in Greek mythology, a winged divine horse; sired by Poseidon, in his role as horse-god, and foaled by the Gorgon Medusa; the brother of Chrysaor
Periclymenus an Argonaut, the son of two demigods, and the grandson of Poseidon, who granted him the ability to change into various animals

peristyle entrance to an emperor's private residence **Persephone** the Greek queen of the Underworld; wife of Hades; daughter of Zeus and Demeter.

Roman form: Proserpine

phalanx a compact body of heavily armed troops

Phlegethon the River of Fire that flows from Hades's realm down into Tartarus; it keeps the wicked alive so they can endure the torments of the Fields of Punishment

pilum (*pila*, pl.) a javelin used by the Roman army **Pluto** the Roman god of death and riches. Greek form: Hades **Polybotes** the giant son of Gaea, the Earth Mother **Polyphemus** the gigantic one-eyed son of Poseidon and Thoosa; one of the Cyclopes **Porphyron** the king of the giants in Greek and Roman mythology **Poseidon** the Greek god of the sea; son of the Titans Kronos and Rhea, and brother of Zeus and Hades. Roman form: Neptune

praetor an elected Roman magistrate and commander of the army **Proserpine** Roman queen of the Underworld. Greek form: Persephone **Psyche** a young mortal woman who fell in love with Eros and was forced by his mother, Aphrodite, to earn her way back to him

quoits a game in which players toss hoops at a stake **Riptide** the name of Percy Jackson's sword; *Anaklusmos* in Greek **River Acheron** the fifth river of the Underworld; the river of pain; the ultimate punishment for the souls of the damned

River Lethe one of several rivers in the Underworld; drinking from it will make someone forget his identity

Romulus and Remus the twin sons of Mars and the priestess Rhea Silvia. They were thrown into the River Tiber by their human father, Amulius, and were rescued and raised by a she-wolf.

Upon reaching adulthood, they founded Rome.

Saturn the Roman god of agriculture; the son of Uranus and Gaea, and the father of Jupiter. Greek form: Kronos

satyr a Greek forest god, part goat and part man. Roman equivalent: faun **Scipio** Reyna's pegasus

Sciron an infamous robber who ambushed passersby and forced them to wash his feet as a toll.

When they knelt, he kicked his victims into the sea, where they were eaten by a

giant turtle.

scorpion ballista a Roman missile siege weapon that launches a large projectile at a distant target

Senatus Populusque Romanus (SPQR) meaning “The Senate and People of Rome,” it refers to the government of the Roman Republic and is used as an official emblem of Rome **shadow-travel** a form of transportation that allows creatures of the Underworld and children of Hades to travel to any desired place on earth or in the Underworld, although it makes the user extremely fatigued

Sibylline Books a collection of prophecies in rhyme written in Greek. Tarquinius Superbus, a king of Rome, bought them from a prophetess named Sibyl and consulted them in times of great danger.

spatha a heavy sword used by Roman cavalry **Spes** goddess of hope; the Feast of Spes, the Day of Hope, falls on August 1

stela (stelae, pl.) an inscribed stone used as a monument **Stygian iron** a magical metal, forged in the River Styx, capable of absorbing the very essence of monsters and injuring mortals, gods, Titans, and giants. It has a significant effect on ghosts and creatures from the Underworld.

Tantalus In Greek mythology, this king was such a good friend of the gods that he was allowed to dine at their table—until he spilled their secrets on earth. He was sent to the Underworld, where his curse was to be stuck in a pool of water under a fruit tree, but never to be able to drink or eat.

Tartarus husband of Gaea; spirit of the abyss; father of the giants **telkhine** a sea demon with flippers instead of hands, and a dog’s head **Tempest** Jason’s friend; a storm spirit in the form of a horse **Terminus** the Roman god of boundaries and landmarks **Terra** the Roman goddess of the Earth. Greek form: Gaea **Thanatos** the Greek god of death; servant of Hades. Roman form: Letus **Theseus** a king of Athens who was known for many exploits, including killing the Minotaur **Three Fates** In Greek mythology, even before there were gods, there were the Fates: Clotho, who spins the thread of life; Lachesis, the measurer, who determines how long a life will be; and Atropos, who cuts the thread of life with her shears.

Tiber River the third-longest river in Italy. Rome was founded on its banks. In Ancient Rome, executed criminals were thrown into the river.

Tiberius was emperor of Rome from 14–37 CE. He was one of Rome’s greatest generals, but he came to be remembered as a reclusive and somber ruler who never really wanted to be emperor.

Titans a race of powerful Greek deities, descendants of Gaea and Uranus, who ruled during the Golden Age and were overthrown by a race of younger gods, the Olympians **Triptolemus** god of farming; he aided Demeter when she was searching for her daughter, Persephone, who was kidnapped by Hades

trireme an Ancient Greek or Roman warship, having three tiers of oars on each side **Trojan Horse** a tale from the Trojan War about a huge wooden horse that the Greeks built and left near Troy with a select force of men inside. After the Trojans pulled the horse into their city as a victory trophy, the Greeks emerged at night, let the rest of their army into Troy, and destroyed it, decisively ending the war.

Trojan War In Greek mythology, the Trojan War was waged against the city of Troy by the Achaeans (Greeks) after Paris of Troy took Helen from her husband, Menelaus, king of Sparta.

venti air spirits

Venus the Roman goddess of love and beauty. She was married to Vulcan, but she loved Mars, the god of war. Greek form: Aphrodite

Vulcan the Roman god of fire and crafts and of blacksmiths; the son of Jupiter and Juno, and married to Venus. Greek form: Hephaestus

Wolf House where Percy Jackson was trained as a Roman demigod by Lupa **Zephyros** Greek god of the West Wind. Roman form: Favonius **Zeus** Greek god of the sky and king of the gods. Roman form: Jupiter

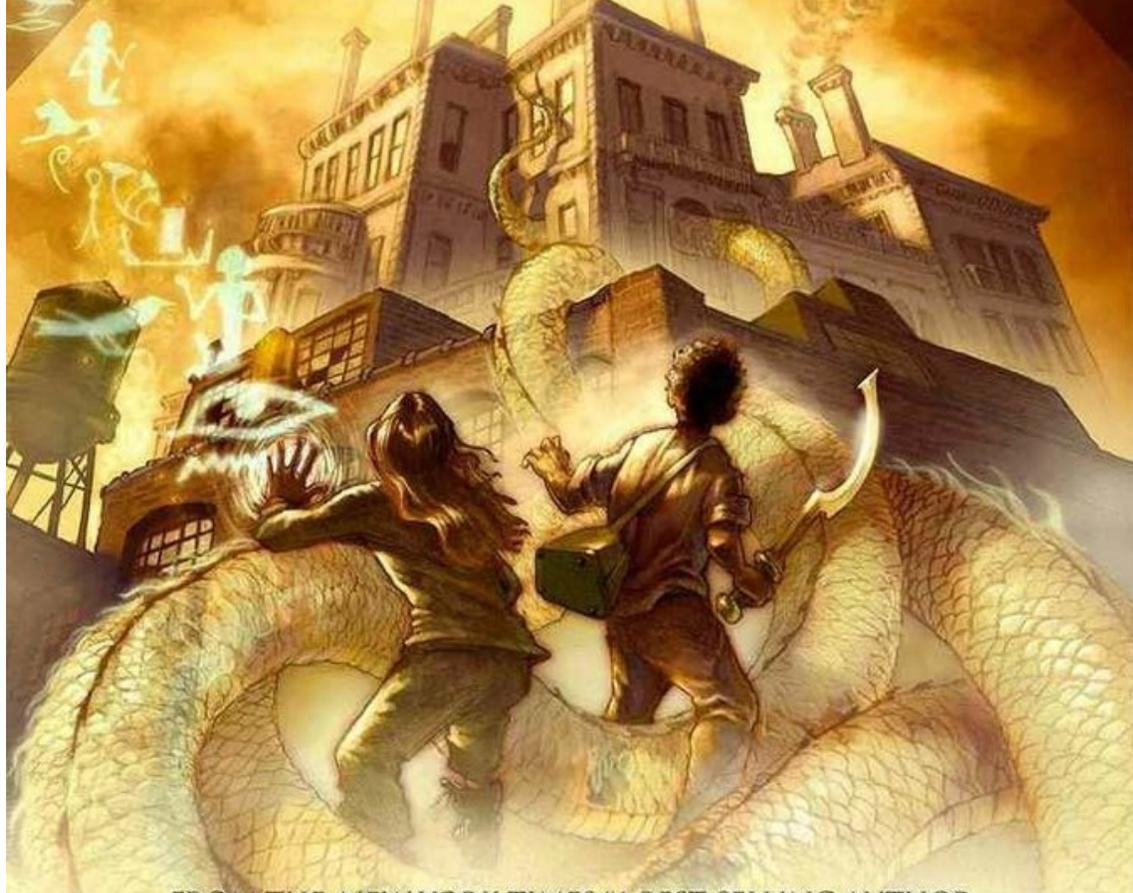
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1. A Death at the Needle

C
A
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R

We only have a few hours, so listen carefully.

If you're hearing this story, you're already in danger. Sadie and I might be your only chance.

Go to the school. Find the locker. I won't tell you which school or which locker, because if you're the right person, you'll find it. The combination is 13/32/33. By the time you finish listening, you'll know what those numbers mean. Just remember the story we're about to tell you isn't complete yet. How it ends will depend on you.

The most important thing: when you open the package and find what's inside, *don't* keep it longer than a week. Sure, it'll be tempting. I mean, it will grant you almost unlimited power. But if you possess it too long, it will consume you. Learn its secrets quickly and pass it on. Hide it for the next person, the way Sadie and I did for you. Then be prepared for your life to get very interesting.

Okay, Sadie is telling me to stop stalling and get on with the story. Fine. I guess

it started in London, the night our dad blew up the British Museum.

My name is Carter Kane. I'm fourteen and my home is a suitcase.

You think I'm kidding? Since I was eight years old, my dad and I have traveled the world. I was born in ll.A. but my dad's an archaeologist, so his work takes him all over. Mostly we go to Egypt, since that's his specialty. Go into a bookstore, find a book about Egypt, there's a pretty good chance it was written by Dr. Julius Kane. You want to know how Egyptians pulled the brains out of mummies, or built the pyramids, or cursed King Tut's tomb? My dad is your man. Of course, there are other reasons my dad moved around so much, but I didn't know his secret back then.

I didn't go to school. My dad homeschooled me, if you can call it "home" schooling when you don't have a home. He sort of taught me whatever he thought was important, so I learned a lot about Egypt and basketball stats and my dad's favorite musicians. I read a lot, too—pretty much anything I could get my hands on, from dad's history books to fantasy novels—because I spent a lot of time sitting around in hotels and airports and dig sites in foreign countries where I didn't know anybody.

My dad was always telling me to put the book down and play some ball. You ever try to start a game of pick-up basketball in Aswan, Egypt? It's not easy.

Anyway, my dad trained me early to keep all my possessions in a single suitcase that fits in an airplane's overhead compartment. My dad packed the same way, except he was allowed an extra workbag for his archaeology tools. Rule number one: I was not allowed to look in his workbag.

That's a rule I never broke until the day of the explosion.

It happened on Christmas Eve. We were in London for visitation day with my sister, Sadie.

See, Dad's only allowed two days a year with her—one in the winter, one in the summer—

because our grandparents hate him. After our mom died, her parents (our grandparents) had this big court battle with Dad. After six lawyers, two fistfights, and a near fatal attack with a spatula (don't ask), they won the right to

keep Sadie with them in England. She was only six, two years younger than me, and they couldn't keep us both—at least that was their excuse for not taking me. So Sadie was raised as a British schoolkid, and I traveled around with my dad. We only saw Sadie twice a year, which was fine with me.

[Shut up, Sadie. Yes—I'm getting to that part.]

So anyway, my dad and I had just flown into Heathrow after a couple of delays. It was a drizzly, cold afternoon. The whole taxi ride into the city, my dad seemed kind of nervous.

Now, my dad is a big guy. You wouldn't think anything could make him nervous. He has dark brown skin like mine, piercing brown eyes, a bald head, and a goatee, so he looks like a buff evil scientist. That afternoon he wore his cashmere winter coat and his best brown suit, the one he used for public lectures. Usually he exudes so much confidence that he dominates any room he walks into, but sometimes—like that afternoon—I saw another side to him that I didn't really understand. He kept looking over his shoulder like we were being hunted.

“Dad?” I said as we were getting off the A-40. “What's wrong?”

“No sign of them,” he muttered. Then he must've realized he'd spoken aloud, because he looked at me kind of startled. “Nothing, Carter. Everything's fine.” Which bothered me because my dad's a terrible liar. I always knew when he was hiding something, but I also knew no amount of pestering would get the truth out of him. He was probably trying to protect me, though from what I didn't know. Sometimes I wondered if he had some dark secret in his past, some old enemy following him, maybe; but the idea seemed ridiculous. Dad was just an archaeologist.

The other thing that troubled me: Dad was clutching his workbag. Usually when he does that, it means we're in danger. Like the time gunmen stormed our hotel in Cairo. I heard shots coming from the lobby and ran downstairs to check on my dad. By the time I got there, he was just calmly zipping up his workbag while three unconscious gunmen hung by their feet from the chandelier, their robes falling over their heads so you could see their boxer shorts. Dad claimed not to have witnessed anything, and in the end the police blamed a freak chandelier malfunction.

Another time, we got caught in a riot in Paris. My dad found the nearest parked

car, pushed me into the backseat, and told me to stay down. I pressed myself against the floorboards and kept my eyes shut tight. I could hear Dad in the driver's seat, rummaging in his bag, mumbling something to himself while the mob yelled and destroyed things outside. A few minutes later he told me it was safe to get up. Every other car on the block had been overturned and set on fire. Our car had been freshly washed and polished, and several twenty-euro notes had been tucked under the windshield wipers.

Anyway, I'd come to respect the bag. It was our good luck charm. But when my dad kept it close, it meant we were going to need good luck.

We drove through the city center, heading east toward my grandparents' flat. We passed the golden gates of Buckingham Palace, the big stone column in Trafalgar Square. London is a pretty cool place, but after you've traveled for so long, all cities start to blend together. Other kids I meet sometimes say, "Wow, you're so lucky you get to travel so much." But it's not like we spend our time sightseeing or have a lot of money to travel in style. We've stayed in some pretty rough places, and we hardly ever stay anywhere longer than a few days. Most of the time it feels like we're fugitives rather than tourists.

I mean, you wouldn't think my dad's work was dangerous. He does lectures on topics like "Can Egyptian Magic Really Kill You?" and "Favorite Punishments in the Egyptian Underworld" and other stuff most people wouldn't care about. But like I said, there's that other side to him. He's always very cautious, checking every hotel room before he lets me walk into it. He'll dart into a museum to see some artifacts, take a few notes, and rush out again like he's afraid to be caught on security cameras.

One time when I was younger, we raced across the Charles de Gaulle airport to catch a last-minute flight, and Dad didn't relax until the plane was off the ground, I asked him point blank what he was running from, and he looked at me like I'd just pulled the pin out of a grenade. For a second I was scared he might actually tell me the truth. Then he said, "Carter, it's nothing." As if "nothing" were the most terrible thing in the world.

After that, I decided maybe it was better not to ask questions.

My grandparents, the Fausts, lived in a housing development near Canary Wharf, right on the banks of the River Thames. The taxi let us off at the curb,

and my dad asked the driver to wait.

We were halfway up the walk when Dad froze. He turned and looked behind us.

“What?” I asked.

Then I saw the man in the trench coat. He was across the street, leaning against a big dead tree.

He was barrel shaped, with skin the color of roasted coffee. His coat and black pinstriped suit looked expensive. He had long braided hair and wore a black fedora pulled down low over his dark round glasses. He reminded me of a jazz musician, the kind my dad would always drag me to see in concert.

Even though I couldn't see his eyes, I got the impression he was watching us. He might've been an old friend or colleague of Dad's. No matter where we went, Dad was always running into people he knew. But it did seem strange that the guy was waiting here, outside my grandparents'. And he didn't look happy.

“Carter,” my dad said, “go on ahead.”

“But—”

“Get your sister. I'll meet you back at the taxi.”

He crossed the street toward the man in the trench coat, which left me with two choices: follow my dad and see what was going on, or do what I was told.

I decided on the slightly less dangerous path. I went to retrieve my sister.

Before I could even knock, Sadie opened the door.

“Late as usual,” she said.

She was holding her cat, Muffin, who'd been a “going away” gift from Dad six years before.

Muffin never seemed to get older or bigger. She had fuzzy yellow-and-black fur like a miniature leopard, alert yellow eyes, and pointy ears that were too tall for her head. A silver Egyptian pendant dangled from her collar. She didn't look

anything like a muffin, but Sadie had been little when she named her, so I guess you have to cut her some slack.

Sadie hadn't changed much either since last summer.

[As I'm recording this, she's standing next to me, glaring, so I guess I'd better be careful how I describe her.]

You would never guess she's my sister. First of all, she'd been living in England so long, she has a British accent. Second, she takes after our mom, who was white, so Sadie's skin is much lighter than mine. She has straight caramel-colored hair, not exactly blond but not brown, which she usually dyes with streaks of bright colors. That day it had red streaks down the left side. Her eyes are blue.

I'm serious. *Blue* eyes, just like our mom's. She's only twelve, but she's exactly as tall as me, which is really annoying. She was chewing gum as usual, dressed for her day out with Dad in battered jeans, a leather jacket, and combat boots, like she was going to a concert and was hoping to stomp on some people. She had headphones dangling around her neck in case we bored her.

[Okay, she didn't hit me, so I guess I did an okay job of describing her.]

"Our plane was late," I told her.

She popped a bubble, rubbed Muffin's head, and tossed the cat inside. "Gran, going out!" From somewhere in the house, Grandma Faust muttered something I couldn't make out, probably

"Don't let them in!"

Sadie closed the door and regarded me as if I were a dead mouse her cat had just dragged in.

"So, here you are again."

"Yep."

"Come on, then." She sighed. "Let's get on with it."

That's the way she was. No "Hi, how you been the last six months? So glad to see you!" or anything. But that was okay with me. When you only see each other twice a year, it's like you're distant cousins rather than siblings. We had absolutely nothing in common except our parents.

We trudged down the steps. I was thinking how she smelled like a combination of old people's house and bubble gum when she stopped so abruptly, I ran into her.

"Who's that?" she asked.

I'd almost forgotten about the dude in the trench coat. He and my dad were standing across the street next to the big tree, having what looked like a serious argument. Dad's back was turned so I couldn't see his face, but he gestured with his hands like he does when he's agitated. The other guy scowled and shook his head.

"Dunno," I said. "He was there when we pulled up."

"He looks familiar." Sadie frowned like she was trying to remember. "Come on."

"Dad wants us to wait in the cab," I said, even though I knew it was no use. Sadie was already on the move.

Instead of going straight across the street, she dashed up the sidewalk for half a block, ducking behind cars, then crossed to the opposite side and crouched under a low stone wall. She started sneaking toward our dad. I didn't have much choice but to follow her example, but it made me feel kind of stupid.

"Six years in England," I muttered, "and she thinks she's James Bond." Sadie swatted me without looking back and kept creeping forward.

A couple more steps and we were right behind the big dead tree. I could hear my dad on the other side, saying, "—have to, Amos. You know it's the right thing."

"No," said the other man, who must've been Amos. His voice was deep and even—very insistent. His accent was American. "If *I* don't stop you, Julius, *they* will. The Per Ankh is shadowing you."

Sadie turned to me and mouthed the words “Per *what?*” I shook my head, just as mystified. “Let’s get out of here,” I whispered, because I figured we’d be spotted any minute and get in serious trouble. Sadie, of course, ignored me.

“They don’t know my plan,” my father was saying. “By the time they figure it out—”

“And the children?” Amos asked. The hairs stood up on the back of my neck. “What about them?”

“I’ve made arrangements to protect them,” my dad said. “Besides, if I don’t do this, we’re all in danger. Now, back off.”

“I can’t, Julius.”

“Then it’s a duel you want?” Dad’s tone turned deadly serious. “You never could beat me, Amos.”

I hadn’t seen my dad get violent since the Great Spatula Incident, and I wasn’t anxious to see a repeat of *that*, but the two men seemed to be edging toward a fight.

Before I could react, Sadie popped up and shouted, “Dad!” He looked surprised when she tackle-hugged him, but not nearly as surprised as the other guy, Amos. He backed up so quickly, he tripped over his own trench coat.

He’d taken off his glasses. I couldn’t help thinking that Sadie was right. He did look familiar—

like a very distant memory.

“I—I must be going,” he muttered. He straightened his fedora and lumbered down the road.

Our dad watched him go. He kept one arm protectively around Sadie and one hand inside the workbag slung over his shoulder. Finally, when Amos disappeared around the corner, Dad relaxed.

He took his hand out of the bag and smiled at Sadie. “Hello, sweetheart.” Sadie pushed away from him and crossed her arms. “Oh, now it’s *sweetheart*, is it?”

You're late.

Visitation Day's nearly over! And what was that about? Who's Amos, and what's the Per Ankh?" Dad stiffened. He glanced at me like he was wondering how much we'd overheard.

"It's nothing," he said, trying to sound upbeat. "I have a wonderful evening planned. Who'd like a private tour of the British Museum?"

Sadie slumped in the back of the taxi between Dad and me.

"I can't believe it," she grumbled. "One evening together, and you want to do research." Dad tried for a smile. "Sweetheart, it'll be fun. The curator of the Egyptian collection personally invited—"

"Right, big surprise." Sadie blew a strand of red-streaked hair out of her face. "Christmas Eve, and we're going to see some moldy old relics from Egypt. Do you ever think about *anything* else?" Dad didn't get mad. He never gets mad at Sadie. He just stared out the window at the darkening sky and the rain.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I do."

Whenever Dad got quiet like that and stared off into nowhere, I knew he was thinking about our mom. The last few months, it had been happening a lot. I'd walk into our hotel room and find him with his cell phone in his hands, Mom's picture smiling up at him from the screen—her hair tucked under a headscarf, her blue eyes startlingly bright against the desert backdrop.

Or we'd be at some dig site. I'd see Dad staring at the horizon, and I'd know he was remembering how he'd met her—two young scientists in the Valley of the Kings, on a dig to discover a lost tomb. Dad was an Egyptologist. Mom was an anthropologist looking for ancient DNA. He'd told me the story a thousand times.

Our taxi snaked its way along the banks of the Thames. Just past Waterloo Bridge, my dad tensed.

"Driver," he said. "Stop here a moment."

The cabbie pulled over on the Victoria Embankment.

“What is it, Dad?” I asked.

He got out of the cab like he hadn’t heard me. When Sadie and I joined him on the sidewalk, he was staring up at Cleopatra’s Needle.

In case you’ve never seen it: the Needle is an obelisk, not a needle, and it doesn’t have anything to do with Cleopatra. I guess the British just thought the name sounded cool when they brought it to London. It’s about seventy feet tall, which would’ve been really impressive back in Ancient Egypt, but on the Thames, with all the tall buildings around, it looks small and sad. You could drive right by it and not even realize you’d just passed something that was a thousand years older than the city of London.

“God.” Sadie walked around in a frustrated circle. “Do we have to stop for *every* monument?” My dad stared at the top of the obelisk. “I had to see it again,” he murmured. “Where it happened...”

A freezing wind blew off the river. I wanted to get back in the cab, but my dad was really starting to worry me. I’d never seen him so distracted.

“What, Dad?” I asked. “What happened here?”

“The last place I saw her.”

Sadie stopped pacing. She scowled at me uncertainly, then back at Dad. “Hang on. Do you mean Mum?”

Dad brushed Sadie’s hair behind her ear, and she was so surprised, she didn’t even push him away.

I felt like the rain had frozen me solid. Mom’s death had always been a forbidden subject. I knew she’d died in an accident in London. I knew my grandparents blamed my dad. But no one would



ever tell us the details. I'd given up asking my dad, partly because it made him so sad, partly because he absolutely refused to tell me anything. "When you're older" was all he would say, which was the most frustrating response ever.

"You're telling us she died here," I said. "At Cleopatra's Needle? What happened?" He lowered his head.

"Dad!" Sadie protested. "I go past this *every* day, and you mean to say—all this time—and I didn't even *know*?"

"Do you still have your cat?" Dad asked her, which seemed like a really stupid question.

"Of course I've still got the cat!" she said. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"And your amulet?"

Sadie's hand went to her neck. When we were little, right before Sadie went to live with our grandparents, Dad had given us both Egyptian amulets. Mine was an Eye of Horus, which was a popular protection symbol in Ancient Egypt.

In fact my dad says the modern pharmacist's symbol, Rx, is a simplified version of the Eye of Horus, because medicine is supposed to protect you.

Anyway, I always wore my amulet under my shirt, but I figured Sadie would've lost hers or thrown it away.

To my surprise, she nodded. "'Course I have it, Dad, but don't change the subject. Gran's always going on about how you caused Mum's death. That's not true, is it?" We waited. For once, Sadie and I wanted exactly the same thing—the truth.

"The night your mother died," my father started, "here at the Needle—" A sudden flash illuminated the embankment. I turned, half blind, and just for a moment I glimpsed two figures: a tall pale man with a forked beard and wearing cream-colored robes, and a coppery-skinned girl in dark blue robes and a headscarf—the kind of clothes I'd seen hundreds of times in Egypt. They were just standing there side by side, not twenty feet away, watching us. Then the light faded. The figures melted into a fuzzy afterimage. When my eyes

readjusted to the darkness, they were gone.

“Um...” Sadie said nervously. “Did you just see that?”

“Get in the cab,” my dad said, pushing us toward the curb. “We’re out of time.” From that point on, Dad clammed up.

“This isn’t the place to talk,” he said, glancing behind us. He’d promised the cabbie an extra ten pounds if he got us to the museum in under five minutes, and the cabbie was doing his best.

“Dad,” I tried, “those people at the river—”

“And the other bloke, Amos,” Sadie said. “Are they Egyptian police or something?”

“Look, both of you,” Dad said, “I’m going to need your help tonight. I know it’s hard, but you have to be patient. I’ll explain everything, I promise, after we get to the museum. I’m going to make everything right again.”

“What do you mean?” Sadie insisted. “Make *what* right?” Dad’s expression was more than sad. It was almost guilty. With a chill, I thought about what Sadie had said: about our grandparents blaming him for Mom’s death. That *couldn’t* be what he was talking about, could it?

The cabbie swerved onto Great Russell Street and screeched to a halt in front of the museum’s main gates.

“Just follow my lead,” Dad told us. “When we meet the curator, act normal.” I was thinking that Sadie never acted *normal*, but I decided not to say that.

We climbed out of the cab. I got our luggage while Dad paid the driver with a big wad of cash.

Then he did something strange. He threw a handful of small objects into the backseat—they looked like stones, but it was too dark for me to be sure. “Keep driving,” he told the cabbie. “Take us to Chelsea.”

That made no sense since we were already out of the cab, but the driver sped off. I glanced at Dad, then back at the cab, and before it turned the corner and

disappeared in the dark, I caught a weird glimpse of three passengers in the backseat: a man and two kids.

I blinked. There was no way the cab could've picked up another fare so fast. "Dad—"

"London cabs don't stay empty very long," he said matter-of-factly. "Come along, kids." He marched off through the wrought iron gates. For a second, Sadie and I hesitated.

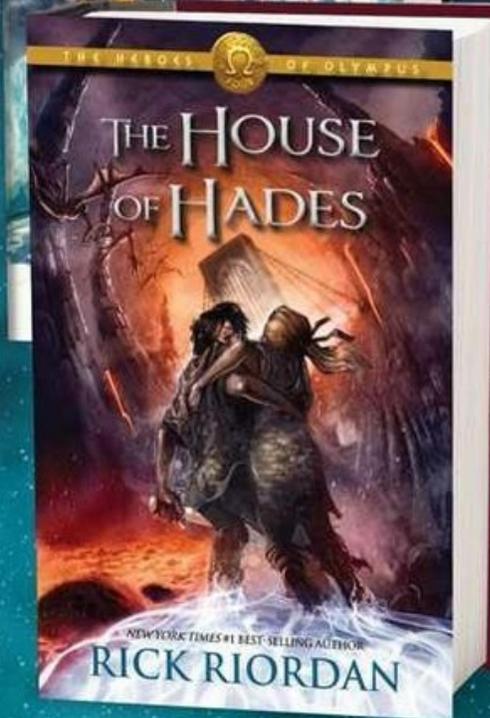
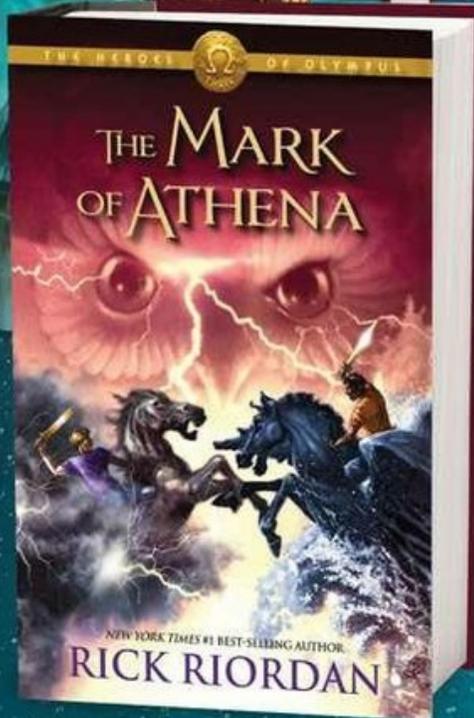
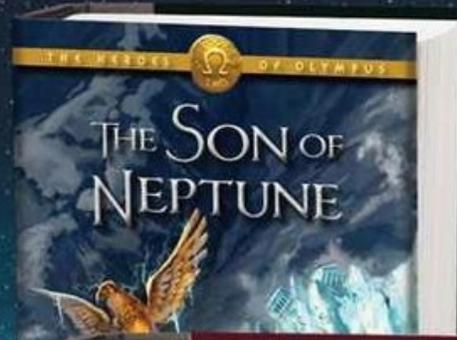
"Carter, *what* is going on?"

I shook my head. "I'm not sure I want to know."

"Well, stay out here in the cold if you want, but *I'm* not leaving without an explanation." She turned and marched after our dad.

Looking back on it, I should've run. I should've dragged Sadie out of there and gotten as far away as possible. Instead I followed her through the gates.

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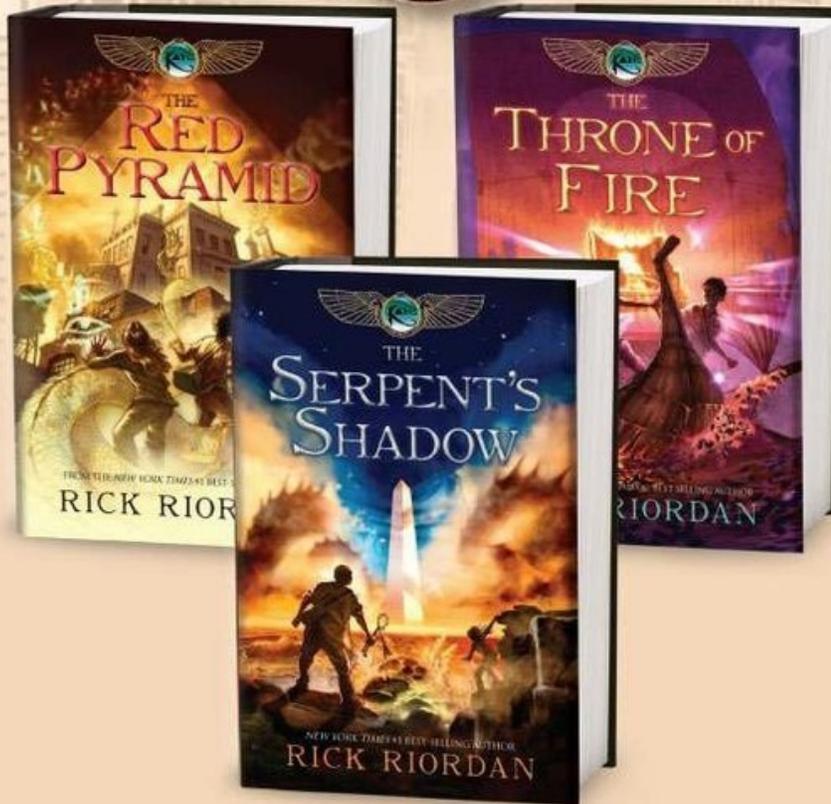
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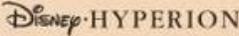
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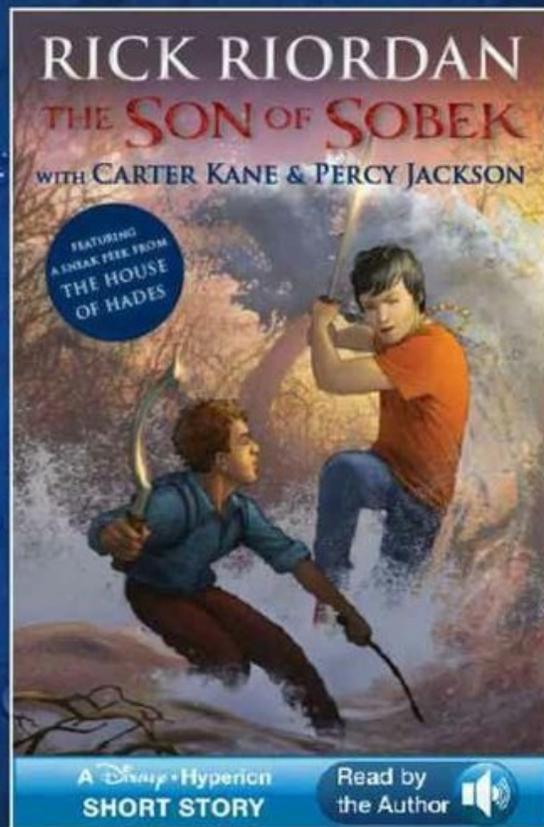
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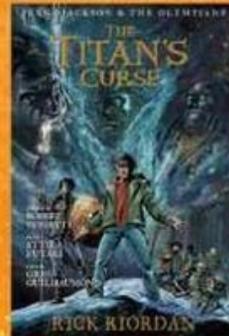
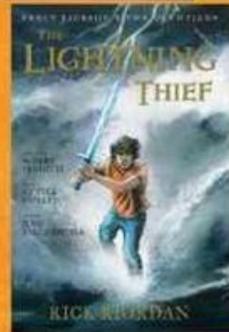
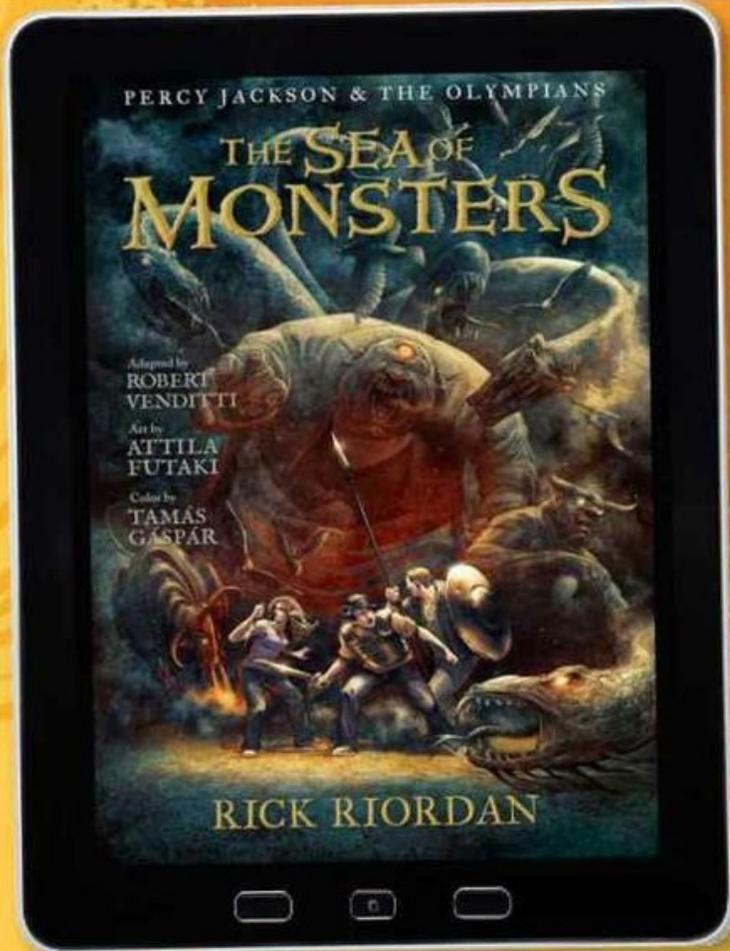
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THE HEROES



OF OLYMPUS

THE BLOOD OF OLYMPUS



NEW YORK TIMES #1 BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

RICK RIORDAN





HEROES OF
OLYMPUS
THE BLOOD OF OLYMPUS

RICK RIORDAN



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Glossary

Rick Riordan is the creator of the award-winning, bestselling Percy Jackson series and the thrilling Kane Chronicles and Heroes of Olympus series.

According to Rick, the idea for the Percy Jackson stories was inspired by his son Haley. But rumour has it that Camp Half-Blood actually exists, and Rick spends his summers there recording the adventures of young demigods. Some believe that, to avoid a mass panic among the mortal population, he was forced to swear on the River Styx to present Percy Jackson's story as fiction.

Rick lives in Boston (apart from his summers on Half-Blood Hill) with his wife and two sons.

To learn more about him and his books, visit: www.rickriordanmythmaster.co.uk

*To my wonderful readers.
Sorry about that apology for that last cliffhanger.
I'll try to avoid cliffhangers in this book.
Well, except for maybe a few small ones ... because I love you guys.*

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*Seven half-bloods shall answer the call,
To storm or fire the world must fall.
An oath to keep with a final breath,
And foes bear arms to the Doors of Death.*



I

Jason

JASON HATED BEING OLD.

His joints hurt. His legs shook. As he tried to climb the hill, his lungs rattled like a box of rocks.

He couldn't see his face, thank goodness, but his fingers were gnarled and bony. Bulging blue veins webbed the backs of his hands.

He even had that old-man smell – mothballs and chicken soup. How was that possible? He'd gone from sixteen to seventy-five in a matter of seconds, but the old-man smell happened instantly, like *Boom. Congratulations! You stink!*

'Almost there.' Piper smiled at him. 'You're doing great.'

Easy for her to say. Piper and Annabeth were disguised as lovely Greek serving maidens. Even in their white sleeveless gowns and laced sandals, they had no trouble navigating the rocky path.

Piper's mahogany hair was pinned up in a braided spiral. Silver bracelets adorned her arms. She resembled an ancient statue of her mom, [Aphrodite](#), which Jason found a little intimidating.

Dating a beautiful girl was nerve-racking enough. Dating a girl whose mom was the goddess of love ... well, Jason was always afraid he'd do something unromantic and Piper's mom would frown down from Mount Olympus and change him into a feral hog.

Jason glanced uphill. The summit was still a hundred yards above.

'Worst idea ever.' He leaned against a cedar tree and wiped his forehead. 'Hazel's magic is too good. If I have to fight, I'll be useless.'

'It won't come to that,' Annabeth promised. She looked uncomfortable in her serving-maiden outfit. She kept hunching her shoulders to keep the dress from slipping. Her pinned-up blonde bun had come undone in the back and her hair

dangled like long spider legs. Knowing her hatred of spiders, Jason decided not to mention that.

‘We infiltrate the palace,’ she said. ‘We get the information we need, and we get out.’

Piper set down her [amphora](#), the tall ceramic wine jar in which her sword was hidden. ‘We can rest for a second. Catch your breath, Jason.’

From her waist cord hung her cornucopia – the magic horn of plenty. Tucked somewhere in the folds of her dress was her knife, Katoptris. Piper didn’t look dangerous, but if the need arose she could dual-wield Celestial bronze blades or shoot her enemies in the face with ripe mangoes.

Annabeth slung her own amphora off her shoulder. She, too, had a concealed sword, but even without a visible weapon she looked deadly. Her stormy grey eyes scanned the surroundings, alert for any threat. If any dude asked Annabeth for a drink, Jason figured she was more likely to kick the guy in the [bifurcum](#).

He tried to steady his breathing.

Below them, Afales Bay glittered, the water so blue it might’ve been dyed with food colouring. A few hundred yards offshore, the *Argo II* rested at anchor. Its white sails looked no bigger than postage stamps, its ninety oars like toothpicks. Jason imagined his friends on deck following his progress, taking turns with Leo’s spyglass, trying not to laugh as they watched Grandpa Jason hobble uphill.

‘Stupid [Ithaca](#),’ he muttered.

He supposed the island was pretty enough. A spine of forested hills twisted down its centre. Chalky white slopes plunged into the sea. Inlets formed rocky beaches and harbours where red-roofed houses and white stucco churches nestled against the shoreline.

The hills were dotted with poppies, crocuses and wild cherry trees. The breeze smelled of blooming myrtle. All very nice – except the temperature was about a hundred and five degrees. The air was as steamy as a Roman bathhouse.

It would’ve been easy for Jason to control the winds and fly to the top of the hill, but *nooo*. For the sake of stealth, he had to struggle along as an old dude with bad knees and chicken-soup stink.

He thought about his last climb, two weeks ago, when Hazel and he had faced the bandit Sciron on the cliffs of Croatia. At least then Jason had been at full

strength. What they were about to face would be much worse than a bandit.

‘You sure this is the right hill?’ he asked. ‘Seems kind of – I don’t know – quiet.’

Piper studied the ridgeline. Braided in her hair was a bright blue harpy feather – a souvenir from last night’s attack. The feather didn’t exactly go with her disguise, but Piper had earned it, defeating an entire flock of demon chicken ladies by herself while she was on duty. She downplayed the accomplishment, but Jason could tell she felt good about it. The feather was a reminder that she wasn’t the same girl she’d been last winter, when they’d first arrived at Camp Half-Blood.

‘The ruins are up there,’ she promised. ‘I saw them in Katoptris’s blade. And you heard what Hazel said. “The biggest –” ’

‘“The biggest gathering of evil spirits I’ve ever sensed,” ’ Jason recalled. ‘Yeah, sounds awesome.’

After battling through the underground temple of [Hades](#), the last thing Jason wanted was to deal with more evil spirits. But the fate of the quest was at stake. The crew of the *Argo II* had a big decision to make. If they chose wrong, they would fail, and the entire world would be destroyed.

Piper’s blade, Hazel’s magical senses and Annabeth’s instincts all agreed – the answer lay here in Ithaca, at the ancient palace of [Odysseus](#), where a horde of evil spirits had gathered to await [Gaia](#)’s orders. The plan was to sneak among them, learn what was going on and decide the best course of action. Then get out, preferably alive.

Annabeth re-adjusted her golden belt. ‘I hope our disguises hold up. The suitors were nasty customers when they were alive. If they find out we’re demigods –’

‘Hazel’s magic will work,’ Piper said.

Jason tried to believe that.

The suitors: a hundred of the greediest, vilest cut-throats who’d ever lived. When Odysseus, the Greek king of Ithaca, went missing after the Trojan War, this mob of B-list princes had invaded his palace and refused to leave, each one hoping to marry Queen [Penelope](#) and take over the kingdom. Odysseus managed to return in secret and slaughter them all – your basic happy homecoming. But, if

Piper's visions were right, the suitors were now back, haunting the place where they'd died.

Jason couldn't believe he was about to visit the actual palace of Odysseus – one of the most famous Greek heroes of all time. Then again, this whole quest had been one mind-blowing event after another. Annabeth herself had just come back from the eternal abyss of [Tartarus](#). Given that, Jason decided maybe he shouldn't complain about being an old man.

'Well ...' He steadied himself with his walking stick. 'If I *look* as old as I feel, my disguise must be perfect. Let's get going.'

As they climbed, sweat trickled down his neck. His calves ached. Despite the heat, he began to shiver. And, try as he might, he couldn't stop thinking about his recent dreams.

Ever since the [House of Hades](#), they'd become more vivid.

Sometimes Jason stood in the underground temple of [Epirus](#), the giant [Clytius](#) looming over him, speaking in a chorus of disembodied voices: *It took all of you together to defeat me. What will you do when the Earth Mother opens her eyes?*

Other times Jason found himself at the crest of Half-Blood Hill. Gaia the Earth Mother rose from the ground – a swirling figure of soil, leaves and stones.

Poor child. Her voice resonated across the landscape, shaking the bedrock under Jason's feet. *Your father is first among the gods, yet you are always second best – to your Roman comrades, to your Greek friends, even to your family. How will you prove yourself?*

His worst dream started in the courtyard of the Sonoma Wolf House. Before him stood the goddess [Juno](#), glowing with the radiance of molten silver.

Your life belongs to me, her voice thundered. *An appeasement from [Zeus](#).*

Jason knew he shouldn't look, but he couldn't close his eyes as Juno went supernova, revealing her true godly form. Pain seared Jason's mind. His body burned away in layers like an onion.

Then the scene changed. Jason was still at the Wolf House, but now he was a little boy – no more than two years old. A woman knelt before him, her lemony scent so familiar. Her features were watery and indistinct, but he knew her voice: bright and brittle, like the thinnest layer of ice over a fast stream.

I will be back for you, dearest, she said. *I will see you soon.*

Every time Jason woke up from that nightmare, his face was beaded with sweat. His eyes stung with tears.

Nico di Angelo had warned them: the House of Hades would stir their worst memories, make them see things and hear things from the past. Their ghosts would become restless.

Jason had hoped that *particular* ghost would stay away, but every night the dream got worse. Now he was climbing to the ruins of a palace where an army of ghosts had gathered.

That doesn't mean she'll be there, Jason told himself.

But his hands wouldn't stop trembling. Every step seemed harder than the last.

'Almost there,' Annabeth said. 'Let's –'

BOOM! The hillside rumbled. Somewhere over the ridge, a crowd roared in approval, like spectators in a coliseum. The sound made Jason's skin crawl. Not so long ago, he'd fought for his life in the Roman Colosseum before a cheering ghostly audience. He wasn't anxious to repeat the experience.

'What was that explosion?' he wondered.

'Don't know,' Piper said. 'But it sounds like they're having fun. Let's go make some dead friends.'



II

Jason

NATURALLY, the situation was worse than Jason expected.

It wouldn't have been any fun otherwise.

Peering through the olive bushes at the top of the rise, he saw what looked like an out-of-control zombie frat party.

The ruins themselves weren't that impressive: a few stone walls, a weed-choked central courtyard, a dead-end stairwell chiselled into the rock. Some plywood sheets covered a pit and a metal scaffold supported a cracked archway.

But superimposed over the ruins was another layer of reality – a spectral mirage of the palace as it must have appeared in its heyday. Whitewashed stucco walls lined with balconies rose three storeys high. Columned porticoes faced the central atrium, which had a huge fountain and bronze braziers. At a dozen banquet tables, ghouls laughed and ate and pushed one another around.

Jason had expected about a hundred spirits, but twice that many were milling about, chasing spectral serving girls, smashing plates and cups, and basically making a nuisance of themselves.

Most looked like Lares from Camp [Jupiter](#) – transparent purple wraiths in tunics and sandals. A few revellers had decayed bodies with grey flesh, matted clumps of hair and nasty wounds. Others seemed to be regular living mortals – some in togas, some in modern business suits or army fatigues. Jason even spotted one guy in a purple Camp Jupiter T-shirt and Roman legionnaire armour.

In the centre of the atrium, a grey-skinned ghoul in a tattered Greek tunic paraded through the crowd, holding a marble bust over his head like a sports trophy. The other ghosts cheered and slapped him on the back. As the ghoul got closer, Jason noticed that he had an arrow in his throat, the feathered shaft

sprouting from his Adam's apple. Even more disturbing: the bust he was holding ... was that *Zeus*?

It was hard to be sure. Most Greek god statues looked similar. But the bearded, glowering face reminded Jason very much of the giant Hippie Zeus in Cabin One at Camp Half-Blood.

'Our next offering!' the ghoulish shouted, his voice buzzing from the arrow in his throat. 'Let us feed the Earth Mother!'

The partiers yelled and pounded their cups. The ghoulish made his way to the central fountain. The crowd parted, and Jason realized the fountain wasn't filled with water. From the three-foot-tall pedestal, a geyser of sand spewed upward, arcing into an umbrella-shaped curtain of white particles before spilling into the circular basin.

The ghoulish heaved the marble bust into the fountain. As soon as Zeus's head passed through the shower of sand, the marble disintegrated like it was going through a wood chipper. The sand glittered gold, the colour of ichor – godly blood. Then the entire mountain rumbled with a muffled *BOOM*, as if belching after a meal.

The dead partygoers roared with approval.

'Any more statues?' the ghoulish shouted to the crowd. 'No? Then I guess we'll have to wait for some *real* gods to sacrifice!'

His comrades laughed and applauded as the ghoulish plopped himself down at the nearest feast table.

Jason clenched his walking stick. 'That guy just disintegrated my dad. Who does he think he *is*?'

'I'm guessing that's [Antinous](#),' said Annabeth, 'one of the suitors' leaders. If I remember right, it was Odysseus who shot him through the neck with that arrow.'

Piper winced. 'You'd think that would keep a guy down. What about all the others? Why are there so many?'

'I don't know,' Annabeth said. 'Newer recruits for Gaia, I guess. Some must've come back to life before we closed the Doors of Death. Some are just spirits.'

'Some are ghoulish,' Jason said. 'The ones with the gaping wounds and the grey skin, like Antinous ... I've fought their kind before.'

Piper tugged at her blue harpy feather. ‘Can they be killed?’

Jason remembered a quest he’d taken for Camp Jupiter years ago in San Bernardino. ‘Not easily. They’re strong and fast and intelligent. Also, they eat human flesh.’

‘Fantastic,’ Annabeth muttered. ‘I don’t see any option except to stick to the plan. Split up, infiltrate, find out why they’re here. If things go bad –’

‘We use the backup plan,’ Piper said.

Jason hated the backup plan.

Before they left the ship, Leo had given each of them an emergency flare the size of a birthday candle. Supposedly, if they tossed one in the air, it would shoot upward in a streak of white phosphorus, alerting the *Argo II* that the team was in trouble. At that point, Jason and the girls would have a few seconds to take cover before the ship’s catapults fired on their position, engulfing the palace in Greek fire and bursts of Celestial bronze shrapnel.

Not the safest plan, but at least Jason had the satisfaction of knowing that he could call an air strike on this noisy mob of dead guys if the situation got dicey. Of course, that was assuming he and his friends could get away. *And* assuming Leo’s doomsday candles didn’t go off by accident – Leo’s inventions sometimes did that – in which case the weather would get much hotter, with a ninety percent chance of fiery apocalypse.

‘Be careful down there,’ he told Piper and Annabeth.

Piper crept around the left side of the ridge. Annabeth went right. Jason pulled himself up with his walking stick and hobbled towards the ruins.

He flashed back to the last time he’d plunged into a mob of evil spirits, in the House of Hades. If it hadn’t been for Frank Zhang and Nico di Angelo ...

Gods ... *Nico*.

Over the past few days, every time Jason sacrificed a portion of a meal to Jupiter, he prayed to his dad to help Nico. That kid had gone through so much, and yet he had volunteered for the most difficult job: transporting the [Athena](#) Parthenos statue to Camp Half-Blood. If he didn’t succeed, the Roman and Greek demigods would slaughter each other. Then, no matter what happened in Greece, the *Argo II* would have no home to return to.

Jason passed through the palace's ghostly gateway. He realized just in time that a section of mosaic floor in front of him was an illusion covering a ten-foot-deep excavation pit. He sidestepped it and continued into the courtyard.

The two levels of reality reminded him of the Titan stronghold on Mount Othrys – a disorienting maze of black marble walls that randomly melted into shadow and solidified again. At least during that fight Jason had had a hundred legionnaires at his side. Now all he had was an old man's body, a stick and two friends in slinky dresses.

Forty feet ahead of him, Piper moved through the crowd, smiling and filling wineglasses for the ghostly revellers. If she was afraid, she didn't show it. So far the ghosts weren't paying her any special attention. Hazel's magic must have been working.

Over on the right, Annabeth collected empty plates and goblets. She wasn't smiling.

Jason remembered the talk he'd had with Percy before leaving the ship.

Percy had stayed aboard to watch for threats from the sea, but he hadn't liked the idea of Annabeth going on this expedition without him – especially since it would be the first time they were apart since returning from Tartarus.

He'd pulled Jason aside. 'Hey, man ... Annabeth would kill me if I suggested she needed anybody to protect her.'

Jason laughed. 'Yeah, she would.'

'But look out for her, okay?'

Jason squeezed his friend's shoulder. 'I'll make sure she gets back to you safely.'

Now Jason wondered if he could keep that promise.

He reached the edge of the crowd.

A raspy voice cried, 'IROS!'

Antinous, the ghoul with the arrow in his throat, was staring right at him. 'Is that you, you old beggar?'

Hazel's magic did its work. Cold air rippled across Jason's face as the Mist subtly altered his appearance, showing the suitors what they expected to see.

'That's me!' Jason said. 'Iros!'

A dozen more ghosts turned towards him. Some scowled and gripped the hilts of their glowing purple swords. Too late, Jason wondered if Iros was an enemy

of theirs, but he'd already committed to the part.

He hobbled forward, putting on his best cranky old man expression. 'Guess I'm late to the party. I hope you saved me some food?'

One of the ghosts sneered in disgust. 'Ungrateful old panhandler. Should I kill him, Antinous?'

Jason's neck muscles tightened.

Antinous regarded him for three counts, then chuckled. 'I'm in a good mood today. Come, Iros, join me at my table.'

Jason didn't have much choice. He sat across from Antinous while more ghosts crowded around, leering as if they expected to see a particularly vicious arm-wrestling contest.

Up close, Antinous's eyes were solid yellow. His lips stretched paper-thin over wolfish teeth. At first, Jason thought the ghoul's curly dark hair was disintegrating. Then he realized a steady stream of dirt was trickling from Antinous's scalp, spilling over his shoulders. Clods of mud filled the old sword gashes in the ghoul's grey skin. More dirt spilled from the base of the arrow wound in his throat.

The power of Gaia, Jason thought. The earth is holding this guy together.

Antinous slid a golden goblet and a platter of food across the table. 'I didn't expect to see you here, Iros. But I suppose even a beggar can sue for retribution. Drink. Eat.'

Thick red liquid sloshed in the goblet. On the plate sat a steaming brown lump of mystery meat.

Jason's stomach rebelled. Even if ghoul food didn't kill him, his vegetarian girlfriend probably wouldn't kiss him for a month.

He recalled what Notus the South Wind had told him: *A wind that blows aimlessly is no good to anyone.*

Jason's entire career at Camp Jupiter had been built on careful choices. He mediated between demigods, listened to all sides of an argument, found compromises. Even when he chafed against Roman traditions, he thought before he acted. He wasn't impulsive.

Notus had warned him that such hesitation would kill him. Jason had to stop deliberating and take what he wanted.

If he was an ungrateful beggar, he had to *act* like one.

He ripped off a chunk of meat with his fingers and stuffed it in his mouth. He guzzled some red liquid, which thankfully tasted like watered-down wine, not blood or poison. Jason fought the urge to gag, but he didn't keel over or explode.

'Yum!' He wiped his mouth. 'Now tell me about this ... what did you call it? Retribution? Where do I sign up?'

The ghosts laughed. One pushed his shoulder and Jason was alarmed that he could actually *feel* it.

At Camp Jupiter, Lares had no physical substance. Apparently these spirits *did* – which meant more enemies who could beat, stab or decapitate him.

Antinous leaned forward. 'Tell me, Iros, what do you have to offer? We don't need you to run messages for us like in the old days. Certainly you aren't a fighter. As I recall, Odysseus crushed your jaw and tossed you into the pigsty.'

Jason's neurons fired. *Iros* ... the old man who'd run messages for the suitors in exchange for scraps of food. Iros had been sort of like their pet homeless person. When Odysseus came home, disguised as a beggar, Iros thought the new guy was moving in on his territory. The two had started arguing ...

'You made Iros –' Jason hesitated. 'You made *me* fight Odysseus. You bet money on it. Even when Odysseus took off his shirt and you saw how muscular he was ... you still made me fight him. You didn't care if I lived or died!'

Antinous bared his pointed teeth. 'Of course I didn't care. I still don't! But you're here, so Gaia must have had a reason to allow you back into the mortal world. Tell me, why are you worthy of a share in our spoils?'

'What spoils?'

Antinous spread his hands. 'The entire world, my friend. The first time we met here, we were only after Odysseus's land, his money and his wife.'

'Especially his wife!' A bald ghost in ragged clothes elbowed Jason in the ribs. 'That Penelope was a hot little honey cake!'

Jason caught a glimpse of Piper serving drinks at the next table. She discreetly put her finger to her mouth in a *gag me* gesture, then went back to flirting with dead guys.

Antinous sneered. '[Eurymachus](#), you whining coward. You never stood a *chance* with Penelope. I remember you blubbering and pleading for your life with Odysseus, blaming everything on me!'

‘Lot of good it did me.’ Eurymachus lifted his tattered shirt, revealing an inch-wide hole in the middle of his spectral chest. ‘Odysseus shot me in the heart, just because I wanted to marry his wife!’

‘At any rate ...’ Antinous turned to Jason. ‘We have gathered now for a much bigger prize. Once Gaia destroys the gods, we will divide up the remnants of the mortal world!’

‘Dibs on London!’ yelled a ghoul at the next table.

‘Montreal!’ shouted another.

‘Duluth!’ yelled a third, which momentarily stopped the conversation as the other ghosts gave him confused looks.

The meat and wine turned to lead in Jason’s stomach. ‘What about the rest of these ... guests? I count at least two hundred. Half of them are new to me.’

Antinous’s yellow eyes gleamed. ‘All of them are suitors for Gaia’s favour. All have claims and grievances against the gods or their pet heroes. That scoundrel over there is [Hippias](#), former tyrant of Athens. He got deposed and sided with the Persians to attack his own countrymen. No morals whatsoever. He’d do anything for power.’

‘Thank you!’ called Hippias.

‘That rogue with the turkey leg in his mouth,’ Antinous continued, ‘that’s [Hasdrubal of Carthage](#). He has a grudge to settle with Rome.’

‘Mhhmm,’ said the Carthaginian.

‘And Michael Varus –’

Jason choked. ‘*Who?*’

Over by the sand fountain, the dark-haired guy in the purple T-shirt and legionnaire armour turned to face them. His outline was blurred, smoky and indistinct, so Jason guessed he was some form of spirit, but the legion tattoo on his forearm was clear enough: the letters [SPQR](#), the double-faced head of the god [Janus](#) and six score marks for years of service. On his breastplate hung the badge of praetorship and the emblem of the Fifth Cohort.

Jason had never met Michael Varus. The infamous [praetor](#) had died in the 1980s. Still, Jason’s skin crawled when he met Varus’s gaze. Those sunken eyes seemed to bore right through Jason’s disguise.

Antinous waved dismissively. ‘He’s a Roman demigod. Lost his legion’s eagle in ... Alaska, was it? Doesn’t matter. Gaia lets him hang around. He insists

he has some insight into defeating Camp Jupiter. But you, Iros – you still haven't answered my question. Why should *you* be welcome among us?'

Varus's dead eyes had unnerved Jason. He could feel the Mist thinning around him, reacting to his uncertainty.

Suddenly Annabeth appeared at Antinous's shoulder. 'More wine, my lord? Oops!'

She spilled the contents of a silver pitcher down the back of Antinous's neck.

'Gahh!' The ghoul arched his spine. 'Foolish girl! Who let you back from Tartarus?'

'A Titan, my lord.' Annabeth dipped her head apologetically. 'May I bring you some moist towelettes? Your arrow is dripping.'

'Begone!'

Annabeth caught Jason's eye – a silent message of support – then she disappeared in the crowd.

The ghoul wiped himself off, giving Jason a chance to collect his thoughts.

He was Iros ... former messenger of the suitors. Why would he be here? Why should they accept him?

He picked up the nearest steak knife and stabbed it into the table, making the ghosts around him jump.

'Why should you welcome me?' Jason growled. 'Because I'm still running messages, you stupid wretches! I've just come from the House of Hades to see what you're up to!'

That last part was true, and it seemed to give Antinous pause. The ghoul glared at him, wine still dripping from the arrow shaft in his throat. 'You expect me to believe Gaia sent you – a beggar – to check up on us?'

Jason laughed. 'I was among the last to leave Epirus before the Doors of Death were closed! I saw the chamber where Clytius stood guard under a domed ceiling tiled with tombstones. I walked the jewel-and-bone floors of the Necromanteion!'

That was also true. Around the table, ghosts shifted and muttered.

'So, Antinous ...' Jason jabbed a finger at the ghoul. 'Maybe *you* should explain to me why *you're* worthy of Gaia's favour. All I see is a crowd of lazy, dawdling dead folk enjoying themselves and not helping the war effort. What should I tell the Earth Mother?'

From the corner of his eye, Jason saw Piper flash him an approving smile. Then she returned her attention to a glowing purple Greek dude who was trying to make her sit on his lap.

Antinous wrapped his hand around the steak knife Jason had impaled in the table. He pulled it free and studied the blade. 'If you come from Gaia, you must know we are here under orders. [Porphyrion](#) decreed it.' Antinous ran the knife blade across his palm. Instead of blood, dry dirt spilled from the cut. 'You do know Porphyrion ... ?'

Jason struggled to keep his nausea under control. He remembered Porphyrion just fine from their battle at the Wolf House. 'The giant king – green skin, forty feet tall, white eyes, hair braided with weapons. Of course I know him. He's a lot more impressive than *you*.'

He decided not to mention that the last time he'd seen the giant king, Jason had blasted him in the head with lightning.

For once, Antinous looked speechless, but his bald ghost friend Eurymachus put an arm around Jason's shoulders.

'Now, now, friend!' Eurymachus smelled like sour wine and burning electrical wires. His ghostly touch made Jason's ribcage tingle. 'I'm sure we didn't mean to question your credentials! It's just, well, if you've spoken with Porphyrion in Athens, you *know* why we're here. I assure you, we're doing exactly as he ordered!'

Jason tried to mask his surprise. *Porphyrion in Athens*.

Gaia had promised to pull up the gods by their roots. Chiron, Jason's mentor at Camp Half-Blood, had assumed that meant that the giants would try to rouse the earth goddess at the original Mount Olympus. But now ...

'The [Acropolis](#),' Jason said. 'The most ancient temples to the gods, in the middle of Athens. That's where Gaia will wake.'

'Of course!' Eurymachus laughed. The wound in his chest made a popping sound, like a porpoise's blowhole. 'And, to get there, those meddlesome demigods will have to travel by sea, eh? They know it's too dangerous to fly over land.'

'Which means they'll have to pass this island,' Jason said.

Eurymachus nodded eagerly. He removed his arm from Jason's shoulders and dipped his finger in his wineglass. 'At that point, they'll have to make a choice,

eh?’

On the tabletop, he traced a coastline, red wine glowing unnaturally against the wood. He drew Greece like a mis-shapen hourglass – a large dangly blob for the northern mainland, then another blob below it, almost as large – the big chunk of land known as the [Peloponnese](#). Cutting between them was a narrow line of sea – the [Straits of Corinth](#).

Jason hardly needed a picture. He and the rest of the crew had spent the last day at sea studying maps.

‘The most direct route,’ Eurymachus said, ‘would be due east from here, across the Straits of Corinth. But if they try to go that way –’

‘Enough,’ Antinous snapped. ‘You have a loose tongue, Eurymachus.’

The ghost looked offended. ‘I wasn’t going to tell him everything! Just about the Cyclopes armies massed on either shore. And the raging storm spirits in the air. And those vicious sea monsters [Keto](#) sent to infest the waters. And of course if the ship got as far as Delphi –’

‘Idiot!’ Antinous lunged across the table and grabbed the ghost’s wrist. A thin crust of dirt spread from the ghoul’s hand, straight up Eurymachus’s spectral arm.

‘No!’ Eurymachus yelped. ‘Please! I – I only meant –’

The ghost screamed as the dirt covered his body like a shell, then cracked apart, leaving nothing but a pile of dust. Eurymachus was gone.

Antinous sat back and brushed off his hands. The other suitors at the table watched him in wary silence.

‘Apologies, Iros.’ The ghoul smiled coldly. ‘All you need to know is this – the ways to Athens are well guarded, just as we promised. The demigods would either have to risk the straits, which are impossible, or sail around the entire Peloponnese, which is hardly much safer. In any event, it’s unlikely they will survive long enough to *make* that choice. Once they reach Ithaca, we will know. We will stop them here and Gaia will see how valuable we are. You can take that message back to Athens.’

Jason’s heart hammered against his sternum. He’d never seen anything like the shell of earth that Antinous had summoned to destroy Eurymachus. He didn’t want to find out if that power worked on demigods.

Also, Antinous sounded confident that he could detect the *Argo II*. Hazel's magic seemed to be obscuring the ship so far, but there was no telling how long that would last.

Jason had the intel they'd come for. Their goal was Athens. The safer route, or at least the *not impossible* route, was around the southern coast. Today was 20 July. They only had twelve days before Gaia planned to wake, on 1 August, the ancient Feast of Hope.

Jason and his friends needed to leave while they had the chance.

But something else bothered him – a cold sense of foreboding, as if he hadn't heard the worst news yet.

Eurymachus had mentioned [Delphi](#). Jason had secretly hoped to visit the ancient site of Apollo's Oracle, maybe get some insight into his personal future, but if the place had been overrun by monsters ...

He pushed aside his plate of cold food. 'Sounds like everything is under control. For your sake, Antinous, I hope so. These demigods are resourceful. They closed the Doors of Death. We wouldn't want them sneaking past you, perhaps getting help from Delphi.'

Antinous chuckled. 'No risk of that. Delphi is no longer in Apollo's control.'

'I – I see. And if the demigods sail the long way around the Peloponnese?'

'You worry too much. That journey is *never* safe for demigods, and it's much too far. Besides, Victory runs rampant in [Olympia](#). As long as that's the case, there is no way the demigods can win this war.'

Jason didn't understand what that meant either, but he nodded. 'Very well. I will report as much to King Porphyron. Thank you for the, er, meal.'

Over at the fountain, Michael Varus called, 'Wait.'

Jason bit back a curse. He'd been trying to ignore the dead praetor, but now Varus walked over, surrounded in a hazy white aura, his deep-set eyes like sinkholes. At his side hung an Imperial gold *gladius*.

'You must stay,' Varus said.

Antinous shot the ghost an irritated look. 'What's the problem, legionnaire? If Iros wants to leave, let him. He smells bad!'

The other ghosts laughed nervously. Across the courtyard, Piper shot Jason a worried glance. A little further away, Annabeth casually palmed a carving knife from the nearest platter of meat.

Varus rested his hand on the pommel of his sword. Despite the heat, his breastplate was glazed with ice. ‘I lost my cohort *twice* in Alaska – once in life, once in death to a *Graecus* named Percy Jackson. Still I have come here to answer Gaia’s call. Do you know why?’

Jason swallowed. ‘Stubbornness?’

‘This is a place of longing,’ Varus said. ‘All of us are drawn here, sustained not only by Gaia’s power but also by our strongest desires. Eurymachus’s greed. Antinous’s cruelty.’

‘You flatter me,’ the ghoul muttered.

‘Hasdrubal’s hatred,’ Varus continued. ‘Hippias’s bitterness. My ambition. And you, *Iros*. What has drawn you here? What does a beggar most desire? Perhaps a home?’

An uncomfortable tingle started at the base of Jason’s skull – the same feeling he got when a huge electrical storm was about to break.

‘I should be going,’ he said. ‘Messages to carry.’

Michael Varus drew his sword. ‘My father is Janus, the god of two faces. I am used to seeing through masks and deceptions. Do you know, *Iros*, why we are so sure the demigods will not pass our island undetected?’

Jason silently ran through his repertoire of Latin cuss words. He tried to calculate how long it would take him to get out his emergency flare and fire it. Hopefully he could buy enough time for the girls to find shelter before this mob of dead guys slaughtered him.

He turned to Antinous. ‘Look, are you in charge here or not? Maybe you should muzzle your Roman.’

The ghoul took a deep breath. The arrow rattled in his throat. ‘Ah, but this might be entertaining. Go on, Varus.’

The dead praetor raised his sword. ‘Our desires reveal us. They show us for who we really are. Someone has come for you, Jason Grace.’

Behind Varus, the crowd parted. The shimmering ghost of a woman drifted forward, and Jason felt as if his bones were turning to dust.

‘My dearest,’ said his mother’s ghost. ‘You have come home.’



III

Jason

SOMEHOW HE KNEW HER. He recognized her dress – a flowery green-and-red wraparound, like the skirt of a Christmas tree. He recognized the colourful plastic bangles on her wrists that had dug into his back when she hugged him goodbye at the Wolf House. He recognized her hair, an over-teased corona of dyed blonde curls and her scent of lemons and aerosol.

Her eyes were blue like Jason's, but they gleamed with fractured light, like she'd just come out of a bunker after a nuclear war – hungrily searching for familiar details in a changed world.

'Dearest.' She held out her arms.

Jason's vision tunnelled. The ghosts and ghouls no longer mattered.

His Mist disguise burned off. His posture straightened. His joints stopped aching. His walking stick turned back into an Imperial gold *gladius*.

The burning sensation didn't stop. He felt as if layers of his life were being seared away – his months at Camp Half-Blood, his years at Camp Jupiter, his training with [Lupa](#) the wolf goddess. He was a scared and vulnerable two-year-old again. Even the scar on his lip, from when he'd tried to eat a stapler as a toddler, stung like a fresh wound.

'Mom?' he managed.

'Yes, dearest.' Her image flickered. 'Come, embrace me.'

'You're – you're not real.'

'Of course she is real.' Michael Varus's voice sounded far away. 'Did you think Gaia would let such an important spirit languish in the Underworld? She is your mother, Beryl Grace, star of television, sweetheart to the king of Olympus, who rejected her not once but twice, in both his Greek and Roman aspects. She deserves justice as much as any of us.'

Jason's heart felt wobbly. The suitors crowded around him, watching.

I'm their entertainment, Jason realized. The ghosts probably found this even more amusing than two beggars fighting to the death.

Piper's voice cut through the buzzing in his head. 'Jason, look at me.'

She stood twenty feet away, holding her ceramic amphora. Her smile was gone. Her gaze was fierce and commanding – as impossible to ignore as the blue harpy feather in her hair. 'That isn't your mother. Her voice is working some kind of magic on you – like charmspeak, but more dangerous. Can't you sense it?'

'She's right.' Annabeth climbed onto the nearest table. She kicked aside a platter, startling a dozen suitors. 'Jason, that's only a remnant of your mother, like an *ara*, maybe, or –'

'A remnant!' His mother's ghost sobbed. 'Yes, look what I have been reduced to. It's Jupiter's fault. He abandoned us. He wouldn't help me! I didn't want to leave you in Sonoma, my dear, but Juno and Jupiter gave me no choice. They wouldn't allow us to stay together. Why fight for them now? Join these suitors. Lead them. We can be a family again!'

Jason felt hundreds of eyes on him.

This has been the story of my life, he thought bitterly. Everyone had always watched him, expecting him to lead the way. From the moment he'd arrived at Camp Jupiter, the Roman demigods had treated him like a prince in waiting. Despite his attempts to alter his destiny – joining the worst cohort, trying to change the camp traditions, taking the least glamorous missions and befriending the least popular kids – he had been made praetor anyway. As a son of Jupiter, his future had been assured.

He remembered what Hercules had said to him at the Straits of Gibraltar: *It's not easy being a son of Zeus. Too much pressure. Eventually, it can make a guy snap.*

Now Jason was here, drawn as taut as a bowstring.

'You left me,' he told his mother. 'That wasn't Jupiter or Juno. That was *you*.'

Beryl Grace stepped forward. The worry lines around her eyes, the pained tightness in her mouth reminded Jason of his sister, Thalia.

'Dearest, I told you I would come back. Those were my last words to you. Don't you remember?'

Jason shivered. In the ruins of the Wolf House his mother had hugged him one last time. She had smiled, but her eyes were full of tears.

It's all right, she had promised. But even as a little kid Jason had known it wasn't all right. Wait here. I will be back for you, dearest. I will see you soon.

She hadn't come back. Instead, Jason had wandered the ruins, crying and alone, calling for his mother and for Thalia – until the wolves came for him.

His mother's unkept promise was at the core of who he was. He'd built his whole life around the irritation of her words, like the grain of sand at the centre of a pearl.

People lie. Promises are broken.

That was why, as much as it chafed him, Jason followed rules. He kept his promises. He never wanted to abandon anyone the way he'd been abandoned and lied to.

Now his mom was back, erasing the one certainty Jason had about her – that she'd left him forever.

Across the table, Antinous raised his goblet. 'So pleased to meet you, son of Jupiter. Listen to your mother. You have many grievances against the gods. Why not join us? I gather these two serving girls are your friends? We will spare them. You wish to have your mother remain in the world? We can do that. You wish to be a king –'

'No.' Jason's mind was spinning. 'No, I don't belong with you.'

Michael Varus regarded him with cold eyes. 'Are you so sure, my fellow praetor? Even if you defeat the giants and Gaia, would you return home like Odysseus did? Where *is* your home now? With the Greeks? With the Romans? No one will accept you. And, *if* you get back, who's to say you won't find ruins like this?'

Jason scanned the palace courtyard. Without the illusory balconies and colonnades, there was nothing but a heap of rubble on a barren hilltop. Only the fountain seemed real, spewing forth sand like a reminder of Gaia's limitless power.

'You were a legion officer,' he told Varus. 'A leader of Rome.'

'So were you,' Varus said. 'Loyalties change.'

'You think I belong with *this* crowd?' Jason asked. 'A bunch of dead losers waiting for a free handout from Gaia, whining that the world owes them

something?’

Around the courtyard, ghosts and ghouls rose to their feet and drew weapons.

‘Beware!’ Piper yelled at the crowd. ‘Every man in this palace is your enemy. Each one will stab you in the back at the first chance!’

Over the last few weeks, Piper’s charmspeak had become truly powerful. She spoke the truth, and the crowd believed her. They looked sideways at one another, hands clenching the hilts of their swords.

Jason’s mother stepped towards him. ‘Dearest, be sensible. Give up your quest. Your *Argo II* could never make the trip to Athens. Even if it did, there’s the matter of the Athena Parthenos.’

A tremor passed through him. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t feign ignorance, my dearest. Gaia knows about your friend Reyna and Nico the son of Hades and the satyr Hedge. To kill them, the Earth Mother has sent her most dangerous son – the hunter who never rests. But you don’t have to die.’

The ghouls and ghosts closed in – two hundred of them facing Jason in anticipation, as if he might lead them in the national anthem.

The hunter who never rests.

Jason didn’t know who that was, but he had to warn Reyna and Nico.

Which meant he had to get out of here alive.

He looked at Annabeth and Piper. Both stood ready, waiting for his cue.

He forced himself to meet his mother’s eyes. She looked like the same woman who’d abandoned him in the Sonoma woods fourteen years ago. But Jason wasn’t a toddler any more. He was a battle veteran, a demigod who’d faced death countless times.

And what he saw in front of him wasn’t his mother – at least, not what his mother *should* be – caring, loving, selflessly protective.

A remnant, Annabeth had called her.

Michael Varus had told him that the spirits here were sustained by their strongest desires. The spirit of Beryl Grace literally *glowed* with need. Her eyes demanded Jason’s attention. Her arms reached out, desperate to possess him.

‘What do you want?’ he asked. ‘What brought you here?’

‘I want life!’ she cried. ‘Youth! Beauty! Your father could have made me immortal. He could have taken me to Olympus, but he abandoned me. You can

set things right, Jason. You are my proud warrior!’

Her lemony scent turned acrid, as if she were starting to burn.

Jason remembered something Thalia had told him. Their mother had become increasingly unstable, until her despair had driven her crazy. She had died in a car accident, the result of her driving while drunk.

The watered wine in Jason’s stomach churned. He decided that if he lived through this day he would never drink alcohol again.

‘You’re a *mania*,’ Jason decided, the word coming to him from his studies at Camp Jupiter long ago. ‘A spirit of insanity. That’s what you’ve been reduced to.’

‘I am all that remains,’ Beryl Grace agreed. Her image flickered through a spectrum of colours. ‘Embrace me, son. I am all you have left.’

The memory of the South Wind spoke in his mind: *You can’t choose your parentage. But you can choose your legacy.*

Jason felt like he was being reassembled, one layer at a time. His heartbeat steadied. The chill left his bones. His skin warmed in the afternoon sun.

‘No,’ he croaked. He glanced at Annabeth and Piper. ‘My loyalties haven’t changed. My family has just expanded. I’m a child of Greece and Rome.’ He looked back at his mother for the last time. ‘I’m no child of yours.’

He made the ancient sign of warding off evil – three fingers thrust out from the heart – and the ghost of Beryl Grace disappeared with a soft hiss, like a sigh of relief.

The ghoul Antinous tossed aside his goblet. He studied Jason with a look of lazy disgust. ‘Well, then,’ he said, ‘I suppose we’ll just kill you.’

All around Jason, the enemies closed in.



IV

Jason

THE FIGHT WAS GOING GREAT – until he got stabbed.

Jason slashed his *gladius* in a wide arc, vaporizing the nearest suitors, then he vaulted onto the table and jumped right over Antinous's head. In midair he willed his blade to extend into a javelin – a trick he'd never tried with this sword – but somehow he knew it would work.

He landed on his feet holding a six-foot-long *pilum*. As Antinous turned to face him, Jason thrust the Imperial gold point through the ghoul's chest.

Antinous looked down incredulously. 'You –'

'Enjoy the Fields of Punishment.' Jason yanked out his *pilum* and Antinous crumbled to dirt.

Jason kept fighting, spinning his javelin – slicing through ghosts, knocking ghouls off their feet.

Across the courtyard, Annabeth fought like a demon, too. Her [drakon](#)-bone sword scythed down any suitors stupid enough to face her.

Over by the sand fountain, Piper had also drawn her sword – the jagged bronze blade she'd taken from Zethes the Boread. She stabbed and parried with her right hand, occasionally shooting tomatoes from the cornucopia in her left, while yelling at the suitors, 'Save yourselves! I'm too dangerous!'

That must have been exactly what they wanted to hear, because her opponents kept running away, only to freeze in confusion a few yards downhill, then charge back into the fight.

The Greek tyrant Hippias lunged at Piper, his dagger raised, but Piper blasted him point-blank in the chest with a lovely pot roast. He tumbled backwards into the fountain and screamed as he disintegrated.

An arrow whistled towards Jason's face. He blew it aside with a gust of wind, then cut through a line of sword-wielding ghouls and noticed a dozen suitors regrouping by the fountain to charge Annabeth. He lifted his javelin to the sky. A bolt of lightning ricocheted off the point and blasted the ghosts to ions, leaving a smoking crater where the sand fountain had been.

Over the last few months, Jason had fought many battles, but he'd forgotten what it was like to feel *good* in combat. Of course he was still afraid, but a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. For the first time since waking up in Arizona with his memories erased, Jason felt *whole*. He knew who he was. He had chosen his family, and it had nothing to do with Beryl Grace or even Jupiter. His family included all the demigods who fought at his side, Roman and Greek, new friends and old. He wasn't going to let anyone break his family apart.

He summoned the winds and flung three ghouls off the side of the hill like rag dolls. He skewered a fourth, then willed his javelin to shrink back to a sword and hacked through another group of spirits.

Soon no more enemies faced him. The remaining ghosts began to disappear on their own. Annabeth cut down Hasdrubal the Carthaginian, and Jason made the mistake of sheathing his sword.

Pain flared in his lower back – so sharp and cold he thought [Khione](#) the snow goddess had touched him.

Next to his ear, Michael Varus snarled, 'Born a Roman, die a Roman.'

The tip of a golden sword jutted through the front of Jason's shirt, just below his ribcage.

Jason fell to his knees. Piper's scream sounded miles away. He felt like he'd been immersed in salty water – his body weightless, his head swaying.

Piper charged towards him. He watched with detached emotion as her sword passed over his head and cut through Michael Varus's armour with a metallic *ka-chunk*.

A burst of cold parted Jason's hair from behind. Dust settled around him, and an empty legionnaire's helmet rolled across the stones. The evil demigod was gone – but he had made a lasting impression.

'Jason!' Piper grabbed his shoulders as he began to fall sideways. He gasped as she pulled the sword out of his back. Then she lowered him to the ground, propping his head against a stone.

Annabeth ran to their side. She had a nasty cut on the side of her neck.

‘Gods.’ Annabeth stared at the wound in Jason’s gut. ‘Oh, gods.’

‘Thanks,’ Jason groaned. ‘I was afraid it might be bad.’

His arms and legs started to tingle as his body went into crisis mode, sending all the blood to his chest. The pain was dull, which surprised him, but his shirt was soaked red. The wound was smoking. He was pretty sure sword wounds weren’t supposed to smoke.

‘You’re going to be fine.’ Piper spoke the words like an order. Her tone steadied his breathing. ‘Annabeth, ambrosia!’

Annabeth stirred. ‘Yeah. Yeah, I got it.’ She ripped through her supply pouch and unwrapped a piece of godly food.

‘We have to stop the bleeding.’ Piper used her dagger to cut fabric from the bottom of her dress. She ripped the cloth into bandages.

Jason dimly wondered how she knew so much first aid. She wrapped the wounds on his back and stomach while Annabeth pushed tiny bites of ambrosia into his mouth.

Annabeth’s fingers trembled. After all the things she’d been through, Jason found it odd that she would freak out now while Piper acted so calm. Then it occurred to him – Annabeth could *afford* to be scared for him. Piper couldn’t. She was completely focused on trying to save him.

Annabeth fed him another bite. ‘Jason, I – I’m sorry. About your mom. But the way you handled it ... that was so brave.’

Jason tried not to close his eyes. Every time he did, he saw his mom’s spirit disintegrating.

‘It wasn’t her,’ he said. ‘At least, no part of her I could save. There was no other choice.’

Annabeth took a shaky breath. ‘No other *right* choice, maybe, but ... a friend of mine, Luke. His mom ... similar problem. He didn’t handle it as well.’

Her voice broke. Jason didn’t know much about Annabeth’s past, but Piper glanced over in concern.

‘I’ve bandaged as much as I can,’ she said. ‘Blood is still soaking through. And the smoke. I don’t get that.’

‘Imperial gold,’ Annabeth said, her voice quavering. ‘It’s deadly to demigods. It’s only a matter of time before –’

‘He’ll be all right,’ Piper insisted. ‘We’ve got to get him back to the ship.’

‘I don’t feel that bad,’ Jason said. And it was true. The ambrosia had cleared his head. Warmth was seeping back into his limbs. ‘Maybe I could fly ...’

Jason sat up. His vision turned a pale shade of green. ‘Or maybe not ...’

Piper caught his shoulders as he keeled sideways. ‘Whoa, Sparky. We need to contact the *Argo II*, get help.’

‘You haven’t called me Sparky in a long time.’

Piper kissed his forehead. ‘Stick with me and I’ll insult you all you want.’

Annabeth scanned the ruins. The magic veneer had faded, leaving only broken walls and excavation pits. ‘We could use the emergency flares, but –’

‘No,’ Jason said. ‘Leo would blast the top of the hill with Greek fire. Maybe, if you guys helped me, I could walk –’

‘Absolutely not,’ Piper objected. ‘That would take too long.’ She rummaged in her belt pouch and pulled out a compact mirror. ‘Annabeth, you know Morse code?’

‘Of course.’

‘So does Leo.’ Piper handed her the mirror. ‘He’ll be watching from the ship. Go to the ridge –’

‘And flash him!’ Annabeth’s face reddened. ‘That came out wrong. But, yeah, good idea.’

She ran to the edge of the ruins.

Piper pulled out a flask of nectar and gave Jason a sip. ‘Hang in there. You are *not* dying from a stupid body piercing.’

Jason managed a weak smile. ‘At least it wasn’t a head injury this time. I stayed conscious the entire fight.’

‘You defeated, like, two hundred enemies,’ Piper said. ‘You were *scary* amazing.’

‘You guys helped.’

‘Maybe, but ... Hey, stay with me.’

Jason’s head started to droop. The cracks in the stones came into sharper focus.

‘Little dizzy,’ he muttered.

‘More nectar,’ Piper ordered. ‘There. Taste okay?’

‘Yeah. Yeah, fine.’

In fact the nectar tasted like liquid sawdust, but Jason kept that to himself. Ever since the House of Hades when he'd resigned his praetorship, ambrosia and nectar didn't taste like his favourite foods from Camp Jupiter. It was as if the memory of his old home no longer had the power to heal him.

Born a Roman, die a Roman, Michael Varus had said.

He looked at the smoke curling from his bandages. He had worse things to worry about than blood loss. Annabeth was right about Imperial gold. The stuff was deadly to demigods as well as monsters. The wound from Varus's blade would do its best to eat away at Jason's life force.

He'd seen a demigod die like that once before. It hadn't been fast or pretty.

I can't die, he told himself. *My friends are depending on me.*

Antinous's words rang in his ears – about the giants in Athens, the impossible trip facing the *Argo II*, the mysterious hunter Gaia had sent to intercept the Athena Parthenos.

'Reyna, Nico and Coach Hedge,' he said. 'They're in danger. We need to warn them.'

'We'll take care of it when we get back to the ship,' Piper promised. 'Your job right now is to relax.' Her tone was light and confident, but her eyes brimmed with tears. 'Besides, those three are a tough group. They'll be fine.'

Jason hoped she was right. Reyna had risked so much to help them. Coach Hedge was annoying sometimes, but he'd been a loyal protector for the entire crew. And Nico ... Jason felt especially worried about him.

Piper brushed her thumb against the scar on his lip. 'Once the war is over ... everything will work out for Nico. You've done what you could, being a friend to him.'

Jason wasn't sure what to say. He hadn't told Piper anything about his conversations with Nico. He'd kept di Angelo's secret.

Still ... Piper seemed to sense what was wrong. As a daughter of Aphrodite, maybe she could tell when somebody was struggling with heartache. She hadn't pressured Jason to talk about it, though. He appreciated that.

Another wave of pain made him wince.

'Concentrate on my voice.' Piper kissed his forehead. 'Think about something good. Birthday cake in the park in Rome –'

'That was nice.'

‘Last winter,’ she suggested. ‘The s’mores fight at the campfire.’

‘I totally got you.’

‘You had marshmallows in your hair for days!’

‘I did not.’

Jason’s mind drifted back to better times.

He just wanted to stay there – talking with Piper, holding her hand, not worrying about giants or Gaia or his mother’s madness.

He knew they should get back to the ship. He was in bad shape. They had the information they’d come for. But as he lay there on the cool stones, Jason felt a sense of incompleteness. The story of the suitors and Queen Penelope ... his thoughts about family ... his recent dreams. Those things all swirled around in his head. There was something more to this place – something he’d missed.

Annabeth came back limping from the edge of the hill.

‘Are you hurt?’ Jason asked her.

Annabeth glanced at her ankle. ‘It’s fine. Just the old break from the Roman caverns. Sometimes when I’m stressed ... That’s not important. I signalled Leo. Frank’s going to change form, fly up here and carry you back to the ship. I need to make a litter to keep you stable.’

Jason had a terrifying image of himself in a hammock, swinging between the claws of Frank the giant eagle, but he decided it would be better than dying.

Annabeth set to work. She collected scraps left behind by the suitors – a leather belt, a torn tunic, sandal straps, a red blanket and a couple of broken spear shafts. Her hands flew across the materials – ripping, weaving, tying, braiding.

‘How are you doing that?’ Jason asked in amazement.

‘Learned it during my quest under Rome.’ Annabeth kept her eyes on her work. ‘I’d never had a reason to try weaving before, but it’s handy for certain things, like getting away from spiders ...’

She tied off one last bit of leather cord and *voilà* – a stretcher large enough for Jason, with spear shafts as carrying handles and safety straps across the middle.

Piper whistled appreciatively. ‘The next time I need a dress altered, I’m coming to you.’

‘Shut up, McLean,’ Annabeth said, but her eyes glinted with satisfaction. ‘Now, let’s get him secured –’

‘Wait,’ Jason said.

His heart pounded. Watching Annabeth weave the makeshift bed, Jason had remembered the story of Penelope – how she’d held out for twenty years, waiting for her husband Odysseus to return.

‘A bed,’ Jason said. ‘There was a special bed in this palace.’

Piper looked worried. ‘Jason, you’ve lost a lot of blood.’

‘I’m not hallucinating,’ he insisted. ‘The marriage bed was sacred. If there was *any* place you could talk to Juno ...’ He took a deep breath and called, ‘Juno!’

Silence.

Maybe Piper was right. He wasn’t thinking clearly.

Then, about sixty feet away, the stone floor cracked. Branches muscled through the earth, growing in fast motion until a full-sized olive tree shaded the courtyard. Under a canopy of grey-green leaves stood a dark-haired woman in a white dress, a leopard-skin cape draped over her shoulders. Her staff was topped with a white lotus flower. Her expression was cool and regal.

‘My heroes,’ said the goddess.

‘[Hera](#),’ Piper said.

‘Juno,’ Jason corrected.

‘Whatever,’ Annabeth grumbled. ‘What are you doing here, Your Bovine Majesty?’

Juno’s dark eyes glittered dangerously. ‘Annabeth Chase. As charming as ever.’

‘Yeah, well,’ Annabeth said, ‘I just got back from *Tartarus*, so my manners are a little rusty, especially towards goddesses who wiped my boyfriend’s memory, made him disappear for months and then –’

‘Honestly, child. Are we going to rehash this again?’

‘Aren’t you supposed to be suffering from split-personality disorder?’ Annabeth asked. ‘I mean – more so than usual?’

‘Whoa,’ Jason interceded. He had plenty of reasons to hate Juno, but they had other issues to deal with. ‘Juno, we need your help. We –’ Jason tried to sit up and immediately regretted it. His insides felt like they were being twirled on a giant spaghetti fork.

Piper kept him from falling over. ‘First things first,’ she said. ‘Jason is hurt. Heal him!’

The goddess knitted her eyebrows. Her form shimmered unsteadily.

‘Some things even the gods cannot heal,’ she said. ‘This wound touches your soul as well as your body. You must fight it, Jason Grace ... you *must* survive.’

‘Yeah, thanks,’ he said, his mouth dry. ‘I’m trying.’

‘What do you mean, the wound touches his soul?’ Piper demanded. ‘Why can’t you –’

‘My heroes, our time together is short,’ Juno said. ‘I am grateful that you called upon me. I have spent weeks in a state of pain and confusion ... my Greek and Roman natures warring against each other. Worse, I’ve been forced to hide from Jupiter, who searches for me in his misguided wrath, believing that *I* caused this war with Gaia.’

‘Gee,’ Annabeth said, ‘why would he think that?’

Juno flashed her an irritated look. ‘Fortunately, this place is sacred to me. By clearing away those ghosts, you have purified it and given me a moment of clarity. I will be able to speak with you – if only briefly.’

‘Why is it sacred ... ?’ Piper’s eyes widened. ‘Oh. The marriage bed!’

‘Marriage bed?’ Annabeth asked. ‘I don’t see any –’

‘The bed of Penelope and Odysseus,’ Piper explained. ‘One of its bedposts was a living olive tree, so it could never be moved.’

‘Indeed.’ Juno ran her hand along the olive tree’s trunk. ‘An immovable marriage bed. Such a beautiful symbol! Like Penelope, the most faithful wife, standing her ground, fending off a hundred arrogant suitors for years because she knew her husband would return. Odysseus and Penelope – the epitome of a perfect marriage!’

Even in his dazed state, Jason was pretty sure he remembered stories about Odysseus falling for other women during his travels, but he decided not to bring that up.

‘Can you advise us, at least?’ he asked. ‘Tell us what to do?’

‘Sail around the Peloponnese,’ said the goddess. ‘As you suspect, that is the only possible route. On your way, seek out the goddess of victory in Olympia. She is out of control. Unless you can subdue her, the rift between Greek and Roman can never be healed.’

‘You mean [Nike](#)?’ Annabeth asked. ‘How is she out of control?’

Thunder boomed overhead, shaking the hill.

‘Explaining would take too long,’ Juno said. ‘I must flee before Jupiter finds me. Once I leave, I will not be able to help you again.’

Jason bit back a retort: *When did you help me the first time?*

‘What else should we know?’ he asked.

‘As you heard, the giants have gathered in Athens. Few gods will be able to help you on your journey, but I am not the only Olympian who is out of favour with Jupiter. The twins have also incurred his wrath.’

‘[Artemis](#) and [Apollo](#)?’ Piper asked. ‘Why?’

Juno’s image began to fade. ‘If you reach the island of [Delos](#), they might be prepared to help you. They are desperate enough to try anything to make amends. Go now. Perhaps we will meet again in Athens, if you succeed. If you do not ...’

The goddess disappeared, or maybe Jason’s eyesight simply failed. Pain rolled through him. His head lolled back. He saw a giant eagle circling high above. Then the blue sky turned black, and Jason saw nothing at all.



Reyna

DIVE-BOMBING A VOLCANO was *not* on Reyna's bucket list.

Her first view of southern Italy was from five thousand feet in the air. To the west, along the crescent of the Gulf of Naples, the lights of sleeping cities glittered in the predawn gloom. A thousand feet below her, a half-mile-wide caldera yawned at the top of a mountain, white steam pluming from the centre.

Reyna's disorientation took a moment to subside. [Shadow-travel](#) left her groggy and nauseous, as if she'd been dragged from the cold waters of the [frigidarium](#) into the sauna at a Roman bathhouse.

Then she realized she was suspended in midair. Gravity took hold, and she began to fall.

'Nico!' she yelled.

'Pan's pipes!' cursed Gleeson Hedge.

'Whaaaaa!' Nico flailed, almost slipping out of Reyna's grip. She held tight and grabbed Coach Hedge by the shirt collar as he started to tumble away. If they got separated now, they were dead.

They plummeted towards the volcano as their largest piece of luggage – the forty-foot-tall Athena Parthenos – trailed after them, leashed to a harness on Nico's back like a very ineffective parachute.

'That's Vesuvius below us!' Reyna shouted over the wind. 'Nico, teleport us out of here!'

His eyes were wild and unfocused. His dark feathery hair whipped around his face like a raven shot out of the sky. 'I – I can't! No strength!'

Coach Hedge bleated. 'News flash, kid! Goats can't fly! Zap us out of here or we're gonna get flattened into an Athena Parthenos omelette!'

Reyna tried to think. She could accept death if she had to, but if the Athena Parthenos was destroyed their quest would fail. Reyna *could not* accept that.

‘Nico, shadow-travel,’ she ordered. ‘I’ll lend you my strength.’

He stared at her blankly. ‘How –’

‘*Do it!*’

She tightened her grip on his hand. The torch-and-sword symbol of [Bellona](#) on her forearm grew painfully hot, as if it were being seared into her skin for the first time.

Nico gasped. Colour returned to his face. Just before they hit the volcano’s steam plume, they slipped into shadows.

The air turned frigid. The sound of the wind was replaced by a cacophony of voices whispering in a thousand languages. Reyna’s insides felt like a giant [piragua](#) – cold syrup trickled over crushed ice – her favourite treat from her childhood in Viejo San Juan.

She wondered why that memory would surface now, when she was on the verge of death. Then her vision cleared. Her feet rested on solid ground.

The eastern sky had begun to lighten. For a moment Reyna thought she was back in New Rome. Doric columns lined an atrium the size of a baseball diamond. In front of her, a bronze faun stood in the middle of a sunken fountain decorated with mosaic tile.

Crepe myrtles and rosebushes bloomed in a nearby garden. Palm trees and pines stretched skyward. Cobblestone paths led from the courtyard in several directions – straight, level roads of good Roman construction, edging low stone houses with colonnaded porches.

Reyna turned. Behind her, the Athena Parthenos stood intact and upright, dominating the courtyard like a ridiculously oversized lawn ornament. The little bronze faun in the fountain had both his arms raised, facing Athena, so he seemed to be cowering in fear of the new arrival.

On the horizon, Mount Vesuvius loomed – a dark, humpbacked shape now several miles away. Thick pillars of steam curled from the crest.

‘We’re in [Pompeii](#),’ Reyna realized.

‘Oh, that’s not good,’ Nico said, and he immediately collapsed.

‘Whoa!’ Coach Hedge caught him before he hit the ground. The satyr propped him against Athena’s feet and loosened the harness that attached Nico to the

statue.

Reyna's own knees buckled. She'd expected some backlash; it happened every time she shared her strength. But she hadn't anticipated so much raw anguish from Nico di Angelo. She sat down heavily, just managing to stay conscious.

Gods of Rome. If this was only a portion of Nico's pain ... how could he bear it?

She tried to steady her breathing while Coach Hedge rummaged through his camping supplies. Around Nico's boots, the stones cracked. Dark seams radiated outwards like a shotgun blast of ink, as if Nico's body were trying to expel all the shadows he'd travelled through.

Yesterday had been worse: an entire meadow withering, skeletons rising from the earth. Reyna wasn't anxious for that to happen again.

'Drink something.' She offered him a canteen of unicorn draught – powdered horn mixed with sanctified water from the [Little Tiber](#). They'd found it worked on Nico better than nectar, helping to cleanse the fatigue and darkness from his system with less danger of spontaneous combustion.

Nico gulped it down. He still looked terrible. His skin had a bluish tint. His cheeks were sunken. Hanging at his side, the sceptre of [Diocletian](#) glowed angry purple, like a radioactive bruise.

He studied Reyna. 'How did you do that ... that surge of energy?'

Reyna turned her forearm. The tattoo still burned like hot wax: the symbol of Bellona, SPQR, with four lines for her years of service. 'I don't like to talk about it,' she said, 'but it's a power from my mother. I can impart strength to others.'

Coach Hedge looked up from his rucksack. 'Seriously? Why haven't you hooked me up, Roman girl? I want super-muscles!'

Reyna frowned. 'It doesn't work like that, Coach. I can only do it in life-and-death situations, and it's more useful in large groups. When I command troops, I can share whatever attributes I have – strength, courage, endurance – multiplied by the size of my forces.'

Nico arched an eyebrow. 'Useful for a Roman praetor.'

Reyna didn't answer. She preferred not to speak of her power for exactly this reason. She didn't want the demigods under her command to think she was controlling them, or that she'd become a leader because she had some special

magic. She could only share the qualities she already possessed, and she couldn't help anyone who wasn't worthy of being a hero.

Coach Hedge grunted. 'Too bad. Super-muscles would be nice.' He went back to sorting through his pack, which seemed to hold a bottomless supply of cooking utensils, survivalist gear and random sports equipment.

Nico took another swig of unicorn draught. His eyes were heavy with exhaustion, but Reyna could tell he was fighting to stay awake.

'You stumbled just now,' he noted. 'When you use your power ... do you get some sort of, um, feedback from me?'

'It's not mind-reading,' she said. 'Not even an empathy link. Just ... a temporary wave of exhaustion. Primal emotions. Your pain washes over me. I take on some of your burden.'

Nico's expression became guarded.

He twisted the silver skull ring on his finger, the same way Reyna did with *her* silver ring when she was thinking. Sharing a habit with the son of Hades made her uneasy.

She'd felt more pain from Nico in their brief connection than she had from her entire legion during the battle against the giant [Polybotes](#). It had drained her worse than the *last* time she'd used her power, to sustain her [pegasus](#) Scipio during their journey across the Atlantic.

She tried to push away that memory. Her brave winged friend dying from poison, his muzzle in her lap, looking at her trustingly as she raised her dagger to end his misery ... Gods, no. She couldn't dwell on that or it would break her.

But the pain she'd felt from Nico was sharper.

'You should rest,' she told him. 'After two jumps in a row, even with a little help ... you're lucky to be alive. We'll need you to be ready again by nightfall.'

She felt bad asking him to do something so impossible. Unfortunately, she'd had a lot of practice pushing demigods beyond their limits.

Nico clenched his jaw and nodded. 'We're stuck here now.' He scanned the ruins. 'But Pompeii is the *last* place I would've chosen to land. This place is full of *lemures*.'

'Lemurs?' Coach Hedge seemed to be making some sort of snare out of kite string, a tennis racket and a hunting knife. 'You mean those cute fuzzy critters –'

‘No.’ Nico sounded annoyed, like he got that question a lot. ‘*Lemures*. Unfriendly ghosts. All Roman cities have them, but in Pompeii –’

‘The whole city was wiped out,’ Reyna remembered. ‘In 79 C.E., Vesuvius erupted and covered the town in ash.’

Nico nodded. ‘A tragedy like that creates a *lot* of angry spirits.’

Coach Hedge eyed the distant volcano. ‘It’s steaming. Is that a bad sign?’

‘I – I’m not sure.’ Nico picked at a hole in the knee of his black jeans. ‘Mountain gods, the *oureae*, can sense children of Hades. It’s possible that’s why we were pulled off course. The spirit of Vesuvius might have been intentionally trying to kill us. But I doubt the mountain can hurt us this far away. Working up to a full eruption would take too long. The immediate threat is all around us.’

The back of Reyna’s neck tingled.

She’d grown used to Lares, the friendly spirits at Camp Jupiter, but even *they* made her uneasy. They didn’t have a good understanding of personal space. Sometimes they’d walk right through her, leaving her with vertigo. Being in Pompeii gave Reyna the same feeling, as if the whole city was one big ghost that had swallowed her whole.

She couldn’t tell her friends how much she feared ghosts, or why she feared them. The whole reason she and her sister had run away from San Juan all those years ago ... that secret had to stay buried.

‘Can you keep them at bay?’ she asked.

Nico turned up his palms. ‘I’ve sent out that message: *Stay away*. But once I’m asleep it won’t do us much good.’

Coach Hedge patted his tennis-racket-knife contraption. ‘Don’t worry, kid. I’m going to line the perimeter with alarms and snares. Plus, I’ll be watching over you the whole time with my baseball bat.’

That didn’t seem to reassure Nico, but his eyes were already half-closed. ‘Okay. But ... go easy. We don’t want another Albania.’

‘No,’ Reyna agreed.

Their first shadow-travel experience together two days ago had been a total fiasco, possibly the most humiliating episode in Reyna’s long career. Perhaps someday, if they survived, they would look back on it and laugh, but not now. The three of them had agreed never to speak of it. What happened in Albania would *stay* in Albania.

Coach Hedge looked hurt. ‘Fine, whatever. Just rest, kid. We got you covered.’

‘All right,’ Nico relented. ‘Maybe a little ...’ He managed to take off his aviator jacket and wad it into a pillow before he keeled over and began to snore.

Reyna marvelled at how peaceful he looked. The worry lines vanished. His face became strangely angelic ... like his surname, *di Angelo*. She could almost believe he was a regular fourteen-year-old boy, not a son of Hades who had been pulled out of time from the 1940s and forced to endure more tragedy and danger than most demigods would in a lifetime.

When Nico had arrived at Camp Jupiter, Reyna didn’t trust him. She’d sensed there was more to his story than being an ambassador from his father, [Pluto](#). Now, of course, she knew the truth. He was a *Greek* demigod – the first person in living memory, perhaps the first *ever*, to go back and forth between the Roman and Greek camps without telling either group that the other existed.

Strangely, that made Reyna trust Nico more.

Sure, he wasn’t Roman. He’d never hunted with Lupa or endured the brutal legion training. But Nico had proven himself in other ways. He’d kept the camps’ secrets for the best of reasons, because he feared a war. He had plunged into Tartarus alone, *voluntarily*, to find the Doors of Death. He’d been captured and imprisoned by giants. He had led the crew of the *Argo II* into the House of Hades ... and now he had accepted yet another terrible quest: risking himself to haul the Athena Parthenos back to Camp Half-Blood.

The pace of the journey was maddeningly slow. They could only shadow-travel a few hundred miles each night, resting during the day to let Nico recover, but even that required more stamina from Nico than Reyna would have thought possible.

He carried so much sadness and loneliness, so much heartache. Yet he put his mission first. He persevered. Reyna respected that. She understood that.

She’d never been a touchy-feely person, but she had the strangest desire to drape her cloak over Nico’s shoulders and tuck him in. She mentally chided herself. He was a comrade, not her little brother. He wouldn’t appreciate the gesture.

‘Hey.’ Coach Hedge interrupted her thoughts. ‘You need sleep, too. I’ll take first watch and cook some grub. Those ghosts shouldn’t be too dangerous now

that the sun's coming up.'

Reyna hadn't noticed how light it was getting. Pink and turquoise clouds striped the eastern horizon. The little bronze faun cast a shadow across the dry fountain.

'I've read about this place,' Reyna realized. 'It's one of the best-preserved villas in Pompeii. They call it the House of the Faun.'

Gleeson glanced at the statue with distaste. 'Yeah, well, today it's the House of the *Satyr*.'

Reyna managed a smile. She was starting to appreciate the differences between satyrs and fauns. If she ever fell asleep with a *faun* on duty, she'd wake up with her supplies stolen, a moustache drawn on her face and the faun long gone. Coach Hedge was different – mostly *good* different, though he did have an unhealthy obsession with martial arts and baseball bats.

'All right,' she agreed. 'You take first watch. I'll put Aurum and Argentum on guard duty with you.'

Hedge looked like he wanted to protest, but Reyna whistled sharply. The metallic greyhounds materialized from the ruins, racing towards her from different directions. Even after so many years, Reyna had no idea where they came from or where they went when she dismissed them, but seeing them lifted her spirits.

Hedge cleared his throat. 'You *sure* those aren't Dalmatians? They look like Dalmatians.'

'They're greyhounds, Coach.' Reyna had no idea why Hedge feared Dalmatians, but she was too tired to ask right now. 'Aurum, Argentum, guard us while I sleep. Obey Gleeson Hedge.'

The dogs circled the courtyard, keeping their distance from the Athena Parthenos, which radiated hostility towards everything Roman.

Reyna herself was only now getting used to it, and she was pretty sure the statue did not appreciate being relocated in the middle of an ancient Roman city.

She lay down and pulled her purple cloak over herself. Her fingers curled around the pouch at her belt, where she kept the silver coin Annabeth had given her before they parted company in Epirus.

It's a sign that things can change, Annabeth had told her. The Mark of Athena is yours now. Maybe the coin will bring you luck.

Whether that luck would be good or bad, Reyna wasn't sure.

She took one last look at the bronze faun cowering before the sunrise and the Athena Parthenos. Then she closed her eyes and slipped into dreams.



VI

Reyna

MOST OF THE TIME, Reyna could control her nightmares.

She had trained her mind to start all her dreams in her favourite place – the Garden of **Bacchus** on the tallest hill in New Rome. She felt safe and tranquil there. When visions invaded her sleep – as they always did with demigods – she could contain them by imagining they were reflections in the garden’s fountain. This allowed her to sleep peacefully and avoid waking up the next morning in a cold sweat.

Tonight, however, she wasn’t so lucky.

The dream began well enough. She stood in the garden on a warm afternoon, the arbour heavy with blooming honey-suckle. In the central fountain, the little statue of Bacchus spouted water into the basin.

The golden domes and red-tiled roofs of New Rome spread out below her. Half a mile west rose the fortifications of Camp Jupiter. Beyond that, the Little Tiber curved gently around the valley, tracing the edge of the Berkeley Hills, hazy and golden in the summer light.

Reyna held a cup of hot chocolate, her favourite drink.

She exhaled contentedly. This place was worth defending – for herself, for her friends, for all demigods. Her four years at Camp Jupiter hadn’t been easy, but they’d been the best time of Reyna’s life.

Suddenly the horizon darkened. Reyna thought it might be a storm. Then she realized a tidal wave of dark loam was rolling across the hills, turning the skin of the earth inside out, leaving nothing behind.

Reyna watched in horror as the earthen tide reached the edge of the valley. The god **Terminus** sustained a magical barrier around the camp, but it slowed the destruction for only a moment. Purple light sprayed upward like shattered glass,

and the tide poured through, shredding trees, destroying roads, wiping the Little Tiber off the map.

It's a vision, Reyna thought. I can control this.

She tried to change the dream. She imagined that the destruction was only a reflection in the fountain, a harmless video image, but the nightmare continued in full vivid scope.

The earth swallowed the [Field of Mars](#), obliterating every trace of forts and trenches from the war games. The city's aqueduct collapsed like a line of children's blocks. Camp Jupiter itself fell – watchtowers crashing down, walls and barracks disintegrating. The screams of demigods were silenced, and the earth moved on.

A sob built in Reyna's throat. The gleaming shrines and monuments on Temple Hill crumbled. The coliseum and the [hippodrome](#) were swept away. The tide of loam reached the Pomerian line and roared straight into the city. Families ran through the forum. Children cried in terror.

The Senate House imploded. Villas and gardens disappeared like crops under a tiller. The tide churned uphill towards the Garden of Bacchus – the last remnant of Reyna's world.

You left them helpless, Reyna Ramírez-Arellano. A woman's voice issued from the black terrain. Your camp will be destroyed. Your quest is a fool's errand. My hunter comes for you.

Reyna tore herself from the garden railing. She ran to the fountain of Bacchus and gripped the rim of the basin, staring desperately into the water. She willed the nightmare to become a harmless reflection.

THUNK.

The basin broke in half, split by an arrow the size of a rake. Reyna stared in shock at the raven-feather fletching, the shaft painted red, yellow and black like a coral snake, the Stygian iron point embedded in her gut.

She looked up through a haze of pain. At the edge of the garden, a dark figure approached – the silhouette of a man whose eyes shone like miniature headlamps, blinding Reyna. She heard the scrape of iron against leather as he drew another arrow from his quiver.

Then her dream changed.

The garden and the hunter vanished, along with the arrow in Reyna's stomach.

She found herself in an abandoned vineyard. Stretched out before her, acres of dead grapevines hung in rows on wooden lattices, like gnarled miniature skeletons. At the far end of the fields stood a cedar-shingled farmhouse with a wraparound porch. Beyond that, the land dropped off into the sea.

Reyna recognized this place: the Goldsmith Winery on the north shore of Long Island. Her scouting parties had secured it as a forward base for the legion's assault on Camp Half-Blood.

She had ordered the bulk of the legion to remain in Manhattan until she told them otherwise, but obviously Octavian had disobeyed her.

The entire Twelfth Legion was camped in the northern-most field. They'd dug in with their usual military precision – ten-foot-deep trenches and spiked earthen walls around the perimeter, a watchtower on each corner armed with ballistae. Inside, tents were arranged in neat rows of white and red. The standards of all five cohorts curled in the wind.

The sight of the legion should have lifted Reyna's spirits. It was a small force, barely two hundred demigods, but they were well trained and well organized. If Julius Caesar came back from the dead, he would've had no trouble recognizing Reyna's troops as worthy soldiers of Rome.

But they had no business being so close to Camp Half-Blood. Octavian's insubordination made Reyna clench her fists. He was intentionally provoking the Greeks, hoping for battle.

Her dream vision zoomed to the porch of the farmhouse, where Octavian sat in a gilded chair that looked suspiciously like a throne. Along with his senatorial purple-lined toga, his centurion badge and his augur's knife, he had adopted a new honour: a white cloth mantle over his head, which marked him as *Pontifex Maximus*, high priest to the gods.

Reyna wanted to strangle him. No demigod in living memory had taken the title *Pontifex Maximus*. By doing so, Octavian was elevating himself almost to the level of emperor.

To his right, reports and maps were strewn across a low table. To his left, a marble altar was heaped with fruit and gold offerings, no doubt for the gods. But to Reyna it looked like an altar to Octavian himself.

At his side, the legion's eagle bearer, Jacob, stood at attention, sweating in his lion-skin cloak as he held the staff with the golden eagle standard of the Twelfth.

Octavian was in the midst of an audience. At the base of the stairs knelt a boy in jeans and a rumpled hoodie. Octavian's fellow centurion of the First Cohort, Mike Kahale, stood to one side with his arms crossed, glowering with obvious displeasure.

'Well, now.' Octavian scanned a piece of parchment. 'I see here you are a legacy, a descendant of [Orcus](#).'

The boy in the hoodie looked up, and Reyna caught her breath. *Bryce Lawrence*. She recognized his mop of brown hair, his broken nose, his cruel green eyes and smug, twisted smile.

'Yes, my lord,' Bryce said.

'Oh, I'm not a *lord*.' Octavian's eyes crinkled. 'Just a centurion, an augur and a humble priest doing his best to serve the gods. I understand you were dismissed from the legion for ... ah, disciplinary problems.'

Reyna tried to shout, but she couldn't make a sound. Octavian knew perfectly well why Bryce had been kicked out. Much like his godly forefather, Orcus, the underworld god of punishment, Bryce was completely remorseless. The little psychopath had survived his trials with Lupa just fine, but as soon as he arrived at Camp Jupiter he had proved to be untrainable. He had tried to set a cat on fire for fun. He had stabbed a horse and sent it stampeding through the Forum. He was even suspected of sabotaging a siege engine and getting his own centurion killed during the war games.

If Reyna had been able to prove it, Bryce's punishment would've been death. But because the evidence was circumstantial, and because Bryce's family was rich and powerful with lots of influence in New Rome, he'd got away with the lighter sentence of banishment.

'Yes, Pontifex,' Bryce said slowly. 'But, if I may, those charges were unproven. I am a loyal Roman.'

Mike Kahale looked like he was doing his best not to throw up.

Octavian smiled. 'I believe in second chances. You've responded to my call for recruits. You have the proper credentials and letters of recommendation. Do you pledge to follow my orders and serve the legion?'

'Absolutely,' said Bryce.

'Then you are reinstated *in probatio*,' Octavian said, 'until you have proven yourself in combat.'

He gestured at Mike, who reached in his pouch and fished out a lead *probatio* tablet on a leather cord. He hung the cord around Bryce's neck.

'Report to the Fifth Cohort,' Octavian said. 'They could use some new blood, some fresh perspective. If your centurion Dakota has any problem with that, tell him to talk to me.'

Bryce smiled like he'd just been handed a sharp knife. 'My pleasure.'

'And, Bryce.' Octavian's face looked almost ghoulish under his white mantle – his eyes too piercing, his cheeks too gaunt, his lips too thin and colourless. 'However much money, power and prestige the Lawrence family carries in the legion, remember that *my* family carries more. I am *personally* sponsoring you, as I am sponsoring all the other new recruits. Follow my orders, and you'll advance quickly. Soon I may have a little job for you – a chance to prove your worth. But cross me and I will not be as lenient as Reyna. Do you understand?'

Bryce's smile faded. He looked like he wanted to say something, but he changed his mind. He nodded.

'Good,' Octavian said. 'Also, get a haircut. You look like one of those *Graecus scum*. Dismissed.'

After Bryce left, Mike Kahale shook his head. 'That makes two dozen now.'

'It's good news, my friend,' Octavian assured him. 'We need the extra manpower.'

'Murderers. Thieves. Traitors.'

'Loyal demigods,' Octavian said, 'who owe their position to *me*.'

Mike scowled. Until Reyna had met him, she'd never understood why people called biceps *guns*, but Mike's arms were as thick as bazooka barrels. He had broad features, a toasted-almond complexion, onyx hair and proud dark eyes, like the old Hawaiian kings. She wasn't sure how a high-school linebacker from Hilo had wound up with [Venus](#) for a mom, but no one in the legion gave him any grief about that – not once they saw him crush rocks with his bare hands.

Reyna had always liked Mike Kahale. Unfortunately, Mike was *very* loyal to his sponsor. And his sponsor was Octavian.

The self-appointed pontifex rose and stretched. 'Don't worry, old friend. Our siege teams have the Greek camp surrounded. Our eagles have complete air superiority. The Greeks aren't going anywhere until we're ready to strike. In

eleven days, all my forces will be in place. My little surprises will be prepared. On August first, the Feast of [Spes](#), the Greek camp will fall.'

'But Reyna said –'

'We've been through this.' Octavian slid his iron dagger from his belt and threw it at the table, where it impaled a map of Camp Half-Blood. 'Reyna has forfeited her position. She went to the ancient lands, which is against the *law*.'

'But the Earth Mother –'

'– has been stirring *because* of the war between the Greek and Roman camps, yes? The gods are incapacitated, yes? And how do we solve that problem, Mike? We eliminate the division. We wipe out the Greeks. We return the gods to their proper manifestation as *Roman*. Once the gods are restored to their full power, Gaia will not dare rise. She will sink back into her slumber. We demigods will be strong and unified, as we were in the old days of the empire. Besides, the first day of August is most auspicious – the month named after my ancestor [Augustus](#). And you know how he united the Romans?'

'He seized power and became emperor,' Mike rumbled.

Octavian waved aside the comment. 'Nonsense. He saved Rome by becoming *First Citizen*. He wanted peace and prosperity, not power! Believe me, Mike, I intend to follow his example. I will save New Rome and, when I do, I will remember my friends.'

Mike shifted his considerable bulk. 'You sound certain. Has your gift of prophecy –'

Octavian held up his hand in warning. He glanced at Jacob the eagle bearer, who was still standing at attention behind him. 'Jacob, you're dismissed. Why don't you go polish the eagle or something?'

Jacob's shoulders slumped in relief. 'Yes, Augur. I mean Centurion! I mean *Pontifex*! I mean –'

'Go.'

'I'll go.'

Once Jacob had hobbled off, Octavian's face clouded. 'Mike, I told you not to speak of my, ah, problem. But to answer your question: no, there still seems to be some *interference* with Apollo's usual gift to me.' He glanced resentfully at a pile of mutilated stuffed animals heaped in the corner of the porch. 'I can't see the future. Perhaps that false Oracle at Camp Half-Blood is working some sort of

witchcraft. But as I've told you before, in strictest confidence, Apollo spoke to me *clearly* last year at Camp Jupiter! He personally blessed my endeavours. He promised I would be remembered as the saviour of the Romans.'

Octavian spread his arms, revealing his harp tattoo, the symbol of his godly forefather. Seven slash marks indicated his years of service – more than any presiding officer, including Reyna.

'Never fear, Mike. We will crush the Greeks. We will stop Gaia and her minions. Then we'll take that harpy the Greeks have been harbouring – the one who memorized our [Sibylline Books](#) – and we'll force her to give us the knowledge of our ancestors. Once that happens, I'm sure Apollo will restore my gift of prophecy. Camp Jupiter will be more powerful than ever. We will *rule* the future.'

Mike's scowl didn't lessen, but he raised his fist in salute. 'You're the boss.'

'Yes, I am.' Octavian pulled his dagger from the table. 'Now, go check on those two dwarfs you captured. I want them properly terrified before I interrogate them again and dispatch them to Tartarus.'

The dream faded.

'Hey, wake up.' Reyna's eyes fluttered open. Gleeson Hedge was leaning over her, shaking her shoulder. 'We got trouble.'

His grave tone got her blood moving.

'What is it?' She struggled to sit up. 'Ghosts? Monsters?'

Hedge scowled. 'Worse. *Tourists.*'



VII

Reyna

THE HORDES HAD ARRIVED.

In groups of twenty or thirty, tourists swarmed through the ruins, milling around the villas, wandering the cobblestone paths, gawking at the colourful frescoes and mosaics.

Reyna worried how the tourists would react to a forty-foot-tall statue of Athena in the middle of the courtyard, but the Mist must have been working overtime to obscure the mortals' vision.

Each time a group approached, they'd stop at the edge of the courtyard and stare in disappointment at the statue. One British tour guide announced, 'Ah, scaffolding. It appears this area is undergoing restoration. Pity. Let's move along.'

And off they went.

At least the statue didn't rumble, 'DIE, UNBELIEVERS!' and zap the mortals to dust. Reyna had once dealt with a statue of the goddess [Diana](#) like that. It hadn't been her most relaxing day.

She recalled what Annabeth had told her about the Athena Parthenos: its magical aura both attracted monsters and kept them at bay. Sure enough, every so often, out of the corner of her eye, Reyna would spot glowing white spirits in Roman clothes flitting among the ruins, frowning at the statue in consternation.

'Those *lemures* are everywhere,' Gleeson muttered. 'Keeping their distance for now – but come nightfall we'd better be ready to move. Ghosts are always worse at night.'

Reyna didn't need to be reminded of that.

She watched as an elderly couple in matching pastel shirts and Bermuda shorts tottered through a nearby garden. She was glad they didn't come any

closer. Around the camp, Coach Hedge had rigged all sorts of trip wires, snares and oversized mousetraps that wouldn't stop any self-respecting monster, but they might very well bring down a senior citizen.

Despite the warm morning, Reyna shivered from her dreams. She couldn't decide which was more terrifying – the impending destruction of New Rome, or the way Octavian was poisoning the legion from the inside.

Your quest is a fool's errand.

Camp Jupiter needed her. The Twelfth Legion needed her. Yet Reyna was halfway across the world, watching a satyr toast blueberry waffles on a stick over an open fire.

She wanted to talk about her nightmares, but she decided to wait until Nico woke up. She wasn't sure she'd have the courage to describe them twice.

Nico kept snoring. Reyna had discovered that once he fell asleep it took a *lot* to wake him up. The coach could do a goat-hoof tap dance around Nico's head and the son of Hades wouldn't even budge.

'Here.' Hedge offered her a plate of flame-grilled waffles with fresh sliced kiwi and pineapple. It all looked surprisingly good.

'Where are you getting these supplies?' Reyna marvelled.

'Hey, I'm a satyr. We're *very* efficient packers.' He took a bite of waffle. 'We also know how to live off the land!'

As Reyna ate, Coach Hedge took out a notepad and started to write. When he was finished, he folded the paper into an aeroplane and tossed it into the air. A breeze carried it away.

'A letter to your wife?' Reyna guessed.

Under the rim of his baseball cap, Hedge's eyes were bloodshot. 'Mellie's a cloud nymph. Air spirits send stuff by paper aeroplane all the time. Hopefully her cousins will keep the letter going across the ocean until it finds her. It's not as fast as an [Iris](#)-message, but, well, I want our kid to have some record of me, in case, you know ...'

'We'll get you home,' Reyna promised. 'You will see your kid.'

Hedge clenched his jaw and said nothing.

Reyna was pretty good at getting people to talk. She considered it essential to know her comrades-in-arms. But she'd had a tough time convincing Hedge to open up about his wife, Mellie, who was close to giving birth back at Camp

Half-Blood. Reyna had trouble imagining the coach as a father, but she understood what it was like to grow up without parents. She wasn't going to let that happen to Coach Hedge's child.

'Yeah, well ...' The satyr bit off another piece of waffle, including the stick he'd toasted it on. 'I just wish we could move faster.' He chin-pointed to Nico. 'I don't see how this kid is going to last one more jump. How many more will it take us to get home?'

Reyna shared his concern. In only eleven days, the giants planned to awaken Gaia. Octavian planned to attack Camp Half-Blood on the same day. That couldn't be a coincidence. Perhaps Gaia was whispering in Octavian's ear, influencing his decisions subconsciously. Or worse: Octavian was actively in league with the earth goddess. Reyna didn't want to believe that even Octavian would knowingly betray the legion, but after what she'd seen in her dreams she couldn't be sure.

She finished her meal as a group of Chinese tourists shuffled past the courtyard. Reyna had been awake for less than an hour and already she was restless to get moving.

'Thanks for breakfast, Coach.' She got to her feet and stretched. 'If you'll excuse me, where there are tourists, there are bathrooms. I need to use the little praetors' room.'

'Go ahead.' The coach jangled the whistle that hung around his neck. 'If anything happens, I'll blow.'

Reyna left Aurum and Argentum on guard duty and strolled through the crowds of mortals until she found a visitors' centre with restrooms. She did her best to clean up, but she found it ironic that she was in an actual Roman city and couldn't enjoy a nice hot Roman bath. She had to settle for paper towels, a broken soap dispenser and an asthmatic hand dryer. And the toilets ... the less said about those, the better.

As she was walking back, she passed a small museum with a window display. Behind the glass lay a row of plaster figures, all frozen in the throes of death. A young girl was curled in a fetal position. A woman lay twisted in agony, her mouth open to scream, her arms thrown overhead. A man knelt with his head bowed, as if accepting the inevitable.

Reyna stared with a mixture of horror and revulsion. She'd read about such figures, but she'd never seen them in person. After the eruption of Vesuvius, volcanic ash had buried the city and hardened to rock around dying Pompeians. Their bodies had disintegrated, leaving behind human-shaped pockets of air. Early archaeologists had poured plaster into the holes and made these casts – creepy replicas of Ancient Romans.

Reyna found it disturbing, *wrong*, that these people's dying moments were on display like clothes in a shop window, yet she couldn't look away.

All her life she'd dreamed about coming to Italy. She had assumed it would never happen. The ancient lands were forbidden to modern demigods; the area was simply too dangerous. Nevertheless, she wanted to follow in the footsteps of Aeneas, son of Aphrodite, the first demigod to settle here after the Trojan War. She wanted to see the original Tiber River, where Lupa the wolf goddess saved [Romulus and Remus](#).

But Pompeii? Reyna had never wanted to come here. The site of Rome's most infamous disaster, an entire city swallowed by the earth ... After Reyna's nightmares, that hit a little too close to home.

So far in the ancient lands, she'd only seen one place on her wish list: Diocletian's Palace in Split, and even that visit had hardly gone the way she'd imagined. Reyna used to dream about going there with Jason to admire their favourite emperor's home. She pictured romantic walks with him through the old city, sunset picnics on the parapets.

Instead, Reyna had arrived in Croatia not with him but with a dozen angry wind spirits on her tail. She'd fought her way through ghosts in the palace. On her way out, gryphons had attacked, mortally wounding her pegasus. The closest she'd got to Jason was finding a note he'd left for her under a bust of Diocletian in the basement.

She would only have painful memories of that place.

Don't be bitter, she chided herself. Aeneas suffered, too. So did Romulus, Diocletian and all the rest. Romans don't complain about hardship.

Staring at the plaster death figures in the museum window, she wondered what they had been thinking as they curled up to die in the ashes. Probably not: *Well, we're Romans! We shouldn't complain!*

A gust of wind blew through the ruins, making a hollow moan. Sunlight flashed against the window, momentarily blinding her.

With a start, Reyna looked up. The sun was directly overhead. How could it be noon already? She'd left the House of the Faun just after breakfast. She'd only been standing here a few minutes ... hadn't she?

She tore herself from the museum display and hurried off, trying to shake the feeling that the dead Pompeians were whispering behind her back.

The rest of the afternoon was unnervingly quiet.

Reyna kept watch while Coach Hedge slept, but there was nothing much to guard against. Tourists came and went. Random harpies and wind spirits flew by overhead. Reyna's dogs would snarl in warning, but the monsters didn't stop to fight.

Ghosts skulked around the edges of the courtyard, apparently intimidated by the Athena Parthenos. Reyna couldn't blame them. The longer the statue stood in Pompeii, the more anger it seemed to radiate, making Reyna's skin itchy and her nerves raw.

Finally, just after sunset, Nico woke. He wolfed down an avocado and cheese sandwich, the first time he'd shown a decent appetite since leaving the House of Hades.

Reyna hated to ruin his dinner, but they didn't have much time. As the daylight faded, the ghosts started moving closer and in greater numbers.

She told him about her dreams: the earth swallowing Camp Jupiter, Octavian closing in on Camp Half-Blood and the hunter with the glowing eyes who had shot Reyna in the gut.

Nico stared at his empty plate. 'This hunter ... a giant, maybe?'

Coach Hedge grunted. 'I'd rather not find out. I say we keep moving.'

Nico's mouth twitched. 'You are suggesting we avoid a fight?'

'Listen, cupcake, I like a smackdown as much as the next guy, but we've got enough monsters to worry about without some bounty-hunter giant tracking us across the world. I don't like the sound of those huge arrows.'

'For once,' Reyna said, 'I agree with Hedge.'

Nico unfolded his aviator jacket. He put his finger through an arrow hole in the sleeve.

‘I could ask for advice.’ Nico sounded reluctant. ‘Thalia Grace ...’

‘Jason’s sister,’ Reyna said.

She’d never met Thalia. In fact, she’d only recently learned Jason *had* a sister. According to Jason, she was a Greek demigod, a daughter of Zeus, who led a group of Diana’s ... no, Artemis’s followers. The whole idea made Reyna’s head spin.

Nico nodded. ‘The Hunters of Artemis are ... well, *hunters*. If anybody knew about this giant hunter guy, Thalia would. I could try sending her an Iris-message.’

‘You don’t sound very excited about the idea,’ Reyna noticed. ‘Are you two ... on bad terms?’

‘We’re fine.’

A few feet away, Aurum snarled quietly, which meant Nico was lying.

Reyna decided not to press.

‘I should also try to contact my sister, Hylla,’ she said. ‘Camp Jupiter is lightly defended. If Gaia attacks there, perhaps the Amazons could help.’

Coach Hedge scowled. ‘No offence, but, uh ... what’s an army of Amazons going to do against a wave of dirt?’

Reyna fought down a sense of dread. She suspected Hedge was right. Against what she’d seen in her dreams, the only defence would be to prevent the giants from waking Gaia. For that, she had to put her trust in the crew of the *Argo II*.

The daylight was almost gone. Around the courtyard, ghosts were forming a mob – hundreds of glowing Romans carrying spectral clubs or stones.

‘We can talk more after the next jump,’ Reyna decided. ‘Right now, we need to get out of here.’

‘Yeah.’ Nico stood. ‘I think we can reach Spain this time if we’re lucky. Just let me –’

The mob of ghosts vanished, like a mass of birthday candles blown out in a single breath.

Reyna’s hand went to her dagger. ‘Where did they go?’

Nico’s eyes flitted across the ruins. His expression was not reassuring. ‘I – I’m not sure, but I don’t think it’s a good sign. Keep a lookout. I’ll get harnessed up. Should only take a few seconds.’

Gleeson Hedge rose to his hooves. ‘*A few seconds you do not have.*’

Reyna's stomach curled into a tiny ball.

Hedge spoke with a woman's voice – the same one Reyna had heard in her nightmare.

She drew her knife.

Hedge turned towards her, his face expressionless. His eyes were solid black. *'Be glad, Reyna Ramírez-Arellano. You will die as a Roman. You will join the ghosts of Pompeii.'*

The ground rumbled. All around the courtyard, spirals of ash swirled into the air. They solidified into crude human figures – earthen shells like the ones in the museum. They stared at Reyna, their eyes ragged holes in faces of rock.

'The earth will swallow you,' Hedge said in the voice of Gaia. *'Just as it swallowed them.'*



VIII

Reyna

‘THERE ARE TOO MANY OF THEM.’ Reyna wondered bitterly how many times she’d said that in her demigod career.

She should have a badge made and wear it around to save time. When she died, the words would probably be written on her tombstone: *There were too many of them.*

Her greyhounds stood on either side of her, growling at the earthen shells. Reyna counted at least twenty, closing in from every direction.

Coach Hedge continued to speak in a very womanly voice: *‘The dead always outnumber the living. These spirits have waited centuries, unable to express their anger. Now I have given them bodies of earth.’*

One earthen ghost stepped forward. It moved slowly, but its footfall was so heavy it cracked the ancient tiles.

‘Nico?’ Reyna called.

‘I can’t control them,’ he said, frantically untangling his harness. ‘Something about the rock shells, I guess. I need a couple of seconds to concentrate on making the shadow-jump. Otherwise I might teleport us into another volcano.’

Reyna cursed under her breath. There was no way she could fight off so many by herself while Nico prepared their escape, especially with Coach Hedge out of commission. ‘Use the sceptre,’ she said. ‘Get me some zombies.’

‘It will not help,’ Coach Hedge intoned. *‘Stand aside, Praetor. Let the ghosts of Pompeii destroy this Greek statue. A true Roman would not resist.’*

The earthen ghosts shuffled forward. Through their mouth holes, they made hollow whistling noises, like someone blowing across empty soda bottles. One stepped on the coach’s dagger-tennis-racket trap and smashed it to pieces.

From his belt, Nico pulled the sceptre of Diocletian. ‘Reyna, if I summon *more* dead Romans ... who’s to say they won’t join this mob?’

‘I say. I am a praetor. Get me some legionnaires, and I’ll control them.’

‘*You shall perish,*’ said the coach. ‘*You shall never –*’

Reyna smacked him on the head with the pommel of her knife. The satyr crumpled.

‘Sorry, Coach,’ she muttered. ‘That was getting tiresome. Nico – zombies! Then concentrate on getting us out of here.’

Nico raised his sceptre and the ground trembled.

The earthen ghosts chose that moment to charge. Aurum leaped at the nearest one and literally bit the creature’s head off with his metal fangs. The rock shell toppled backwards and shattered.

Argentum was not so lucky. He sprang at another ghost, which swung its heavy arm and bashed the greyhound in his face. Argentum went flying. He staggered to his feet. His head was twisted forty-five degrees to the right. One of his ruby eyes was missing.

Anger hammered in Reyna’s chest like a hot spike. She’d already lost her pegasus. She was *not* going to lose her dogs, too. She slashed her knife through the ghost’s chest, then drew her *gladius*. Strictly speaking, fighting with two blades wasn’t very Roman, but Reyna had spent time with pirates. She’d picked up more than a few tricks.

The earthen shells crumbled easily, but they hit like sledgehammers. Reyna didn’t understand how, but she knew she couldn’t afford to take even one blow. Unlike Argentum, she wouldn’t survive getting her head knocked sideways.

‘Nico!’ She ducked between two earthen ghosts, allowing them to smash each other’s heads in. ‘Any time now!’

The ground split open down the centre of the courtyard. Dozens of skeletal soldiers clawed their way to the surface. Their shields looked like giant corroded pennies. Their blades were more rust than metal. But Reyna had never been so relieved to see reinforcements.

‘Legion!’ she shouted. ‘*Ad aciem!*’

The zombies responded, pushing through the earthen ghosts to form a battle line. Some fell, crushed by stone fists. Others managed to close ranks and raise their shields.

Behind her, Nico cursed.

Reyna risked a backward glance. The sceptre of Diocletian was smoking in Nico's hands.

'It's fighting me!' he yelled. 'I don't think it likes summoning Romans to fight other Romans!'

Reyna knew that Ancient Romans had spent at least half their time fighting each other, but she decided not to bring that up. 'Just secure Coach Hedge. Get ready to shadow-travel! I'll buy you some –'

Nico yelped. The sceptre of Diocletian exploded into pieces. Nico didn't look hurt, but he stared at Reyna in shock. 'I – I don't know what happened. You've got a few minutes, tops, before your zombies disappear.'

'Legion!' Reyna shouted. '*Orbem formate! Gladium signe!*'

The zombies circled the Athena Parthenos, their swords ready for close-quarters fighting. Argentum dragged the unconscious Coach Hedge over to Nico, who was furiously strapping himself into the harness. Aurum stood guard, lunging at any earth ghosts who broke through the line.

Reyna fought shoulder to shoulder with the dead legionnaires, sending her strength into their ranks. She knew it wouldn't be enough. The earthen ghosts fell easily, but more kept rising from the ground in swirls of ash. Each time their stone fists connected, another zombie went down.

Meanwhile, the Athena Parthenos towered over the battle – regal, haughty and unconcerned.

A little help would be nice, Reyna thought. Maybe a destructo-ray? Or some good old-fashioned smiting.

The statue did nothing except radiate hatred, which seemed directed equally at Reyna and the attacking ghosts.

You want to lug me to Long Island? the statue seemed to say. *Good luck with that, Roman scum.*

Reyna's destiny: to die defending a passive-aggressive goddess.

She kept fighting, extending more of her will into the undead troops. In return, they bombarded her with their despair and resentment.

You fight for nothing, the zombie legionnaires whispered in her mind. *The empire is gone.*

‘For Rome!’ Reyna cried hoarsely. She slashed her *gladius* through one earthen ghost and stabbed her dagger in another’s chest. ‘Twelfth Legion Fulminata!’

All around her, zombies fell. Some were crushed in battle. Others disintegrated on their own as the residual power of Diocletian’s sceptre finally failed.

The earthen ghosts closed in – a sea of misshapen faces with hollow eyes.

‘Reyna, now!’ Nico yelled. ‘We’re leaving!’

She glanced back. Nico had harnessed himself to the Athena Parthenos. He held the unconscious Gleeson Hedge in his arms like a damsel in distress. Aurum and Argentum had disappeared – perhaps too badly damaged to continue fighting.

Reyna stumbled.

A rock fist gave her a glancing blow to the ribcage, and her side erupted in pain. Her head swam. She tried to breathe, but it was like inhaling knives.

‘Reyna!’ Nico shouted again.

The Athena Parthenos flickered, about to disappear.

An earthen ghost swung at Reyna’s head. She managed to dodge, but the pain in her ribs almost made her black out.

Give up, said the voices in her head. *The legacy of Rome is dead and buried, just like Pompeii.*

‘No,’ she murmured to herself. ‘Not while I’m still alive.’

Nico stretched out his hand as he slipped into the shadows. With the last of her strength, Reyna leaped towards him.



IX

Leo

LEO DIDN'T WANT TO COME OUT OF THE WALL.

He had three more braces to attach, and nobody else was skinny enough to fit in the crawl space. (One of the many advantages of being scrawny.)

Wedged between the layers of the hull with the plumbing and wiring, Leo could be alone with his thoughts. When he got frustrated, which happened about every five seconds, he could hit stuff with his mallet and the other crew members would figure he was working, not throwing a tantrum.

One problem with his sanctuary: he only fitted up to his waist. His butt and legs were still on view to the general public, which made it hard for him to hide.

'Leo!' Piper's voice came from somewhere behind him. 'We need you.'

The Celestial bronze O-ring slipped out of Leo's pliers and slid into the depths of the crawl space.

Leo sighed. 'Talk to the pants, Piper! 'Cause the hands are busy!'

'I am *not* talking to the pants. Meeting in the mess hall. We're almost at Olympia.'

'Yeah, fine. I'll be there in a sec.'

'What are you doing, anyway? You've been poking around inside the hull for days.'

Leo swept his flashlight across the Celestial bronze plates and pistons he'd been installing slowly but surely. 'Routine maintenance.'

Silence. Piper was a little too good at knowing when he was lying. 'Leo –'

'Hey, while you're out there, do me a favour. I got this itch right below my –'

'Fine, I'm leaving!'

Leo allowed himself a couple more minutes to fasten the brace. His work wasn't done. Not by a long shot. But he was making progress.

Of course, he'd laid the groundwork for his secret project when he first built the *Argo II*, but he hadn't told anyone about it. He had barely been honest with himself about what he was doing.

Nothing lasts forever, his dad once told him. *Not even the best machines*.

Yeah, okay, maybe that was true. But [Hephaestus](#) had also said, *Everything can be reused*. Leo intended to test that theory.

It was a dangerous risk. If he failed, it would crush him. Not just emotionally. It would *physically* crush him.

The thought made him claustrophobic.

He wriggled out of the crawl space and went back into his cabin.

Well ... *technically* it was his cabin, but he didn't sleep there. The mattress was littered with wires, nails and the guts of several disassembled bronze machines. His three massive rolling tool cabinets – Chico, Harpo and Groucho – took up most of the room. Dozens of power tools hung on the walls. The worktable was piled with photocopied blueprints from *On Spheres*, the forgotten Archimedes text Leo had liberated from an underground workshop in Rome.

Even if he wanted to sleep in his cabin, it would've been too cramped and dangerous. He preferred to bed down in the engine room, where the constant hum of machinery helped him fall asleep. Besides, ever since his time on the island of Ogygia, he had become fond of camping out. A bedroll on the floor was all he needed.

His cabin was only for storage ... and for working on his most difficult projects.

He pulled his keys from his tool belt. He didn't really have time, but he unlocked Groucho's middle drawer and stared at the two precious objects inside: a bronze astrolabe he'd picked up in Bologna, and a fist-sized chunk of crystal from Ogygia. Leo hadn't figured out how to put the two things together yet, and it was driving him crazy.

He'd been hoping to get some answers when they visited Ithaca. After all, it was the home of Odysseus, the dude who had constructed the astrolabe. But, judging from what Jason had said, those ruins hadn't held any answers for him – just a bunch of ill-tempered ghouls and ghosts.

Anyway, Odysseus never got the astrolabe to work. He hadn't had a crystal to use as a homing beacon. Leo did. He would have to succeed where the cleverest

demigod of all time had failed.

Just Leo's luck. A super-hot immortal girl was waiting for him on Ogygia, but he couldn't figure out how to wire a stupid chunk of rock into the three-thousand-year-old navigation device. Some problems even duct tape couldn't solve.

Leo closed the drawer and locked it.

His eyes drifted to the bulletin board above his worktable, where two pictures hung side by side. The first was the old crayon drawing he'd made when he was seven years old – a diagram of a flying ship he'd seen in his dreams. The second was a charcoal sketch Hazel had recently made for him.

Hazel Levesque ... that girl was something. As soon as Leo rejoined the crew in Malta, she'd known right away that Leo was hurting inside. The first chance she got, after all that mess in the House of Hades, she'd marched into Leo's cabin and said, 'Spill.'

Hazel was a good listener. Leo told her the whole story. Later that evening, Hazel came back with her sketch pad and her charcoal pencils. 'Describe her,' she insisted. 'Every detail.'

It felt a little weird helping Hazel make a portrait of [Calypso](#) – as if he were talking to a police artist: *Yes, officer, that's the girl who stole my heart!* Sounded like a freaking country song.

But describing Calypso had been easy. Leo couldn't close his eyes without seeing her.

Now her likeness gazed back at him from the bulletin board – her almond-shaped eyes, her pouty lips, her long straight hair swept over one shoulder of her sleeveless dress. He could almost smell her cinnamon fragrance. Her knitted brow and the downward turn of her mouth seemed to say, *Leo Valdez, you are so full of it.*

Dang, he loved that woman!

Leo had pinned her portrait next to the drawing of the *Argo II* to remind himself that sometimes visions *do* come true. As a little kid, he'd dreamed about a flying ship. Eventually he built it. Now he would build a way to get back to Calypso.

The hum of the ship's engines changed to a lower pitch. Over the cabin loudspeaker, Festus's voice creaked and squeaked.

‘Yeah, thanks, buddy,’ Leo said. ‘On my way.’

The ship was descending, which meant Leo’s projects would have to wait.

‘Sit tight, Sunshine,’ he told Calypso’s picture. ‘I’ll get back to you, just like I promised.’

Leo could imagine her response: *I am not waiting for you, Leo Valdez. I am not in love with you. And I certainly don’t believe your foolish promises!*

The thought made him smile. He slipped his keys back into his tool belt and headed for the mess hall.

The other six demigods were eating breakfast.

Once upon a time, Leo would have worried about all of them being together belowdecks with nobody at the helm, but ever since Piper had permanently woken up Festus with her charmspeak – a feat Leo *still* did not understand – the dragon figurehead had been more than capable of running the *Argo II* by himself. Festus could navigate, check the radar, make a blueberry smoothie and spew white-hot jets of fire at invaders – simultaneously – without even blowing a circuit.

Besides, they had Buford the Wonder Table as backup.

After Coach Hedge left on his shadow-travel expedition, Leo had decided that his three-legged table could do just as good a job as their ‘adult chaperone’. He had laminated Buford’s tabletop with a magic scroll that projected a pint-sized holographic simulation of Coach Hedge. Mini-Hedge would stomp around on Buford’s top, randomly saying things like ‘CUT THAT OUT!’ ‘I’M GONNA KILL YOU!’ and the ever-popular ‘PUT SOME CLOTHES ON!’

Today, Buford was manning the helm. If Festus’s flames didn’t scare away the monsters, Buford’s holographic Hedge definitely would.

Leo stood in the doorway of the mess hall, taking in the scene around the dining table. It wasn’t often he got to see all his friends together.

Percy was eating a huge stack of blue pancakes (what was his deal with blue food?) while Annabeth chided him for pouring on too much syrup.

‘You’re drowning them!’ she complained.

‘Hey, I’m a [Poseidon](#) kid,’ he said. ‘I can’t drown. And neither can my pancakes.’

To their left, Frank and Hazel used their cereal bowls to flatten out a map of Greece. They looked over it, their heads close together. Every once in a while Frank's hand would cover Hazel's, just sweet and natural like they were an old married couple, and Hazel didn't even look flustered, which was real progress for a girl from the 1940s. Until recently, if somebody said *gosh darn*, she would nearly faint.

At the head of the table, Jason sat uncomfortably with his T-shirt rolled up to his ribcage as Nurse Piper changed his bandages.

'Hold still,' she said. 'I know it hurts.'

'It's just cold,' he said.

Leo could hear the pain in his voice. That stupid *gladius* blade had pierced him all the way through. The entrance wound on his back was an ugly shade of purple and it steamed. Probably not a good sign.

Piper tried to stay positive, but privately she had told Leo how worried she was. Ambrosia, nectar and mortal medicine could only help so much. A deep cut from Celestial bronze or Imperial gold could literally dissolve a demigod's essence from the inside out. Jason might get better. He *claimed* he felt better. But Piper wasn't so sure.

Too bad Jason wasn't a metal automaton. At least then Leo would have some idea of how to help his best friend. But with humans ... Leo felt helpless. They broke *way* too easily.

He loved his friends. He'd do anything for them. But as he looked at the six of them – three couples, all focused on each other – he thought about the warning from [Nemesis](#), the revenge goddess: *You will not find a place among your brethren. You will always be the seventh wheel.*

He was starting to think Nemesis was right. Assuming Leo lived long enough, assuming his crazy secret plan worked, his destiny was with somebody else, on an island that no man ever found twice.

But for now the best he could do was to follow his old rule: *Keep moving*. Don't get bogged down. Don't think about the bad stuff. Smile and joke even when you don't feel like it. *Especially* when you don't feel like it.

'What's up, guys?' He strolled into the mess hall. 'Aw, yes to brownies!'

He grabbed the last one – from a special sea-salt recipe they'd picked up from [Aphros](#) the fish centaur at the bottom of the Atlantic.

The intercom crackled. Buford's Mini-Hedge yelled over the speakers, 'PUT SOME CLOTHES ON!'

Everyone jumped. Hazel ended up five feet away from Frank. Percy spilled syrup in his orange juice. Jason awkwardly wriggled back into his T-shirt, and Frank turned into a bulldog.

Piper glared at Leo. 'I thought you were getting rid of that stupid hologram.'

'Hey, Buford's just saying good morning. He loves his hologram! Besides, we all miss the coach. And Frank makes a cute bulldog.'

Frank morphed back into a burly, grumpy Chinese Canadian dude. 'Just sit down, Leo. We've got stuff to talk about.'

Leo squeezed in between Jason and Hazel. He figured they were the least likely to smack him if he made bad jokes. He took a bite of his brownie and grabbed a pack of Italian junk food – Fonzie's – to round out his balanced breakfast. He'd become kind of addicted to the things since buying some in Bologna. They were cheesy and corny – two of his favourite qualities.

'So ...' Jason winced as he leaned forward. 'We're going to stay airborne and drop anchor as close as we can to Olympia. It's further inland than I'd like – about five miles – but we don't have much choice. According to Juno, we have to find the goddess of victory and, um ... subdue her.'

Uncomfortable silence around the table.

With the new drapes covering the holographic walls, the mess hall was darker and gloomier than it should've been, but that couldn't be helped. Ever since the [Kerkopes](#) dwarf twins had short-circuited the walls, the real-time video feed from Camp Half-Blood often fuzzed out, changing into playback of extreme dwarf close-ups – red whiskers, nostrils and bad dental work. It wasn't helpful when you were trying to eat or have a serious conversation about the fate of the world.

Percy sipped his syrup-flavoured orange juice. He seemed to find it okay. 'I'm cool with fighting the occasional goddess, but isn't Nike one of the *good* ones? I mean, personally, I *like* victory. I can't get enough of it.'

Annabeth drummed her fingers on the table. 'It does seem strange. I understand why Nike would be in Olympia – home of the Olympics and all that. The contestants sacrificed to her. Greeks and Romans worshipped her there for, like, twelve hundred years, right?'

‘Almost to the end of the Roman Empire,’ Frank agreed. ‘Romans called her *Victoria*, but same difference. Everybody loved her. Who doesn’t like to win? Not sure why we would have to subdue her.’

Jason frowned. A wisp of steam curled from the wound under his shirt. ‘All I know ... the ghoul Antinous said, *Victory runs rampant in Olympia*. Juno warned us that we could never heal the rift between the Greeks and Romans unless we defeated victory.’

‘How do we defeat victory?’ Piper wondered. ‘Sounds like one of those impossible riddles.’

‘Like making stones fly,’ Leo said, ‘or eating only one Fonzie.’

He popped a handful into his mouth.

Hazel wrinkled her nose. ‘That stuff is going to kill you.’

‘You kidding? So many preservatives in these things, I’ll live forever. But, hey, about this victory goddess being popular and great – Don’t you guys remember what her kids are like at Camp Half-Blood?’

Hazel and Frank had never been to Camp Half-Blood, but the others nodded gravely.

‘He’s got a point,’ Percy said. ‘Those kids in Cabin Seventeen – they’re *super*-competitive. When it comes to capture the flag, they’re almost worse than the *Ares* kids. Uh, no offence, Frank.’

Frank shrugged. ‘You’re saying Nike has a dark side?’

‘Her *kids* sure do,’ Annabeth said. ‘They never turn down a challenge. They *have* to be number one at everything. If their mom is that intense ...’

‘Whoa.’ Piper put her hands on the table like the ship was rocking. ‘Guys, all the gods are split between their Greek and Roman aspects, right? If Nike’s that way and she’s the goddess of *victory* –’

‘She’d be *really* conflicted,’ Annabeth said. ‘She’d want one side or the other to win so she could declare a victor. She’d literally be fighting with herself.’

Hazel nudged her cereal bowl across the map of Greece. ‘But we don’t *want* one side or the other to win. We’ve got to get the Greeks and Romans on the same team.’

‘Maybe that’s the problem,’ Jason said. ‘If the goddess of victory is running rampant, torn between Greek and Roman, she might make it impossible to bring the two camps together.’

‘How?’ Leo asked. ‘Start a flame war on Twitter?’

Percy stabbed at his pancakes. ‘Maybe she’s like Ares. That guy can spark a fight just by walking into a crowded room. If Nike radiates competitive vibes or something, she could aggravate the whole Greek–Roman rivalry big-time.’

Frank pointed at Percy. ‘You remember that old sea god in Atlanta – [Phorcys](#)? He said that Gaia’s plans always have lots of layers. This could be part of the giants’ strategy – keep the two camps divided; keep the gods divided. If that’s the case, we can’t let Nike play us against each other. We should send a landing party of *four* – two Greeks, two Romans. The balance might help keep *her* balanced.’

Listening to Zhang, Leo had one of those double-take moments. He couldn’t believe how much the guy had changed in the last few weeks.

Frank wasn’t just taller and buffer. He was more confident now, more willing to take charge. Maybe that was because his magic firewood lifeline was safely stashed away in a flameproof pouch, or maybe it was because he’d commanded a zombie legion and been promoted to praetor. Whatever the case, Leo had trouble seeing him as the same klutzy dude who’d once *iguanaed* his way out of Chinese handcuffs.

‘I think Frank is right,’ Annabeth said. ‘A party of four. We’ll have to be careful who goes. We don’t want to do anything that might make the goddess, um, more unstable.’

‘I’ll go,’ Piper said. ‘I can try charmspeaking.’

Worry lines deepened around Annabeth’s eyes. ‘Not this time, Piper. Nike is all about competition. Aphrodite ... well, she is too, in her own way. I think Nike might see you as a threat.’

Once, Leo might have made a joke about that. *Piper a threat?* The girl was like a sister to him, but, if he needed help beating up a gang of thugs or subduing a victory goddess, Piper was not the first person he’d turn to.

Recently, though ... well, Piper may not have changed as obviously as Frank, but she *had* changed. She had stabbed Khione the snow goddess in the chest. She had defeated the Boreads. She’d slashed up a flock of wild harpies singlehandedly. As for her charmspeak, she’d become so powerful it made Leo nervous. If she told him to eat his vegetables, he might actually *do* it.

Annabeth's words didn't seem to upset her. Piper just nodded and scanned the group. 'Who should go, then?'

'Jason and Percy shouldn't go together,' Annabeth said. 'Jupiter and Poseidon – bad combination. Nike could start you two fighting easily.'

Percy gave her a sideways smile. 'Yeah, we can't have another incident like in Kansas. I might kill my bro Jason.'

'Or I might kill my bro Percy,' Jason said amiably.

'Which proves my point,' Annabeth said. 'We also shouldn't send Frank and me together. [Mars](#) and Athena – that would be just as bad.'

'Okay,' Leo broke in. 'So Percy and me for the Greeks. Frank and Hazel for the Romans. Is that the ultimate non-competitive dream team or what?'

Annabeth and Frank exchanged war-godly looks.

'It could work,' Frank decided. 'I mean, *no* combination is going to be perfect, but Poseidon, Hephaestus, Pluto, Mars ... I don't see any huge antagonism there.'

Hazel traced her finger along the map of Greece. 'I still wish we could've gone through the Gulf of Corinth. I was hoping we could visit Delphi, maybe get some advice. Plus it's such a long way around the Peloponnese.'

'Yeah.' Leo's heart sank when he looked at how much coastline they still had to navigate. 'It's July twenty-second already. Counting today, only ten days until –'

'I know,' Jason said. 'But Juno was clear. The shorter way would have been suicide.'

'And as for Delphi ...' Piper leaned towards the map. The blue harpy feather in her hair swung like a pendulum. 'What's going on there? If Apollo doesn't have his Oracle any more ...'

Percy grunted. 'Probably something to do with that creep Octavian. Maybe he was so bad at telling the future that he broke Apollo's powers.'

Jason managed a smile, though his eyes were cloudy from pain. 'Hopefully we can find Apollo and Artemis. Then you can ask him yourself. Juno said the twins might be willing to help us.'

'A lot of unanswered questions,' Frank muttered. 'A lot of miles to cover before we get to Athens.'

‘First things first,’ Annabeth said. ‘You guys have to find Nike and figure out how to subdue her ... whatever Juno meant by that. I still don’t understand how you defeat a goddess who controls victory. Seems impossible.’

Leo started to grin. He couldn’t help it. Sure, they only had ten days to stop the giants from waking Gaia. Sure, he could die before dinnertime. But he loved being told that something was impossible. It was like someone handing him a lemon meringue pie and telling him not to throw it. He just couldn’t resist the challenge.

‘We’ll see about that.’ He rose to his feet. ‘Let me get my collection of grenades and I’ll meet you guys on deck!’



X

Leo

‘SMART CALL BACK THERE,’ Percy said, ‘choosing the air-conditioning.’

He and Leo had just searched the museum. Now they were sitting on a bridge that spanned the Kladeos River, their feet dangling over the water as they waited for Frank and Hazel to finish scouting the ruins.

To their left, the Olympic valley shimmered in the afternoon heat. To their right, the visitors’ lot was crammed with tour buses. Good thing the *Argo II* was moored a hundred feet in the air, because they never would’ve found parking.

Leo skipped a stone across the river. He wished Hazel and Frank would get back. He felt awkward hanging out with Percy.

For one thing, he wasn’t sure what kind of small talk to make with a guy who’d recently come back from Tartarus. *Catch that last episode of Doctor Who? Oh, right. You were trudging through the Pit of Eternal Damnation!*

Percy had been intimidating enough *before* – summoning hurricanes, duelling pirates, killing giants in the Colosseum ...

Now ... well, after what happened in Tartarus, it seemed like Percy had graduated to a totally different level of butt-kickery.

Leo had trouble even thinking of him as part of the same *camp*. The two of them had never been at Camp Half-Blood at the same time. Percy’s leather necklace had four beads for four completed summers. Leo’s leather necklace had exactly *none*.

The only thing they had in common was Calypso, and every time Leo thought about *that* he wanted to punch Percy in the face.

Leo kept thinking he should bring it up, just to clear the air, but the timing never seemed right. And, as the days went by, the subject got harder and harder to broach.

‘What?’ Percy asked.

Leo stirred. ‘What, what?’

‘You were staring at me, like, *angry*.’

‘Was I?’ Leo tried to muster a joke, or at least a smile, but he couldn’t. ‘Um, sorry.’

Percy gazed at the river. ‘I suppose we need to talk.’ He opened his hand and the stone Leo had skipped flew out of the stream, right into Percy’s palm.

Oh, Leo thought, we’re showing off now?

He considered shooting a column of fire at the nearest tour bus and blowing up the gas tank, but he decided that might be a tad dramatic. ‘Maybe we *should* talk. But not –’

‘Guys!’ Frank stood at the far end of the parking lot, waving at them to come over. Next to him, Hazel sat astride her horse Arion, who had appeared unannounced as soon as they’d landed.

Saved by the Zhang, Leo thought.

He and Percy jogged over to meet their friends.

‘This place is huge,’ Frank reported. ‘The ruins stretch from the river to the base of that mountain over there, about half a kilometre.’

‘How far is that in regular measurements?’ Percy asked.

Frank rolled his eyes. ‘That *is* a regular measurement in Canada and the *rest* of the world. Only you Americans –’

‘About five or six football fields,’ Hazel interceded, feeding Arion a big chunk of gold.

Percy spread his hands. ‘That’s all you needed to say.’

‘Anyway,’ Frank continued, ‘from overhead, I didn’t see anything suspicious.’

‘Neither did I,’ Hazel said. ‘Arion took me on a complete loop around the perimeter. A lot of tourists, but no crazy goddess.’

The big stallion nickered and tossed his head, his neck muscles rippling under his butterscotch coat.

‘Man, your horse can cuss.’ Percy shook his head. ‘He doesn’t think much of Olympia.’

For once, Leo agreed with the horse. He didn't like the idea of tromping through fields full of ruins under a blazing sun, shoving his way through hordes of sweaty tourists while searching for a split-personality victory goddess. Besides, Frank had already flown over the whole valley as an eagle. If his sharp eyes hadn't seen anything, maybe there was nothing to see.

On the other hand, Leo's tool-belt pockets were full of dangerous toys. He would hate to go home without blowing anything up.

'So we blunder around together,' he said, 'and let trouble find us. It's always worked before.'

They poked about for a while, avoiding tour groups and ducking from one patch of shade to the next. Not for the first time, Leo was struck by how similar Greece was to his home state of Texas – the low hills, the scrubby trees, the drone of cicadas and the oppressive summer heat. Switch out the ancient columns and ruined temples for cows and barbed wire, and Leo would've felt right at home.

Frank found a tourist pamphlet (seriously, that dude would read the ingredients on a soup can) and gave them a running commentary on what was what.

'This is the [Propylon](#).' He waved towards a stone path lined with crumbling columns. 'One of the main gates into the Olympic valley.'

'Rubble!' said Leo.

'And over there –' Frank pointed to a square foundation that looked like the patio for a Mexican restaurant – 'is the Temple of Hera, one of the oldest structures here.'

'More rubble!' Leo said.

'And that round bandstand-looking thing – that's the Philipeon, dedicated to [Philip of Macedonia](#).'

'Even *more* rubble! First-rate rubble!'

Hazel, who was still riding Arion, kicked Leo in the arm. 'Doesn't *anything* impress you?'

Leo glanced up. Her curly gold-brown hair and golden eyes matched her helmet and sword so well she might've been engineered from Imperial gold. Leo doubted Hazel would consider that a compliment, but, as far as humans went, Hazel was first-rate craftsmanship.

Leo remembered their trip together through the House of Hades. Hazel had led him through that creepy maze of illusions. She'd made the sorceress Pasiphaë disappear through an imaginary hole in the floor. She'd battled the giant Clytius while Leo choked in the giant's cloud of darkness. She'd cut the chains binding the Doors of Death. Meanwhile Leo had done ... well, pretty much nothing.

He wasn't infatuated with Hazel any more. His heart was far away on the island of Ogygia. Still, Hazel Levesque impressed him – even when she *wasn't* sitting atop a scary immortal supersonic horse who cussed like a sailor.

He didn't say any of this, but Hazel must have picked up on his thoughts. She looked away, flustered.

Happily oblivious, Frank continued his guided tour. 'And over there ... oh.' He glanced at Percy. 'Uh, that semicircular depression in the hill, with the niches ... that's a nymphaeum, built in Roman times.'

Percy's face turned the colour of limeade. 'Here's an idea: let's not go there.'

Leo had heard all about his near-death experience in the nymphaeum in Rome with Jason and Piper. 'I love that idea.'

They kept walking.

Once in a while, Leo's hands drifted to his tool belt. Ever since the Kerkopes had stolen it in Bologna, he was scared he might get belt-jacked again, though he doubted any monster was as good at thievery as those dwarfs. He wondered how the little crud monkeys were doing in New York. He hoped they were still having fun harassing Romans, stealing lots of shiny zippers and causing legionnaires' trousers to fall down.

'This is the [Pelopion](#),' Frank said, pointing to another fascinating pile of stones.

'Come on, Zhang,' Leo said. '*Pelopion* isn't even a word. What was it – a sacred spot for *plopping*?'

Frank looked offended. 'It's the burial site of [Pelops](#). This whole part of Greece, the Peloponnese, was named after him.'

Leo resisted the urge to throw a grenade in Frank's face. 'I suppose I should know who Pelops was?'

'He was a prince, won his wife in a chariot race. Supposedly he started the Olympic games in honour of that.'

Hazel sniffed. ‘How romantic. “Nice wife you have, Prince Pelops.” “Thanks. I won her in a chariot race.” ’

Leo didn’t see how any of this was helping them find the victory goddess. At the moment, the only victory he wanted was to vanquish an ice-cold drink and maybe some nachos.

Still ... the further they got into the ruins, the more uneasy he felt. He flashed back to one of his earliest memories – his babysitter Tía Callida, a.k.a. Hera, encouraging him to prod a poisonous snake with a stick when he was four years old. The psycho goddess told him it was good training for being a hero, and maybe she’d been right. These days Leo spent most of his time poking around until he found trouble.

He scanned the crowds of tourists, wondering if they were regular mortals or monsters in disguise, like those *eidolons* who’d chased them in Rome. Every so often he thought he saw a familiar face – his bully cousin, Raphael; his mean third-grade teacher, Mr Borquin; his abusive foster mom, Teresa – all kinds of people who had treated Leo like dirt.

Probably he just imagined their faces, but it made him edgy. He remembered how the goddess Nemesis had appeared as his Aunt Rosa, the person Leo most resented and wanted revenge on. He wondered if Nemesis was around here somewhere, watching to see what Leo would do. He still wasn’t sure he’d paid his debt to that goddess. He suspected she wanted more suffering from him. Maybe today was the day.

They stopped at some wide steps leading to another ruined building – the Temple of Zeus, according to Frank.

‘Used to be a huge gold-and-ivory statue of Zeus inside,’ Zhang said. ‘One of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Made by the same dude who did the Athena Parthenos.’

‘Please tell me we don’t have to find it,’ Percy said. ‘I’ve had enough huge magic statues for one trip.’

‘Agreed.’ Hazel patted Arion’s flank, as the stallion was acting skittish.

Leo felt like whinnying and stomping his hooves, too. He was hot and agitated and hungry. He felt like they’d prodded the poisonous snake about as much as they could and the snake was about strike back. He wanted to call it a day and return to the ship before that happened.

Unfortunately, when Frank mentioned *Temple of Zeus* and *statue*, Leo's brain had made a connection. Against his better judgement, he shared it.

'Hey, Percy,' he said, 'remember that statue of Nike in the museum? The one that was all in pieces?'

'Yeah?'

'Didn't it used to stand *here*, at the Temple of Zeus? Feel free to tell me I'm wrong. I'd love to be wrong.'

Percy's hand went to his pocket. He slipped out his pen, Riptide. 'You're right. So if Nike was anywhere ... this would be a good spot.'

Frank scanned their surroundings. 'I don't see anything.'

'What if we promoted, like, Adidas shoes?' Percy wondered. 'Would that make Nike mad enough to show up?'

Leo smiled nervously. Maybe he and Percy did share something else – a stupid sense of humour. 'Yeah, I bet that would *totally* be against her sponsorship deal. **THOSE ARE NOT THE OFFICIAL SHOES OF THE OLYMPICS! YOU WILL DIE NOW!**'

Hazel rolled her eyes. 'You're both impossible.'

Behind Leo, a thunderous voice shook the ruins: 'YOU WILL DIE NOW!'

Leo almost jumped out of his tool belt. He turned ... and mentally kicked himself. He just *had* to invoke Adidas, the goddess of off-brand shoes.

Towering over him in a golden chariot, with a spear aimed at his heart, was the goddess Nike.



XI

Leo

THE GOLD WINGS WERE OVERKILL.

Leo could dig the chariot and the two white horses. He was okay with Nike's glittering sleeveless dress (Calypso totally rocked that style, but that wasn't relevant) and Nike's piled-up braids of dark hair circled with a gilded laurel wreath.

Her expression was wide-eyed and a little crazy, like she'd just had twenty espressos and ridden a roller coaster, but that didn't bother Leo. He could even deal with the gold-tipped spear pointed at his chest.

But those *wings* – they were polished gold, right down to the last feather. Leo could admire the intricate workmanship, but it was too much, too bright, too flashy. If her wings had been solar panels, Nike would've produced enough energy to power Miami.

'Lady,' he said, 'could you fold your flappers, please? You're giving me a sunburn.'

'What?' Nike's head jerked towards him like a startled chicken's. 'Oh ... my brilliant plumage. Very well. I suppose you can't die in glory if you are blinded and burned.'

She tucked in her wings. The temperature dropped to a normal hundred-and-twenty-degree summer afternoon.

Leo glanced at his friends. Frank stood very still, sizing up the goddess. His backpack hadn't yet morphed into a bow and quiver, which was probably prudent. He couldn't have been too freaked out, because he'd avoided turning into a giant goldfish.

Hazel was having trouble with Arion. The roan stallion nickered and bucked, avoiding eye contact with the white horses pulling Nike's chariot.

As for Percy, he held his magic ballpoint pen like he was trying to decide whether to bust out some sword moves or autograph Nike's chariot.

Nobody stepped forward to talk. Leo kind of missed having Piper and Annabeth with them. They were good at the whole *talking* thing.

He decided somebody had better say something before they all died in glory.

'So!' He pointed his index fingers at Nike. 'I didn't get the briefing, and I'm pretty sure the information wasn't covered in Frank's pamphlet. Could you tell me what's going on here?'

Nike's wide-eyed stare unnerved him. Was Leo's nose on fire? That happened sometimes when he got stressed.

'We must have victory!' the goddess shrieked. 'The contest must be decided! You have come here to determine the winner, yes?'

Frank cleared his throat. 'Are you Nike or Victoria?'

'Argghh!' The goddess clutched the side of her head. Her horses reared, causing Arion to do the same.

The goddess shuddered and split into two separate images, which reminded Leo – ridiculously – of when he used to lie on the floor in his apartment as a kid and play with the coiled doorstop on the skirting board. He would pull it back and let it fly: *sproing!* The stopper would shudder back and forth so fast it looked like it was splitting into two separate coils.

That's what Nike looked like: a divine doorstop, splitting in two.

On the left was the first version: glittery sleeveless dress, dark hair circled with laurels, golden wings folded behind her. On the right was a different version, dressed for war in a Roman breastplate and greaves. Short auburn hair peeked out from the rim of a tall helmet. Her wings were feathery white, her dress purple, and the shaft of her spear was fixed with a plate-sized Roman insignia – a golden SPQR in a laurel wreath.

'I am Nike!' cried the image on the left.

'I am Victoria!' cried the one on the right.

For the first time, Leo understood the old saying his *abuelo* used to use: *talking out of the side of your mouth*. This goddess was literally saying two different things at once. She kept shuddering and splitting, making Leo dizzy. He was tempted to get out his tools and adjust the idle on her carburettor, because that much vibration would make her engine fly apart.

‘I am the decider of victory!’ Nike screamed. ‘Once I stood here at the corner of Zeus’s temple, venerated by all! I oversaw the games of Olympia. Offerings from every city-state were piled at my feet!’

‘Games are irrelevant!’ yelled Victoria. ‘I am the goddess of success in battle! Roman generals worshipped me! Augustus himself erected my altar in the Senate House!’

‘Ahhhh!’ both voices screamed in agony. ‘We must decide! We must have victory!’

Arion bucked so violently that Hazel had to slide off his back to avoid getting thrown. Before she could calm him down, the horse disappeared, leaving a vapour trail through the ruins.

‘Nike,’ Hazel said, stepping forward slowly, ‘you’re confused, like all the gods. The Greeks and Romans are on the verge of war. It’s causing your two aspects to clash.’

‘I know that!’ The goddess shook her spear, the tip rubber-banding into two points. ‘I cannot abide unresolved conflict! Who is stronger? Who is the winner?’

‘Lady, nobody’s the winner,’ Leo said. ‘If that war happens, everybody loses.’

‘*No winner?*’ Nike looked so shocked, Leo was pretty sure his nose *must* be on fire. ‘There is always a winner! *One* winner. Everyone else is a loser! Otherwise victory is meaningless. I suppose you want me to give certificates to all the contestants? Little plastic trophies to every single athlete or soldier for *participation*? Should we all line up and shake hands and tell each other, *Good game*? No! Victory must be real. It must be earned. That means it must be rare and difficult, against steep odds, and defeat *must* be the other possibility.’

The goddess’s two horses nipped at each other, as if getting into the spirit.

‘Uh ... okay,’ Leo said. ‘I can tell you’ve got strong feelings about that. But the real war is against Gaia.’

‘He’s right,’ Hazel said. ‘Nike, you were Zeus’s charioteer in the last war with the giants, weren’t you?’

‘Of course!’

‘Then you know Gaia is the real enemy. We need your help to defeat her. The war isn’t between the Greeks and Romans.’

Victoria roared, ‘The Greeks must perish!’

‘Victory or death!’ Nike wailed. ‘One side must prevail!’

Frank grunted. ‘I get enough of this from my dad screaming in my head.’

Victoria glared down at him. ‘A child of Mars, are you? A praetor of Rome? No true Roman would spare the Greeks. I cannot abide to be split and confused – I cannot think straight! Kill them! Win!’

‘Not happening,’ Frank said, though Leo noticed Zhang’s right eye was twitching.

Leo was struggling, too. Nike was sending off waves of tension, setting his nerves on fire. He felt like he was crouched at the starting line, waiting for someone to yell ‘Go!’ He had the irrational desire to wrap his hands around Frank’s neck, which was stupid, since his hands wouldn’t even *fit* around Frank’s neck.

‘Look, Miss Victory ...’ Percy tried for a smile. ‘We don’t want to interrupt your crazy time. Maybe you can just finish this conversation with yourself and we’ll come back later, with, um, some bigger weapons and possibly some sedatives.’

The goddess brandished her spear. ‘You will determine the matter once and for all! Today, *now*, you will decide the victor! Four of you? Excellent! We will have teams. Perhaps girls versus boys!’

Hazel said, ‘Uh ... no.’

‘Shirts versus skins!’

‘Definitely no,’ said Hazel.

‘Greeks versus Romans!’ Nike cried. ‘Yes, of course! Two and two. The last demigod standing wins. The others will die gloriously.’

A competitive urge pulsed through Leo’s body. It took all of his effort not to reach in his tool belt, grab a mallet and whop Hazel and Frank upside their heads.

He realized how right Annabeth had been not to send anyone whose parents had natural rivalries. If Jason were here, he and Percy would probably already be on the ground, bashing each other’s brains out.

He forced his fists to unclench. ‘Look, lady, we’re not going to go all *Hunger Games* on each other. Isn’t going to happen.’

‘But you will win a fabulous honour!’ Nike reached into a basket at her side and produced a wreath of thick green laurels. ‘This crown of leaves could be

yours! You can wear it on your head! Think of the glory!’

‘Leo’s right,’ Frank said, though his eyes were fixed on the wreath. His expression was a little too greedy for Leo’s taste. ‘We don’t fight each other. We fight the giants. You should help us.’

‘Very well!’ The goddess raised the laurel wreath in one hand and her spear in the other.

Percy and Leo exchanged looks.

‘Uh ... does that mean you’ll join us?’ Percy asked. ‘You’ll help us fight the giants?’

‘That will be part of the prize,’ Nike said. ‘Whoever wins, I will consider you an ally. We will fight the giants together, and I will bestow victory upon you. But there can only be one winner. The others must be defeated, killed, destroyed utterly. So what will it be, demigods? Will you succeed in your quest, or will you cling to your namby-pamby ideas of friendship and *everybody wins* participation awards?’

Percy uncapped his pen. Riptide grew into a Celestial bronze sword. Leo was worried he might turn it on them. Nike’s aura was *that* hard to resist.

Instead, Percy pointed his blade at Nike. ‘What if we fight you instead?’

‘Ha!’ Nike’s eyes gleamed. ‘If you refuse to fight each other, you shall be persuaded!’

Nike spread her golden wings. Four metal feathers fluttered down, two on either side of the chariot. The feathers twirled like gymnasts, growing larger, sprouting arms and legs, until they touched the ground as four metallic, human-sized replicas of the goddess, each armed with a golden spear and a Celestial bronze laurel wreath that looked suspiciously like a barbed-wire Frisbee.

‘To the stadium!’ the goddess cried. ‘You have five minutes to prepare. Then blood shall be spilled!’

Leo was about to say, *What if we refuse to go to the stadium?*

He got his answer before asking the question.

‘Run!’ Nike bellowed. ‘To the stadium with you, or my Nikai will kill you where you stand!’

The metal ladies unhinged their jaws and blasted out a sound like a Super Bowl crowd mixed with feedback. They shook their spears and charged the

demigods.

It wasn't Leo's finest moment. Panic seized him, and he took off. His only comfort was that his friends did, too – and they weren't the cowardly type.

The four metal women swept behind them in a loose semicircle, herding them to the northeast. All the tourists had vanished. Perhaps they'd fled to the air-conditioned comfort of the museum, or maybe Nike had somehow forced them to leave.

The demigods ran, tripping over stones, leaping over crumbled walls, dodging around columns and informational placards. Behind them, Nike's chariot wheels rumbled and her horses whinnied.

Every time Leo thought about slowing down, the metal ladies screamed again – what had Nike called them? *Nikai*? *Nikettes*? – filling Leo with terror.

He hated being filled with terror. It was embarrassing.

'There!' Frank sprinted towards a kind of trench between two earthen walls with a stone archway above. It reminded Leo of those tunnels that football teams run through when they enter the field. 'That's the entrance to the old Olympic stadium. It's called the crypt!'

'Not a good name!' Leo yelled.

'Why are we going there?' Percy gasped. 'If that's where she wants us –'

The *Nikettes* screamed again and all rational thought abandoned Leo. He ran for the tunnel.

When they reached the arch, Hazel yelled, 'Hold it!'

They stumbled to a stop. Percy doubled over, wheezing. Leo had noticed that Percy seemed to get winded more easily these days – probably because of that nasty acid air he'd been forced to breathe in Tartarus.

Frank peered back the way they'd come. 'I don't see them any more. They disappeared.'

'Did they give up?' Percy asked hopefully.

Leo scanned the ruins. 'Nah. They just herded us where they wanted us. What were those things, anyway? The *Nikettes*, I mean.'

'*Nikettes*?' Frank scratched his head. 'I think it was *Nikai*, plural, like *victories*.'

'Yes.' Hazel looked deep in thought, running her hands along the stone archway. 'In some legends, Nike had an army of little victories she could send

all over the world to do her bidding.’

‘Like Santa’s elves,’ Percy said. ‘Except evil. And metal. And really loud.’

Hazel pressed her fingers against the arch, as if taking its pulse. Beyond the narrow tunnel, the earthen walls opened into a long field with gently rising slopes on either side, like seating for spectators.

Leo guessed it would have been an open-air stadium back in the day – big enough for discus-throwing, javelin-catching, naked shot-put, or whatever else those crazy Greeks used to do to win a bunch of leaves.

‘Ghosts linger in this place,’ Hazel murmured. ‘A lot of pain is embedded in these stones.’

‘Please tell me you have a plan,’ Leo said. ‘Preferably one that doesn’t involve embedding my pain in the stones.’

Hazel’s eyes were stormy and distant, the way they’d been in the House of Hades – like she was peering into a different layer of reality. ‘This was the players’ entrance. Nike said we have five minutes to prepare. Then she’ll expect us to pass under this archway and begin the games. We won’t be allowed to leave that field until three of us are dead.’

Percy leaned on his sword. ‘I’m pretty sure death matches weren’t an Olympic sport.’

‘Well, they are today,’ Hazel warned. ‘But I might be able to give us an edge. When we pass through, I could raise some obstacles on the field – hiding places to buy us some time.’

Frank frowned. ‘You mean like on the Field of Mars – trenches, tunnels, that kind of thing? You can do that with the Mist?’

‘I think so,’ Hazel said. ‘Nike would probably *like* to see an obstacle course. I can play her expectations against her. But it would be more than that. I can use any subterranean gateway – even this arch – to access the Labyrinth. I can raise part of the Labyrinth to the surface.’

‘Whoa, whoa, whoa.’ Percy made a time-out sign. ‘The Labyrinth is *bad*. We discussed this.’

‘Hazel, he’s right.’ Leo remembered all too well how she’d led him through the illusionary maze in the House of Hades. They’d almost died about every six feet. ‘I mean, I know you’re good with magic. But we’ve already got four screaming Nikettes to worry about –’

‘You’ll have to trust me,’ she said. ‘We’ve only got a couple of minutes now. When we pass through the arch, I can at least manipulate the playing field to our advantage.’

Percy exhaled through his nose. ‘Twice now, I’ve been forced to fight in stadiums – once in Rome, and before that *in* the Labyrinth. I hate playing games for people’s amusement.’

‘We all do,’ Hazel said. ‘But we have to put Nike off guard. We’ll pretend to fight until we can neutralize those Nikettes – ugh, that’s an awful name. Then we subdue Nike, like Juno said.’

‘Makes sense,’ Frank agreed. ‘You felt how powerful Nike was, trying to put us at each other’s throats. If she’s sending out those vibes to all the Greeks and Romans, there’s no way we’ll be able to prevent a war. We’ve got to get her under control.’

‘And how do we do that?’ Percy asked. ‘Bonk her on the head and stuff her in a sack?’

Leo’s mental gears started to turn.

‘Actually,’ he said, ‘you’re not far off. Uncle Leo brought some toys for all you good little demigods.’



XII

Leo

TWO MINUTES WASN'T NEARLY ENOUGH TIME.

Leo hoped he'd given everybody the right gadgets and adequately explained what all the buttons did. Otherwise things would get ugly.

While he was lecturing Frank and Percy on Archimedean mechanics, Hazel stared at the stone archway and muttered under her breath.

Nothing seemed to change in the big grassy field beyond, but Leo was sure Hazel had some Mistalicious tricks up her sleeve.

He was just explaining to Frank how to avoid getting decapitated by his own Archimedes sphere when the sound of trumpets echoed through the stadium. Nike's chariot appeared on the field, the Nikettes arrayed in front of her with their spears and laurels raised.

'Begin!' the goddess bellowed.

Percy and Leo sprinted through the archway. Immediately, the field shimmered and became a maze of brick walls and trenches. They ducked behind the nearest wall and ran to the left. Back at the archway, Frank yelled, 'Uh, die, *Graecus* scum!' A poorly aimed arrow sailed over Leo's head.

'More vicious!' Nike yelled. 'Kill like you mean it!'

Leo glanced at Percy. 'Ready?'

Percy hefted a bronze grenade. 'I hope you labelled these right.' He yelled, 'Die, Romans!' and lobbed the grenade over the wall.

BOOM! Leo couldn't see the explosion, but the smell of buttery popcorn filled the air.

'Oh, no!' Hazel wailed. 'Popcorn! Our fatal weakness!'

Frank shot another arrow over their heads. Leo and Percy scrambled to the left, ducking through a maze of walls that seemed to shift and turn on their own.

Leo could still see open sky above him, but claustrophobia started to set in, making it hard for him to breathe.

Somewhere behind them, Nike yelled, ‘Try harder! That popcorn was not fatal!’

From the rumble of her chariot wheels, Leo guessed she was circling the perimeter of the field – Victory taking a victory lap.

Another grenade exploded over Percy’s and Leo’s heads. They dived into a trench as the green starburst of Greek fire singed Leo’s hair. Fortunately, Frank had aimed high enough that the blast only *looked* impressive.

‘Better,’ Nike called out, ‘but where is your aim? Don’t you *want* this circlet of leaves?’

‘I wish the river was closer,’ Percy muttered. ‘I want to drown her.’

‘Be patient, water boy.’

‘Don’t call me *water boy*.’

Leo pointed across the field. The walls had shifted, revealing one of the Nikettes about thirty yards away, standing with her back to them. Hazel must be doing her thing – manipulating the maze to isolate their targets.

‘I distract,’ Leo said, ‘you attack. Ready?’

Percy nodded. ‘Go.’

He dashed to the left as Leo pulled a ball-peen hammer from his tool belt and yelled, ‘Hey, Bronze Butt!’

The Nikette turned as Leo threw. His hammer clanged harmlessly off the metal lady’s chest, but she must have been annoyed. She marched towards him, raising her barbed-wire laurel wreath.

‘Oops.’ Leo ducked as the metal circlet spun over his head. The wreath hit a wall behind him, punching a hole straight through the bricks, then arced backwards through the air like a boomerang. As the Nikette raised her hand to catch it, Percy emerged from the trench behind her and slashed with Riptide, cutting the Nikette in half at the waist. The metal wreath shot past him and embedded in a marble column.

‘Foul!’ the victory goddess cried. The walls shifted and Leo saw her barreling towards them in her chariot. ‘You don’t attack the Nikai unless you wish to die!’

A trench appeared in the goddess’s path, causing her horses to balk. Leo and Percy ran for cover. Out of the corner of his eye, maybe fifty feet away, Leo saw

Frank the grizzly bear jump from the top of a wall and flatten another Nikette. Two Bronze Butts down, two more to go.

‘No!’ Nike screamed in outrage. ‘No, no, no! Your lives are forfeit! Nikai, attack!’

Leo and Percy leaped behind a wall. They lay there for a second, trying to catch their breath.

Leo had trouble getting his bearings, but he guessed that was part of Hazel’s plan. She was causing the terrain to shift around them – opening new trenches, changing the slope of the land, throwing up new walls and columns. With luck, she would make it harder for the Nikettes to find them. Travelling just twenty feet might take them several minutes.

Still, Leo hated being disoriented. It reminded him of his helplessness in the House of Hades – the way Clytius had smothered him in darkness, snuffing out his fire, possessing his voice. It reminded him of Khione, plucking him off the deck of the *Argo II* with a gust of wind and shooting him halfway across the Mediterranean.

It was bad enough being scrawny and weak. If Leo couldn’t control his own senses, his own voice, his own body ... that didn’t leave him much to rely on.

‘Hey,’ Percy said, ‘if we don’t make it out of this –’

‘Shut up, man. We’re going to make it.’

‘If we don’t, I want you to know – I feel bad about Calypso. I failed her.’

Leo stared at him, dumbfounded. ‘You know about me and –’

‘The *Argo II* is a small ship.’ Percy grimaced. ‘Word got around. I just ... well, when I was in Tartarus, I was reminded that I hadn’t followed through on my promise to Calypso. I asked the gods to free her and then ... I just assumed they *would*. With me getting amnesia and getting sent to Camp Jupiter and all, I didn’t think about Calypso much after that. I’m not making excuses. I should have made sure the gods kept their promise. Anyway, I’m glad you found her. You promised to find a way back to her, and I just wanted to say, if we *do* survive all this, I’ll do anything I can to help you. That’s a promise I *will* keep.’

Leo was speechless. Here they were, hiding behind a wall in the middle of a magical war zone, with grenades and grizzly bears and Bronze Butt Nikettes to worry about, and Percy pulls *this* on him.

‘Man, what is your *problem*?’ Leo grumbled.

Percy blinked. 'So ... I guess we're not cool?'

'Of course we're not cool! You're as bad as Jason! I'm trying to resent you for being all perfect and hero-y and whatnot. Then you go and act like a standup guy. How am I supposed to hate you if you apologize and promise to help and stuff?'

A smile tugged at the corner of Percy's mouth. 'Sorry about that.'

The ground rumbled as another grenade exploded, sending spirals of whipped cream into the sky. 'That's Hazel's signal,' Leo said. 'They've taken down another Nikette.'

Percy peeked around the corner of the wall.

Until this moment, Leo hadn't realized how much he'd resented Percy. The dude had always intimidated him. Knowing Calypso had had a crush on Percy had made the feeling ten times worse. But now the knot of anger in his gut started to unravel. Leo just couldn't dislike the guy. Percy seemed sincere about being sorry and wanting to help.

Besides, Leo finally had confirmation that Percy Jackson was out of the picture with Calypso. The air was cleared. All Leo had to do was to find his way back to Ogygia. And he *would*, assuming he survived the next ten days.

'One Nikette left,' Percy said. 'I wonder –'

Somewhere close by, Hazel cried out in pain.

Instantly, Leo was on his feet.

'Dude, wait!' Percy called, but Leo plunged through the maze, his heart pounding.

The walls fell away on either side. Leo found himself in an open stretch of field. Frank stood at the far end of the stadium, shooting flaming arrows at Nike's chariot as the goddess bellowed insults and tried to find a path to him across the shifting network of trenches.

Hazel was closer – maybe sixty feet away. The fourth Nikette had obviously sneaked up on her. Hazel was limping away from her attacker, her jeans ripped, her left leg bleeding. She parried the metal lady's spear with her huge cavalry sword, but she was about to be overpowered. All around her, the Mist flickered like a dying strobe light. She was losing control of the magic maze.

'I'll help her,' Percy said. 'You stick to the plan. Get Nike's chariot.'

'But the plan was to eliminate all four Nikettes first!'

‘So change the plan and *then* stick to it!’

‘That doesn’t even make sense, but go! Help her!’

Percy rushed to Hazel’s defence. Leo darted towards Nike, yelling, ‘Hey! I want a participation award!’

‘Gah!’ The goddess pulled the reins and turned her chariot in his direction. ‘I will destroy you!’

‘Good!’ Leo yelled. ‘Losing is way better than winning!’

‘*WHAT?*’ Nike threw her mighty spear, but her aim was off with the rocking of the chariot. Her weapon skittered into the grass. Sadly, a new one appeared in her hands.

She urged her horses to a full gallop. The trenches disappeared, leaving an open field, perfect for running down small Latino demigods.

‘Hey!’ Frank yelled from across the stadium. ‘I want a participation award, too! Everybody wins!’

He shot a well-aimed arrow that landed in the back of Nike’s chariot and began to burn. Nike ignored it. Her eyes were fixed on Leo.

‘Percy ... ?’ Leo’s voice sounded like a hamster’s squeak. From his tool belt, he fished out an Archimedes sphere and set the concentric circles to arm the device.

Percy was still sparring with the last metal lady. Leo couldn’t wait.

He threw the sphere in the chariot’s path. It hit the ground and burrowed in, but he needed Percy to spring the trap. If Nike sensed any threat, she apparently didn’t think much of it. She kept charging at Leo.

The chariot was twenty feet from the grenade. Fifteen feet.

‘Percy!’ Leo yelled. ‘Operation Water Balloon!’

Unfortunately, Percy was a little busy getting smacked around. The Nikette thumped him backwards with the butt of her spear. She threw her wreath with such force it knocked Percy’s sword from his grip. Percy stumbled. The metallic lady moved in for the kill.

Leo howled. He knew the distance was too far. He knew that if he didn’t jump out of the way now Nike would run him over. But that didn’t matter. His friends were about to be skewered. He thrust out his hand and shot a white-hot bolt of fire straight at the Nikette.

It literally melted her face. The Nikette staggered, her spear still raised. Before she could regain her balance, Hazel thrust her *spatha* and impaled the metal lady through the chest. The Nikette crashed into the grass.

Percy turned towards the victory goddess's chariot. Just as those huge white horses were about to turn Leo into roadkill, the carriage passed over Leo's sunken grenade, which exploded in a high-pressure geyser. Water blasted upward, flipping the chariot – horses, carriage, goddess and all.

Back in Houston, Leo used to live with his mom in an apartment right off the Gulf Freeway. He heard car crashes at least once a week, but this sound was worse – Celestial bronze crumpling, wood splintering, stallions screaming and a goddess wailing in two distinct voices, both of them very surprised.

Hazel collapsed. Percy caught her. Frank ran towards them from across the field.

Leo was on his own as the goddess Nike disentangled herself from the wreckage and rose to face him. Her braided hairdo now resembled a stepped-on cow pat. A laurel wreath was stuck around her left ankle. Her horses got to their hooves and galloped away in a panic, dragging the soaked, half-burning wreckage of the chariot behind them.

'YOU!' Nike glared at Leo, her eyes hotter and brighter than her metal wings. 'You *dare*?'

Leo didn't feel very courageous, but he forced a smile. 'I know, right? I'm awesome! Do I win a leaf hat now?'

'You will die!' The goddess raised her spear.

'Hold that thought!' Leo dug around in his tool belt. 'You haven't seen my best trick yet. I have a weapon guaranteed to win *any* contest!'

Nike hesitated. 'What weapon? What do you mean?'

'My ultimate zap-o-matic!' He pulled out a second Archimedes sphere – the one he'd spent a whole thirty seconds modifying before they entered the stadium. 'How many laurel wreaths have you got? Because I'm gonna win them all.'

He fiddled with dials, hoping he'd done his calculations right.

Leo had got better at making spheres, but they still weren't completely reliable. More like twenty percent reliable.

It would've been nice to have Calypso's help weaving the Celestial bronze filaments. She was an *ace* at weaving. Or Annabeth: she was no slouch. But Leo had done his best, rewiring the sphere to carry out two completely different functions.

'Behold!' Leo clicked the final dial. The sphere opened. One side elongated into a gun handle. The other side unfolded into a miniature radar dish made of Celestial bronze mirrors.

Nike frowned. 'What is that supposed to be?'

'An Archimedes death ray!' Leo said. 'I finally perfected it. Now give me all the prizes.'

'Those things don't work!' Nike yelled. 'They proved it on television! Besides, I'm an immortal goddess. You can't destroy me!'

'Watch closely,' Leo said. 'Are you watching?'

Nike could've zapped him into a grease spot or speared him like a cheese wedge, but her curiosity got the best of her. She stared straight into the dish as Leo flipped the switch. Leo knew to look away. Even so, the blazing beam of light left him seeing spots.

'Gah!' The goddess staggered. She dropped her spear and clutched at her eyes. 'I'm blind! I'm blind!'

Leo hit another button on his death ray. It collapsed back into a sphere and began to hum. Leo counted silently to three, then tossed the sphere at the goddess's feet.

FOOM! Metal filaments shot upward, wrapping Nike in a bronze net. She wailed, falling sideways as the net constricted, forcing her two forms – Greek and Roman – into a quivering, out-of-focus whole.

'Trickery!' Her doubled voices buzzed like muffled alarm clocks. 'Your death ray did not even kill me!'

'I don't need to kill you,' Leo said. 'I vanquished you just fine.'

'I will simply change form!' she cried. 'I will rip apart your silly net! I will destroy you!'

'Yeah, see, you can't.' Leo hoped he was right. 'That's high-quality Celestial bronze netting, and I'm a son of Hephaestus. He's kind of an expert on catching goddesses in nets.'

'No. Noooooo!'

Leo left her thrashing and cursing, and went to check on his friends. Percy looked all right, just sore and bruised. Frank had propped Hazel up and was feeding her ambrosia. The cut on her leg had stopped bleeding, though her jeans were pretty much ruined.

‘I’m okay,’ she said. ‘Just too much magic.’

‘You were awesome, Levesque.’ Leo did his best Hazel imitation: ‘*Popcorn! Our fatal weakness!*’

She smiled wanly. Together the four of them walked over to Nike, who was still writhing and flapping her wings in the net like a golden chicken.

‘What do we do with her?’ Percy asked.

‘Take her aboard the *Argo II*,’ Leo said. ‘Chuck her in one of the horse stalls.’

Hazel’s eyes widened. ‘You’re going to keep the goddess of victory in the stable?’

‘Why not? Once we sort things out between Greeks and Romans, the gods should go back to their normal selves. Then we can free her and she can ... you know ... grant us victory.’

‘Grant *you* victory?’ the goddess cried. ‘Never! You will suffer for this outrage! Your blood shall be spilled! One of you here – one of you four – is fated to die battling Gaia!’

Leo’s intestines tied themselves into a slipknot. ‘How do you know that?’

‘I can foresee victories!’ Nike yelled. ‘You will have no success without death! Release me and fight each other! It is better you die here than face what is to come!’

Hazel stuck the point of her *spatha* under Nike’s chin. ‘Explain.’ Her voice was harder than Leo had ever heard. ‘Which of us will die? How do we stop it?’

‘Ah, child of Pluto! Your magic helped you cheat in this contest, but you cannot cheat destiny. One of you will die. One of you *must* die!’

‘No,’ Hazel insisted. ‘There’s another way. There is *always* another path.’

‘**Hecate** taught you this?’ Nike laughed. ‘You would hope for the physician’s cure, perhaps? But that is impossible. Too much stands in your way: the poison of **Pylos**, the chained god’s heartbeat in Sparta, the curse of Delos! No, you cannot cheat death.’

Frank knelt. He gathered up the net under Nike’s chin and raised her face to his. ‘What are you talking about? How do we find this cure?’

‘I will not help you,’ Nike growled. ‘I will curse you with my power, net or no!’

She began to mutter in Ancient Greek.

Frank looked up, scowling. ‘Can she really cast magic through this net?’

‘Heck if I know,’ Leo said.

Frank let go of the goddess. He took off one of his shoes, peeled off his sock and stuffed it in the goddess’s mouth.

‘Dude,’ Percy said, ‘that is disgusting.’

‘Mpppphhh!’ Nike complained. ‘Mpppphhh!’

‘Leo,’ Frank said grimly, ‘you got duct tape?’

‘Never leave home without it.’ He fished a roll from his tool belt, and in no time Frank had wrapped it around Nike’s head, securing the gag in her mouth.

‘Well, it’s not a laurel wreath,’ Frank said, ‘but it’s a new kind of victory circle: the gag of duct tape.’

‘Zhang,’ Leo said, ‘you got style.’

Nike thrashed and grunted until Percy nudged her with his toe. ‘Hey, shut up. You behave or we’ll get Arion back here and let him nibble your wings. He loves gold.’

Nike shrieked once, then became still and quiet.

‘So ...’ Hazel sounded a little nervous. ‘We have one tied-up goddess. Now what?’

Frank folded his arms. ‘We go looking for this physician’s cure ... whatever that is. Because, personally, I like cheating death.’

Leo grinned. ‘Poison in Pylos? A chained god’s heartbeat in Sparta? A curse in Delos? Oh, yeah. This is gonna be fun!’



XIII

Nico

THE LAST THING NICO HEARD was Coach Hedge grumbling, ‘Well, *this* isn’t good.’

He wondered what he’d done wrong this time. Maybe he’d teleported them into a den of Cyclopes, or a thousand feet above another volcano. There was nothing he could do about it. His vision was gone. His other senses were shutting down. His knees buckled and he passed out.

He tried to make the most of his unconsciousness.

Dreams and death were old friends of his. He knew how to navigate their dark borderland. He sent out his thoughts, searching for Thalia Grace.

He rushed past the usual fragments of painful memories – his mother smiling down at him, her face illuminated by the sunlight rippling off the Venetian Grand Canal; his sister Bianca laughing as she pulled him across the Mall in Washington, D.C., her green floppy hat shading her eyes and the splash of freckles across her nose. He saw Percy Jackson on a snowy cliff outside Westover Hall, shielding Nico and Bianca from the [manticore](#) as Nico clutched a Mythomagic figurine and whispered, *I’m scared*. He saw Minos, his old ghostly mentor, leading him through the Labyrinth. Minos’s smile was cold and cruel. *Don’t worry, son of Hades. You will have your revenge.*

Nico couldn’t stop the memories. They cluttered his dreams like the ghosts of Asphodel – an aimless, sorrowful mob pleading for attention. *Save me*, they seemed to whisper. *Remember me. Help me. Comfort me.*

He didn’t dare stop to dwell on them. They would only crush him with wants and regrets. The best he could do was to stay focused and push through.

I am the son of Hades, he thought. I go where I wish. The darkness is my birthright.

He forged ahead through a grey-and-black terrain, looking for the dreams of Thalia Grace, daughter of Zeus. Instead, the ground dissolved at his feet and he fell into a familiar backwater – the [Hypnos](#) cabin at Camp Half-Blood.

Buried under piles of feather comforters, snoring demigods nestled in their bunks. Above the mantel, a dark tree branch dripped milky water from the River Lethe into a bowl. A cheerful fire crackled in the fireplace. In front of it, in a leather armchair, dozed the head counsellor for Cabin Fifteen – a pot-bellied guy with unruly blond hair and a gentle bovine face.

‘Clovis,’ Nico growled, ‘for the gods’ sake, stop *dreaming* so powerfully!’

Clovis’s eyes fluttered open. He turned and stared at Nico, though Nico knew this was simply part of Clovis’s own dreamscape. The actual Clovis would still be snoring in his armchair back at camp.

‘Oh, hi ...’ Clovis yawned wide enough to swallow a minor god. ‘Sorry. Did I pull you off course again?’

Nico gritted his teeth. There was no point getting upset. The Hypnos cabin was like Grand Central Station for dream activity. You couldn’t travel *anywhere* without going through it once in a while.

‘As long as I’m here,’ Nico said, ‘pass along a message. Tell Chiron I’m on my way with a couple of friends. We’re bringing the Athena Parthenos.’

Clovis rubbed his eyes. ‘So it’s true? How are you bringing it? Did you rent a van or something?’

Nico explained as concisely as possible. Messages sent through dreams tended to get fuzzy around the edges, especially when you were dealing with Clovis. The simpler, the better.

‘We’re being followed by a hunter,’ Nico said. ‘One of Gaia’s giants, I think. Can you get that message to Thalia Grace? You’re better at finding people in dreams than I am. I need her advice.’

‘I’ll try.’ Clovis fumbled for a cup of hot chocolate on the side table. ‘Uh, before you go, do you have a second?’

‘Clovis, this is a dream,’ Nico reminded him. ‘Time is fluid.’

Even as he said it, Nico worried about what was happening in the real world. His physical self might be plummeting to his death, or surrounded by monsters. Still, he couldn’t force himself to wake up – not after the amount of energy he’d expended on shadow-travel.

Clovis nodded. 'Right ... I was thinking you should probably see what happened today at the council of war. I slept through some of it, but –'

'Show me,' Nico said.

The scene changed. Nico found himself in the rec room of the Big House, all the senior camp leaders gathered around the ping-pong table.

At one end sat Chiron the centaur, his equine posterior collapsed into his magic wheelchair so he looked like a regular human. His curly brown hair and beard had more grey streaks than a few months ago. Deep lines etched his face.

'– things we can't control,' he was saying. 'Now let's review our defences. Where do we stand?'

Clarisse from the Ares cabin sat forward. She was the only one in full armour, which was typical. Clarisse probably slept in her combat gear. As she spoke, she gestured with her dagger, which made the other counsellors lean away from her.

'Our defensive line is mostly solid,' she said. 'The campers are as ready to fight as they'll ever be. We control the beach. Our triremes are unchallenged on Long Island Sound, but those stupid giant eagles dominate our airspace. Inland, in all three directions, the barbarians have us completely cut off.'

'They're Romans,' said Rachel Dare, doodling with a marker on the knee of her jeans. 'Not barbarians.'

Clarisse pointed her dagger at Rachel. 'What about their allies, huh? Did you see that tribe of two-headed men that arrived yesterday? Or the glowing red dog-headed guys with the big poleaxes? They look pretty barbaric to me. It would've been nice if you'd *foreseen* any of that, if your Oracle power didn't break down when we needed it most!'

Rachel's face turned as red as her hair. 'That's hardly my fault. Something is wrong with Apollo's gifts of prophecy. If I knew how to fix it –'

'She's right.' Will Solace, head counsellor for the Apollo cabin, put his hand gently on Clarisse's wrist. Not many campers could've done that without getting stabbed, but Will had a way of defusing people's anger. He got her to lower her dagger. 'Everyone in our cabin has been affected. It's not just Rachel.'

Will's shaggy blond hair and pale blue eyes reminded Nico of Jason Grace, but the similarities ended there.

Jason was a fighter. You could tell from the intensity of his stare, his constant alertness, the coiled-up energy in his frame. Will Solace was more like a lanky

cat stretched out in the sunshine. His movements were relaxed and nonthreatening, his gaze soft and far away. In his faded SURF BARBADOS T-shirt, his cutoff shorts and flip-flops, he looked about as unaggressive as a demigod could get, but Nico knew he was brave under fire. During the Battle of Manhattan, Nico had seen him in action – the camp’s best combat medic, risking his life to save wounded campers.

‘We don’t know what’s going on at Delphi,’ Will continued. ‘My dad hasn’t answered any prayers, or appeared in any dreams ... I mean, *all* the gods have been silent, but this isn’t like Apollo. Something’s wrong.’

Across the table, Jake Mason grunted. ‘Probably this Roman dirt-wipe who’s leading the attack – Octavian what’s-his-name. If I was Apollo and my descendant was acting that way, I’d go into hiding out of shame.’

‘I agree,’ Will said. ‘I wish I was a better archer ... I wouldn’t mind shooting my Roman relative off his high horse. Actually, I wish I could use *any* of my father’s gifts to stop this war.’ He looked down at his own hands with distaste. ‘Unfortunately, I’m just a healer.’

‘Your talents are essential,’ Chiron said. ‘I fear we’ll need them soon enough. As for seeing the future ... what about the harpy Ella? Has she offered any advice from the Sibylline Books?’

Rachel shook her head. ‘The poor thing is scared out of her wits. Harpies hate being imprisoned. Ever since the Romans surrounded us ... well, she feels trapped. She knows Octavian means to capture her. It’s all Tyson and I can do to keep her from flying away.’

‘Which would be suicide.’ Butch Walker, son of Iris, crossed his burly arms. ‘With those Roman eagles in the air, flying isn’t safe. I’ve already lost two pegasi.’

‘At least Tyson brought some of his [Cyclops](#) friends to help out,’ Rachel said. ‘That’s a little good news.’

Over by the refreshment table, Connor Stoll laughed. He had a fistful of Ritz crackers in one hand and a can of Easy Cheese in the other. ‘A dozen full-grown Cyclopes? That’s a *lot* of good news! Plus, Lou Ellen and the Hecate kids have been putting up magic barriers, and the whole [Hermes](#) cabin has been lining the hills with traps and snares and all kinds of nice surprises for the Romans!’

Jake Mason frowned. ‘Most of which you stole from Bunker Nine and the Hephaestus cabin.’

Clarisse grumbled in agreement. ‘They even stole the landmines from around the Ares cabin. How do you steal *live* landmines?’

‘We *commandeered* them for the war effort.’ Connor sprayed a glob of Easy Cheese into his mouth. ‘Besides, you guys have plenty of toys. You can share!’

Chiron turned to his left, where the satyr Grover Underwood sat in silence, fingering his reed pipes. ‘Grover? What news from the nature spirits?’

Grover heaved a sigh. ‘Even on a good day, it’s hard to organize nymphs and dryads. With Gaia stirring, they’re almost as disoriented as the gods. Katie and Miranda from the [Demeter](#) cabin are out there right now trying to help, but if the Earth Mother wakes ...’ He looked around the table nervously. ‘Well, I can’t promise the woods will be safe. Or the hills. Or the strawberry fields. Or –’

‘Great.’ Jake Mason elbowed Clovis, who was starting to nod off. ‘So what do we do?’

‘Attack.’ Clarisse pounded the ping-pong table, which made everyone flinch. ‘The Romans are getting more reinforcements by the day. We know they plan to invade on August first. Why should we let *them* set the timetable? I can only guess they’re waiting to gather more forces. They already outnumber us. We should attack now, before they get any stronger; take the fight to them!’

Malcolm, the acting head counsellor for Athena, coughed into his fist. ‘Clarisse, I get your point. But have you studied Roman engineering? Their *temporary* camp is better defended than Camp Half-Blood. Attack them at their base, and we’d be massacred.’

‘So we just *wait*?’ Clarisse demanded. ‘Let them get all their forces prepared while Gaia gets closer to waking? I have Coach Hedge’s pregnant wife under my protection. I am *not* going to let anything happen to her. I owe Hedge my life. Besides, I’ve been training the campers more than you have, Malcolm. Their morale is low. Everybody is scared. If we’re under siege another nine days –’

‘We should stick to Annabeth’s plan.’ Connor Stoll looked about as serious as he ever did, despite the Easy Cheese around his mouth. ‘We have to hold out until she gets that magic Athena statue back here.’

Clarisse rolled her eyes. ‘You mean if that *Roman praetor* gets the statue back here. I don’t understand what Annabeth was thinking, collaborating with the

enemy. Even *if* the Roman manages to bring us the statue – which is impossible – we’re supposed to trust that will bring peace? The statue arrives and suddenly the Romans lay down their weapons and start dancing around, throwing flowers?’

Rachel set down her marker pen. ‘Annabeth knows what she’s doing. We have to try for peace. Unless we can unite the Greeks and Romans, the gods won’t be healed. Unless the gods are healed, there’s no way we can kill the giants. And unless we kill the giants –’

‘Gaia wakes,’ Connor said. ‘Game over. Look, Clarisse, Annabeth sent me a message from Tartarus. From *fricking* Tartarus. Anybody who can do that ... hey, I listen to them.’

Clarisse opened her mouth to reply, but when she spoke it was Coach Hedge’s voice: ‘Nico, wake up. We’ve got problems.’



XIV

Nico

NICO SAT UP SO QUICKLY he head-butted the satyr in the nose.

‘OW! Jeez, kid, you got a hard noggin!’

‘S-sorry, Coach.’ Nico blinked, trying to get his bearings. ‘What’s going on?’

He didn’t see any immediate threat. They were camped on a sunny lawn in the middle of a public square. Beds of orange marigolds bloomed all around them. Reyna was sleeping curled up, with her two metal dogs at her feet. A stone’s throw away, little kids played tag around a white marble fountain. At a nearby pavement café, half a dozen people sipped coffee in the shade of patio umbrellas. A few delivery vans were parked along the edges of the square, but there was no traffic. The only pedestrians were a few families, probably locals, enjoying a warm afternoon.

The square itself was paved with cobblestones, edged with white stucco buildings and lemon trees. In the centre stood the well-preserved shell of a Roman temple. Its square base stretched maybe fifty feet wide and ten feet tall, with an intact facade of Corinthian columns rising another twenty-five feet. And at the top of the colonnade ...

Nico’s mouth went dry. ‘Oh, Styx.’

The Athena Parthenos lay sideways along the tops of the columns like a nightclub singer sprawled across a piano. Lengthwise, she fitted almost perfectly, but with Nike in her extended hand she was a bit too wide. She looked like she might topple forward at any moment.

‘What is she *doing* up there?’ Nico asked.

‘You tell me.’ Hedge rubbed his bruised nose. ‘That’s where we appeared. Almost fell to our deaths, but luckily I’ve got nimble hooves. You were

unconscious, hanging in your harness like a tangled paratrooper until we managed to get you down.'

Nico tried to picture that, then decided he'd rather not. 'Is this Spain?'

'Portugal,' Hedge said. 'You overshot. By the way, Reyna speaks *Spanish*; she does not speak Portuguese. Anyway, while you were asleep, we figured out this city is [Évora](#). Good news: it's a sleepy little place. Nobody's bothered us. Nobody seems to notice the giant Athena sleeping on top of the Roman temple, which is called the Temple of Diana, in case you were wondering. And people here appreciate my street performances! I've made about sixteen euros.'

He picked up his baseball cap, which jangled with coins.

Nico felt ill. 'Street performances?'

'A little singing,' the coach said. 'A little martial arts. Some interpretive dance.'

'Wow.'

'I know! The Portuguese have taste. Anyway, I supposed this was a decent place to lie low for a couple of days.'

Nico stared at him. 'A couple of *days*?'

'Hey, kid, we didn't have much choice. In case you haven't noticed, you've been working yourself to death with all that shadow-jumping. We tried to wake you up last night. No dice.'

'So I've been asleep for –'

'About thirty-six hours. You needed it.'

Nico was glad he was sitting down. Otherwise he would've fallen down. He could've sworn he'd only slept a few minutes, but as his drowsiness faded he realized he felt more clear-headed and rested than he had in weeks, maybe since before he went looking for the Doors of Death.

His stomach growled. Coach Hedge raised his eyebrows.

'You must be hungry,' said the satyr. 'Either that, or your stomach speaks hedgehog. That was *quite* a statement in hedgehog.'

'Food would be good,' Nico agreed. 'But first, what's the bad news ... I mean, aside from the statue being sideways? You said we had trouble.'

'Oh, right.' The coach pointed to a gated archway at the corner of the square. Standing in the shadows was a glowing, vaguely human figure outlined in grey

flames. The spirit's features were indistinct, but it seemed to be beckoning to Nico.

'Burning Man showed up a few minutes ago,' said Coach Hedge. 'He doesn't get any closer. When I tried to go over there, he disappeared. Not sure if he's a threat, but he seems to be asking for you.'

Nico assumed it was a trap. Most things were.

But Coach Hedge promised he could guard Reyna for a little longer and, on the off chance the spirit had something useful to say, Nico decided it was worth the risk.

He unsheathed his Stygian iron blade and approached the archway.

Normally ghosts didn't scare him. (Assuming, of course, Gaia hadn't encased them in shells of stone and turned them into killing machines. That had been a new one for him.)

After his experience with Minos, Nico realized that most spectres held only as much power as you allowed them to have. They pried into your mind, using fear or anger or longing to influence you. Nico had learned to shield himself. Sometimes he could even turn the tables and bend ghosts to his will.

As he approached the fiery grey apparition, he was fairly sure it was a garden-variety wraith – a lost soul who had died in pain. Shouldn't be a problem.

Still, Nico took nothing for granted. He remembered Croatia all too well. He'd gone into that situation smug and confident, only to have his feet swept out from under him, literally and emotionally. First Jason Grace had grabbed him and flung him over a wall. Then the god Favonius had dissolved him into wind. And as for that arrogant thug, [Cupid](#) ...

Nico clenched his sword. Sharing his secret crush hadn't been the worst of it. Eventually he might have done that, in his own time, in his own way. But being *forced* to talk about Percy, being bullied and harassed and strong-armed simply for Cupid's amusement ...

Tendrils of darkness were now spreading out from his feet, killing all the weeds between the cobblestones. Nico tried to rein in his anger.

When he reached the ghost, he saw it wore a monk's habit – sandals, woollen robes and a wooden cross around his neck. Grey flames swirled around him – burning his sleeves, blistering his face, turning his eyebrows to ashes. He

seemed to be stuck in the moment of his immolation, like a black-and-white video on a permanent loop.

‘You were burned alive,’ Nico sensed. ‘Probably in the Middle Ages?’

The ghost’s face distorted in a silent scream of agony, but his eyes looked bored, even a little annoyed, as if the scream was just an automatic reflex he couldn’t control.

‘What do you want of me?’ Nico asked.

The ghost gestured for Nico to follow. It turned and walked through the open gateway. Nico glanced back at Coach Hedge. The satyr just made a shooing gesture like, *Go. Do your Underworld thing.*

Nico trailed the ghost through the streets of Évora.

They zigzagged through narrow cobblestone walkways, past courtyards with potted hibiscus trees and white stucco buildings with butterscotch trim and wrought-iron balconies. No one noticed the ghost, but the locals looked askance at Nico. A young girl with a fox terrier crossed the street to avoid him. Her dog growled, the hair on its back standing straight up like a dorsal fin.

The ghost led Nico to another public square, anchored at one end by a large square church with whitewashed walls and limestone arches. The ghost passed through the portico and disappeared inside.

Nico hesitated. He had nothing against churches, but this one radiated death. Inside would be tombs, or perhaps something less pleasant ...

He ducked through the doorway. His eyes were drawn to a side chapel, lit from within by eerie golden light. Carved over the door was a Portuguese inscription. Nico didn’t speak the language, but he remembered his childhood Italian well enough to glean the general meaning: *We, the bones that are here, await yours.*

‘Cheery,’ he muttered.

He entered the chapel. At the far end stood an altar, where the fiery wraith knelt in prayer, but Nico was more interested in the room itself. The walls were constructed of bones and skulls – thousands upon thousands, cemented together. Columns of bones held up a vaulted ceiling decorated with images of death. On one wall, like coats on a coat rack, hung the desiccated, skeletal remains of two people – an adult and a small child.

‘A beautiful room, isn’t it?’

Nico turned. A year ago, he would’ve jumped out of his skin if his father suddenly appeared next to him. Now, Nico was able to control his heart rate, along with his desire to knee his father in the groin and run away.

Like the wraith, Hades was dressed in the habit of a Franciscan monk, which Nico found vaguely disturbing. His black robes were tied at the waist with a simple white cord. His cowl was pushed back, revealing dark hair shorn close to the scalp and eyes that glittered like frozen tar. The god’s expression was calm and content, as if he’d just come home from a lovely evening strolling through the Fields of Punishment, enjoying the screams of the damned.

‘Getting some redecorating ideas?’ Nico asked. ‘Maybe you could do your dining room in mediaeval monk skulls.’

Hades arched an eyebrow. ‘I can never tell when you’re joking.’

‘Why are you here, Father? *How* are you here?’

Hades traced his fingers along the nearest column, leaving bleached white marks on the old bones. ‘You’re a hard mortal to find, my son. For several days I’ve been searching. When the sceptre of Diocletian exploded ... well, that got my attention.’

Nico felt a flush of shame. Then he felt angry for feeling ashamed. ‘Breaking the sceptre wasn’t my fault. We were about to be overrun –’

‘Oh, the sceptre isn’t important. A relic that old, I’m surprised you got two uses out of it. The explosion simply gave me some clarity. It allowed me to pinpoint your location. I was hoping to speak to you in Pompeii, but it is so ... well, *Roman*. This chapel was the first place where my presence was strong enough that I could appear to you as myself – by which I mean *Hades*, god of the dead, not split with that *other* manifestation.’

Hades breathed in the stale dank air. ‘I am very drawn to this place. The remains of five thousand monks were used to build the Chapel of Bones. It serves as a reminder that life is short and death is eternal. I feel *focused* here. Even so, I only have a few moments.’

Story of our relationship, Nico thought. You only ever have a few moments.

‘So tell me, Father. What do you want?’

Hades clasped his hands together in the sleeves of his robe. ‘Can you entertain the notion that I might be here to help you, not simply because I want

something?’

Nico almost laughed, but his chest felt too hollow. ‘I can entertain the notion that you might be here for multiple reasons.’

The god frowned. ‘I suppose that’s fair enough. You seek information about Gaia’s hunter. His name is [Orion](#).’

Nico hesitated. He wasn’t used to getting a direct answer, without games or riddles or quests. ‘Orion. Like the constellation. Wasn’t he ... a friend of Artemis?’

‘He was,’ Hades said. ‘A giant born to oppose the twins, Apollo and Artemis, but, much like Artemis, Orion rejected his destiny. He sought to live on his own terms. First he tried to live among mortals as a huntsman for the king of [Khios](#). He, ah, ran into some trouble with the king’s daughter. The king had Orion blinded and exiled.’

Nico thought back to what Reyna had told him. ‘My friend dreamed of a hunter with glowing eyes. If Orion is blind –’

‘He was blind,’ Hades corrected. ‘Shortly after his exile, Orion met Hephaestus, who took pity on the giant and crafted him new mechanical eyes even better than the originals. Orion became friends with Artemis. He was the first male ever allowed to join her Hunt. But ... things went wrong between them. How exactly, I do not know. Orion was slain. Now he has returned as a loyal son of Gaia, ready to do her bidding. He is driven by bitterness and anger. You can understand that.’

Nico wanted to yell, *Like you know what I feel?*

Instead he asked, ‘How do we stop him?’

‘You cannot,’ Hades said. ‘Your only hope is to outrun him, accomplish your quest before he reaches you. Apollo or Artemis *might* be able to slay him, arrows against arrows, but the twins are in no condition to aid you. Even now, Orion has your scent. His hunting pack is almost upon you. You won’t have the luxury of more rest from here to Camp Half-Blood.’

A belt seemed to tighten around Nico’s ribs. He’d left Coach Hedge on guard duty with Reyna asleep. ‘I need to get back to my companions.’

‘Indeed,’ Hades said. ‘But there is more. Your sister ...’ Hades faltered. As always, the subject of Bianca lay between them like a loaded gun – deadly, easy to reach, impossible to ignore. ‘I mean your *other* sister, Hazel ... she has

discovered that one of the Seven will die. She may try to prevent this. In doing so, she may lose sight of her priorities.’

Nico didn’t trust himself to speak.

To his surprise, his thoughts didn’t leap first to Percy. His primary concern was for Hazel, then for Jason, then for Percy and the others aboard the *Argo II*. They’d saved him in Rome. They’d welcomed him aboard their ship. Nico had never allowed himself the luxury of friends, but the crew of the *Argo II* was as close as he’d ever come. The idea of any of them dying made him feel empty – like he was back in the giants’ bronze jar, alone in the dark, subsisting only on sour pomegranate seeds.

Finally he asked, ‘Is Hazel all right?’

‘For the moment.’

‘And the others? Who will die?’

Hades shook his head. ‘Even if I were certain, I could not say. I tell you this because you are my son. You know that some deaths cannot be prevented. Some deaths *should* not be prevented. When the time comes, you may need to act.’

Nico didn’t know what that meant. He didn’t *want* to know.

‘My son.’ Hades’s tone was almost gentle. ‘Whatever happens, you have earned my respect. You brought honour to our house when we stood together against **Kronos** in Manhattan. You risked my wrath to help the Jackson boy – guiding him to the River Styx, freeing him from my prison, pleading with me to raise the armies of Erebus to assist him. Never before have I been so *harassed* by one of my sons. *Percy this* and *Percy that*. I nearly blasted you to cinders.’

Nico took a shallow breath. The walls of the room began to tremble, dust trickling from the cracks between the bones. ‘I didn’t do all that just for him. I did it because the whole world was in danger.’

Hades allowed himself the faintest smile, but there was nothing cruel in his eyes. ‘I can entertain the possibility that you acted for *multiple* reasons. My point is this: you and I rose to the aid of Olympus because you convinced me to let go of my anger. I would encourage you to do likewise. My children are so rarely happy. I ... I would like to see you be an exception.’

Nico stared at his father. He didn’t know what to do with that statement. He could accept many unreal things – hordes of ghosts, magical labyrinths, travel

through shadows, chapels made of bones. But tender words from the Lord of the Underworld? No. That made no sense.

Over at the altar, the fiery ghost rose. He approached, burning and screaming silently, his eyes conveying some urgent message.

‘Ah,’ Hades said. ‘This is Brother Paloan. He’s one of hundreds who were burned alive in the square near the old Roman temple. The Inquisition had its headquarters there, you know. At any rate, he suggests you leave now. You have very little time before the wolves arrive.’

‘Wolves? You mean Orion’s pack?’

Hades flicked his hand. The ghost of Brother Paloan disappeared. ‘My son, what you are attempting – shadow-travel across the world, carrying the statue of Athena – it may well destroy you.’

‘Thanks for the encouragement.’

Hades placed his hands briefly on Nico’s shoulders.

Nico didn’t like to be touched, but somehow this brief contact with his father felt reassuring – the same way the Chapel of Bones was reassuring. Like death, his father’s presence was cold and often callous, but it was *real* – brutally honest, inescapably dependable. Nico found a sort of freedom in knowing that eventually, no matter what happened, he would end up at the foot of his father’s throne.

‘I will see you again,’ Hades promised. ‘I will prepare a room for you at the palace in case you do not survive. Perhaps your chambers would look good decorated with the skulls of monks.’

‘Now I can’t tell if *you’re* joking.’

Hades’s eyes glittered as his form began to fade. ‘Then perhaps we are alike in some important ways.’

The god vanished.

Suddenly the chapel felt oppressive – thousands of hollow eye sockets staring at Nico. *We, the bones that are here, await yours.*

He hurried out of the church, hoping he remembered the way back to his friends.



XV

Nico

‘WOLVES?’ REYNA ASKED.

They were eating dinner from the nearby pavement café.

Despite Hades’s warning to hurry back, Nico had found nothing much changed at the camp. Reyna had just awoken. The Athena Parthenos still lay sideways across the top of the temple. Coach Hedge was entertaining a few locals with tap dancing and martial arts, occasionally singing into his megaphone, though nobody seemed to understand what he was saying.

Nico wished the coach hadn’t brought the megaphone. Not only was it loud and obnoxious but also, for no reason Nico understood, it occasionally blurted out random Darth Vader lines from *Star Wars* or yelled, ‘THE COW GOES MOO!’

As the three of them sat on the lawn to eat, Reyna seemed alert and rested. She and Coach Hedge listened as Nico described his dreams, then his meeting with Hades at the Chapel of Bones. Nico held back a few personal details from his talk with his father, though he sensed that Reyna knew plenty about wrestling with one’s feelings.

When he mentioned Orion and the wolves that were supposedly on their way, Reyna frowned.

‘Most wolves are friendly to Romans,’ she said. ‘I’ve never heard stories about Orion hunting with a pack.’

Nico finished his ham sandwich. He eyed the plate of pastries and was surprised to find he still had an appetite. ‘It could have been a figure of speech: *very little time before the wolves arrive*. Perhaps Hades didn’t literally mean wolves. At any rate, we should leave as soon as it’s dark enough for shadows.’

Coach Hedge stuffed an issue of *Guns & Ammo* into his bag. ‘Only problem: the Athena Parthenos is still thirty feet in the air. Gonna be fun hauling you guys and your gear to the top of that temple.’

Nico tried a pastry. The lady at the café had called them *farturas*. They looked like spiral doughnuts and tasted great – just the right combination of crispy, sugary and buttery – but when Nico first heard *fartura* he knew Percy would have made a joke out of the name.

America has dough-nuts, Percy would have said. Portugal has fart-nuts.

The older Nico got, the more juvenile Percy seemed to him, though Percy was three years older. Nico found his sense of humour equal parts endearing and annoying. He decided to concentrate on the *annoying*.

Then there were the times Percy was deadly serious: looking up at Nico from that chasm in Rome – *The other side, Nico! Lead them there. Promise me!*

And Nico had promised. It didn’t seem to matter how much he resented Percy Jackson; Nico would do anything for him. He hated himself for that.

‘So ...’ Reyna’s voice jarred him from his thoughts. ‘Will Camp Half-Blood wait for August first, or will they attack?’

‘We have to hope they wait,’ Nico said. ‘We can’t ... *I can’t get the statue back any faster.*’

Even at this rate, my dad thinks I might die. Nico kept that thought private.

He wished Hazel was with him. Together they had shadow-travelled the entire crew of the *Argo II* out of the House of Hades. When they shared their power, Nico felt like anything was possible. The trip to Camp Half-Blood could’ve been done in half the time.

Besides, Hades’s words about one of the crew dying had sent a chill through him. He couldn’t lose Hazel. Not another sister. Not again.

Coach Hedge looked up from counting the change in his baseball cap. ‘And you’re sure Clarisse said Mellie was okay?’

‘Yes, Coach. Clarisse is taking good care of her.’

‘That’s a relief. I don’t like what Grover said about Gaia whispering to the nymphs and dryads. If the nature spirits turn evil ... that’s not going to be pretty.’

Nico had never heard of such a thing happening. Then again, Gaia hadn’t been awake since the dawn of humanity.

Reyna took a bite of her pastry. Her chain mail glittered in the afternoon sun. ‘I wonder about these wolves ... Is it possible we’ve misunderstood the message? The goddess Lupa has been very quiet. Perhaps she is sending us aid. The wolves could be from her – to *defend* us from Orion and his pack.’

The hopefulness in her voice was as thin as gauze. Nico decided not to rip through it.

‘Maybe,’ he said. ‘But wouldn’t Lupa be busy with the war between the camps? I thought she’d be sending wolves to help your legion.’

Reyna shook her head. ‘Wolves are not front-line fighters. I don’t think she would help Octavian. Her wolves might be patrolling Camp Jupiter, defending it in the legion’s absence, but I just don’t know ...’

She crossed her legs at the ankles, and the iron tips of her combat boots glinted. Nico made a mental note not to get into any kicking contests with Roman legionnaires.

‘There’s something else,’ she said. ‘I haven’t had any luck contacting my sister, Hylla. It makes me uneasy that both the wolves *and* the Amazons have gone silent. If something has happened on the West Coast ... I fear the only hope for either camp lies with us. We *must* return the statue soon. That means the greatest burden is on you, son of Hades.’

Nico tried to swallow his bile. He wasn’t mad at Reyna. He kind of liked Reyna. But so often he’d been called on to do the impossible. Normally, as soon as he accomplished it, he was forgotten.

He remembered how nice the kids at Camp Half-Blood had been to him after the war with Kronos. *Great job, Nico! Thanks for bringing the armies of the Underworld to save us!*

Everybody smiled. They all invited him to sit at their table.

After about a week, his welcome wore thin. Campers would jump when he walked up behind them. He would emerge from the shadows at the campfire, startle somebody and see the discomfort in their eyes: *Are you still here? Why are you here?*

It didn’t help that immediately after the war with Kronos, Annabeth and Percy had started dating ...

Nico set down his *fartura*. Suddenly it didn’t taste so good.

He recalled his talk with Annabeth at Epirus, just before he'd left with the Athena Parthenos.

She'd pulled him aside and said, 'Hey, I have to talk to you.'

Panic had seized him. *She knows.*

'I want to thank you,' she continued. 'Bob ... the Titan ... he only helped us in Tartarus because you were kind to him. You told him we were worth saving. That's the only reason we're alive.'

She said *we* so easily, as if she and Percy were interchangeable, inseparable.

Nico had once read a story from Plato, who claimed that in the ancient times all humans had been a combination of male and female. Each person had two heads, four arms, four legs. Supposedly, these combo-humans had been so powerful they made the gods uneasy, so Zeus split them in half – man and woman. Ever since, humans had felt incomplete. They spent their lives searching for their other halves.

And where does that leave me? Nico wondered.

It wasn't his favourite story.

He wanted to hate Annabeth, but he just couldn't. She'd gone out of her way to thank him at Epirus. She was genuine and sincere. She never overlooked him or avoided him like most people did. Why couldn't she be a horrible person? That would've made it easier.

The wind god Favonius had warned him in Croatia: *If you let your anger rule you ... your fate will be even sadder than mine.*

But how could his fate be anything *but* sad? Even if he lived through this quest, he would have to leave both camps forever. That was the only way he would find peace. He wished there was another option – a choice that didn't hurt like the waters of the [Phlegethon](#) – but he couldn't see one.

Reyna was studying him, probably trying to read his thoughts. She glanced down at his hands, and Nico realized he was twisting his silver skull ring – the last gift Bianca had given him.

'Nico, how can we help you?' Reyna asked.

Another question he wasn't used to hearing.

'I'm not sure,' he admitted. 'You've already let me rest as much as possible. That's important. Perhaps you can lend me your strength again. This next jump

will be the longest. I'll have to muster enough energy to get us across the Atlantic.'

'You'll succeed,' Reyna promised. 'Once we're back in the U.S., we should encounter fewer monsters. I might even be able to get help from retired legionnaires along the eastern seaboard. They are obliged to aid any Roman demigod who calls on them.'

Hedge grunted. 'If Octavian hasn't already won them over. In which case, you might find yourself arrested for treason.'

'Coach,' Reyna scolded, 'not helping.'

'Hey, just sayin'. Personally, I wish we could stay in Évora longer. Good food, good money and so far no sign of these figurative *wolves* –'

Reyna's dogs sprang to their feet.

In the distance, howls pierced the air. Before Nico could stand, wolves appeared from every direction – huge black beasts leaping from the roofs, surrounding their encampment.

The largest of them padded forward. The alpha wolf stood on his haunches and began to change. His forelegs grew into arms. His snout shrank into a pointy nose. His grey fur morphed into a cloak of woven animal pelts. He became a tall, wiry man with a haggard face and glowing red eyes. A crown of finger bones circled his greasy black hair.

'Ah, little satyr ...' The man grinned, revealing pointed fangs. 'Your wish is granted! You will stay in Évora forever, because, sadly for you, my figurative wolves are *literally* wolves.'



XVI

Nico

‘**YOU’RE NOT ORION,**’ Nico blurted.

A stupid comment, but it was the first thing that came to his mind.

The man before him clearly was not a hunter giant. He wasn’t tall enough. He didn’t have dragon legs. He didn’t carry a bow or quiver, and he didn’t have the headlamp eyes Reyna had described from her dream.

The grey man laughed. ‘Indeed not. Orion has merely employed me to assist him in his hunt. I am –’

‘**Lycaon,**’ Reyna interrupted. ‘The first werewolf.’

The man gave her a mock bow. ‘Reyna Ramírez-Arellano, praetor of Rome. One of Lupa’s whelps! I’m pleased you recognize me. No doubt, I am the stuff of your nightmares.’

‘The stuff of my indigestion, perhaps.’ From her belt pouch, Reyna produced a foldable camping knife. She flicked it open and the wolves snarled, backing away. ‘I never travel without a silver weapon.’

Lycaon bared his teeth. ‘Would you keep a dozen wolves and their king at bay with a pocketknife? I heard you were brave, *filia Romana*. I did not realize you were foolhardy.’

Reyna’s dogs crouched, ready to spring. The coach gripped his baseball bat, though for once he didn’t look anxious to swing.

Nico reached for the hilt of his sword.

‘Don’t bother,’ muttered Coach Hedge. ‘These guys are only hurt by silver or fire. I remember them from Pikes Peak. They’re annoying.’

‘And I remember you, Gleeson Hedge.’ The werewolf’s eyes glowed lava red. ‘My pack will be delighted to have goat meat for dinner.’

Hedge snorted. 'Bring it on, mangy boy. The Hunters of Artemis are on their way right now, just like last time! That's a temple of *Diana* over there, you idiot. You're on their home turf!'

Again the wolves snarled and widened their circle. Some glanced nervously towards the rooftops.

Lycaon only glared at the coach. 'A nice try, but I'm afraid that temple has been misnamed. I passed through here during Roman times. It was actually dedicated to the Emperor Augustus. Typical demigod vanity. Regardless, I've been much more careful since our last encounter. If the Hunters were anywhere close by, I would know.'

Nico tried to think of an escape plan. They were surrounded and outnumbered. Their only effective weapon was a pocketknife. The sceptre of Diocletian was gone. The Athena Parthenos was thirty feet above them at the top of the temple, and even if they could reach it they couldn't shadow-travel until they actually had *shadows*. The sun wouldn't set for hours.

He hardly felt brave, but he stepped forward. 'So you've got us. What are you waiting for?'

Lycaon studied him like a new type of meat in a butcher's display case. 'Nico di Angelo ... son of Hades. I've heard of you. I'm sorry I can't kill you promptly, but I promised my employer Orion that I would detain you until he arrives. No worries. He should be here in a few moments. Once he's done with you, I shall spill your blood and mark this place as my territory for ages to come!'

Nico gritted his teeth. 'Demigod blood. The blood of Olympus.'

'Of course!' Lycaon said. 'Spilled upon the ground, especially *sacred* ground, demigod blood has many uses. With the proper incantations, it can awaken monsters or even gods. It can cause new life to spring up or make a place barren for generations. Alas, *your* blood will not wake Gaia herself. That honour is reserved for your friends aboard the *Argo II*. But fear not. Your death will be almost as painful as theirs.'

The grass started dying around Nico's feet. The marigold beds withered. Barren ground, he thought. Sacred ground.

He remembered the thousands of skeletons in the Chapel of Bones. He recalled what Hades had said about this public square, where the Inquisition had

burned hundreds of people alive.

This was an ancient city. How many dead lay in the ground beneath his feet?

‘Coach,’ he said, ‘you can climb?’

Hedge scoffed. ‘I’m half *goat*. Of course I can climb!’

‘Get up to the statue and secure the rigging. Make a rope ladder and drop it down for us.’

‘Uh, but the pack of wolves –’

‘Reyna,’ Nico said, ‘you and your dogs will have to cover our retreat.’

The praetor nodded grimly. ‘Understood.’

Lycaon howled with laughter. ‘Retreat to where, son of Hades? There is no escape. You cannot kill us!’

‘Maybe not,’ Nico said. ‘But I can slow you down.’

He spread his hands and the ground erupted.

Nico hadn’t expected it to work so well. He had pulled bone fragments from the earth before. He’d animated rat skeletons and unearthed the odd human skull. Nothing prepared him for the wall of bones that burst skyward – hundreds of femurs, ribs and fibulas entangling the wolves, forming a spiky briar patch of human remains.

Most of the wolves were hopelessly trapped. Some writhed and gnashed their teeth, trying to free themselves from their haphazard cages. Lycaon himself was immobilized in a cocoon of rib bones, but that didn’t stop him from screaming curses.

‘You worthless child!’ he roared. ‘I will rip the flesh from your limbs!’

‘Coach, go!’ Nico said.

The satyr sprinted towards the temple. He made the top of the podium in a single leap and scrambled up the left pillar.

Two wolves broke free from the thicket of bones. Reyna threw her knife and impaled one in the neck. Her dogs pounced on the other. Aurum’s fangs and claws slipped harmlessly off the wolf’s hide, but Argentum brought the beast down.

Argentum’s head was still bent sideways from the fight in Pompeii. His left ruby eye was still missing, but he managed to sink his fangs into the wolf’s scruff. The wolf dissolved into a puddle of shadow.

Thank goodness for silver dogs, Nico thought.

Reyna drew her sword. She scooped a handful of silver coins from Hedge's baseball cap, grabbed duct tape from the coach's supply bag and began taping coins around her blade. The girl was nothing if not inventive.

'Go!' she told Nico. 'I'll cover you!'

The wolves struggled, causing the bone thicket to crack and crumble. Lycaon freed his right arm and began smashing through his prison of ribcages.

'I will flay you alive!' he promised. 'I will add your pelt to my cloak!'

Nico ran, pausing just long enough to grab Reyna's silver pocketknife from the ground.

He wasn't a mountain goat, but he found a set of stairs at the back of the temple and raced to the top. He reached the base of the columns and squinted up at Coach Hedge, who was precariously perched at the feet of the Athena Parthenos, unravelling ropes and knotting a ladder.

'Hurry!' Nico yelled.

'Oh, really?' the coach called down. 'I thought we had tons of time!'

The last thing Nico needed was satyr sarcasm. Down in the square, more wolves broke free of their bone restraints. Reyna swatted them aside with her modified duct-tape-coin-sword, but a handful of change wasn't going to hold back a pack of werewolves for long. Aurum snarled and snapped in frustration, unable to hurt the enemy. Argentum did his best, sinking his claws into the throat of another wolf, but the silver dog was already damaged. Soon he'd be hopelessly outnumbered.

Lycaon freed both his arms. He started pulling his legs from their ribcage restraints. There were only a few seconds until he would be loose.

Nico was out of tricks. Summoning that wall of bones had drained him. It would take all his remaining energy to shadow-travel – assuming he could even find a shadow to travel into.

A shadow.

He looked at the silver pocketknife in his hand. An idea came to him – possibly the stupidest, craziest idea he'd had since he thought, *Hey, I'll get Percy to swim in the River Styx! He'll love me for that!*

'Reyna, get up here!' he yelled.

She slammed another wolf in the head and ran. In mid-stride, she flicked her sword, which elongated into a javelin, then used it to launch herself up like a pole-vaulter. She landed next to Nico.

‘What’s the plan?’ she asked, not even out of breath.

‘Show-off,’ he grumbled.

A knotted rope fell from above.

‘Climb, ya silly non-goats!’ Hedge yelled.

‘Go,’ Nico told her. ‘Once you’re up there, hang on tight to the rope.’

‘Nico –’

‘Do it!’

Her javelin shrank back into a sword. Reyna sheathed it and began to climb, scaling the column despite her armour and her supplies.

Down in the plaza, Aurum and Argentum were nowhere to be seen. Either they’d retreated or they’d been destroyed.

Lycaon broke free of his bone cage with a triumphant howl. ‘You will suffer, son of Hades!’

What else is new? Nico thought.

He palmed the pocketknife. ‘Come get me, you mutt! Or do you have to *stay* like a good dog until your master shows up?’

Lycaon sprang through the air, his claws extended, his fangs bared. Nico wrapped his free hand around the rope and concentrated, a bead of sweat trickling down his neck.

As the wolf king fell on him, Nico thrust the silver knife into Lycaon’s chest. All around the temple, wolves howled as one.

The wolf king sank his claws into Nico’s arms. His fangs stopped less than an inch from Nico’s face. Nico ignored his own pain and jabbed the pocketknife to the hilt between Lycaon’s ribs.

‘Be useful, dog,’ he snarled. ‘Back to the shadows.’

Lycaon’s eyes rolled up in his head. He dissolved into a pool of inky darkness.

Then several things happened at once. The outraged pack of wolves surged forward. From a nearby rooftop, a booming voice yelled, ‘STOP THEM!’

Nico heard the unmistakable sound of a large bow being drawn taut.

Then he melted into the pool of Lycaon’s shadow, taking his friends and the Athena Parthenos with him – slipping into cold ether with no idea where he

would emerge.



XVII

Piper

PIPER COULDN'T BELIEVE how hard it was to find deadly poison.

All morning she and Frank had scoured the port of Pylos. Frank allowed only Piper to come with him, thinking her charmspeak might be useful if they ran into his shape-shifting relatives.

As it turned out, her sword was more in demand. So far, they'd slain a [Laistrygonian ogre](#) in the bakery, battled a giant warthog in the public square and defeated a flock of Stymphalian birds with some well-aimed vegetables from Piper's cornucopia.

She was glad for the work. It kept her from dwelling on her conversation with her mother the night before – that bleak glimpse of the future Aphrodite had made her promise not to share ...

Meanwhile, Piper's biggest challenge in Pylos was the ads plastered all over town for her dad's new movie. The posters were in Greek, but Piper knew what they said: *TRISTAN MCLEAN IS JAKE STEEL: SIGNED IN BLOOD*.

Gods, what a horrible title. She wished her father had never taken on the Jake Steel franchise, but it had become one of his most popular roles. There he was on the poster, his shirt ripped open to reveal perfect abs (gross, Dad!), an AK-47 in each hand, a rakish smile on his chiselled face.

Halfway across the world, in the smallest, most out-of-the-way town imaginable, there was her dad. It made Piper feel sad, disoriented, homesick and annoyed all at once. Life went on. So did Hollywood. While her dad pretended to save the world, Piper and her friends actually *had* to. In eight more days, unless Piper could pull off the plan Aphrodite had explained ... well, there wouldn't be any more movies, or theatres, or people.

Around one in the afternoon, Piper finally put her charmspeak to work. She spoke with an Ancient Greek ghost in a Laundromat (on a one-to-ten scale for weird conversations, definitely an eleven) and got directions to an ancient stronghold where the shape-shifting descendants of Periclymenus supposedly hung out.

After trudging across the island in the afternoon heat, they found the cave perched halfway up a beachside cliff. Frank insisted that Piper wait for him at the bottom while he checked it out.

Piper wasn't happy about that, but she stood obediently on the beach, squinting up at the cave entrance and hoping she hadn't guided Frank into a death trap.

Behind her, a stretch of white sand hugged the foot of the hills. Sunbathers sprawled on blankets. Little kids splashed in the waves. The blue sea glittered invitingly.

Piper wished she could surf those waters. She'd promised to teach Hazel and Annabeth someday, if they ever came out to Malibu ... if Malibu still existed after 1 August.

She glanced up at the cliff's summit. The ruins of an old castle clung to the ridge. Piper wasn't sure if that was part of the shape-changers' hideout or not. Nothing moved on the parapets. The entrance of the cave sat about seventy feet down the cliff face – a circle of black in the chalky yellow rock like the hole of a giant pencil sharpener.

Nestor's Cave, the Laundromat ghost had called it. Supposedly the ancient king of Pylos had stashed his treasure there in times of crisis. The ghost also claimed that Hermes had once hidden the stolen cattle of Apollo in that cave.

Cows.

Piper shuddered. When she was little, her dad had driven her past a meat-processing plant in Chino. The smell had been enough to turn her into a vegetarian. Ever since, just the thought of cows made her ill. Her experiences with Hera the cow queen, the *katoblepones* of Venice and the pictures of creepy death cows in the House of Hades hadn't helped.

Piper was just starting to think, *Frank's been gone too long* – when he appeared at the cave entrance. Next to him stood a tall grey-haired man in a white linen suit and a pale yellow tie. The older man pressed a small shiny object

– like a stone or a piece of glass – into Frank’s hands. He and Frank exchanged a few words. Frank nodded gravely. Then the man turned into a seagull and flew away.

Frank picked his way down the trail until he reached Piper.

‘I found them,’ he said.

‘I noticed. You okay?’

He stared at the seagull as it flew towards the horizon.

Frank’s close-cropped hair pointed forward like an arrow, making his gaze even more intense. His Roman badges – *mural crown, centurion, praetor* – glittered on his shirt collar. On his forearm, the SPQR tattoo with the crossed spears of Mars stood out darkly in the full sunlight.

He looked good in his new outfit. The giant warthog had slimed his old clothes pretty badly, so Piper had taken him for some emergency shopping in Pylos. Now he wore new black jeans, soft leather boots and a dark green Henley shirt that fitted him snugly. He’d been self-conscious about the shirt. He was used to hiding his bulk in baggy clothes, but Piper assured him he didn’t have to worry about that any more. Since his growth spurt in Venice, he’d grown into his bulkiness just fine.

You haven’t changed, Frank, she’d told him. You’re just more you.

It was a good thing Frank Zhang was still so sweet and soft-spoken. Otherwise he would’ve been a scary guy.

‘Frank?’ she prompted gently.

‘Yeah, sorry.’ He focused on her. ‘My, uh ... cousins, I guess you’d call them ... they’ve been living here for generations, all descended from Periclymenus the Argonaut. I told them my story, how the Zhang family had gone from Greece to Rome to China to Canada. I told them about the legionnaire ghost I saw in the House of Hades, urging me to come to Pylos. They ... they didn’t seem surprised. They said it’s happened before, long-lost relatives coming home.’

Piper heard the wistfulness in his voice. ‘You were expecting something different.’

He shrugged. ‘A bigger welcome. Some party balloons. I’m not sure. My grandmother told me I would close the circle – bring our family honour and all that. But my cousins here ... they acted kind of cold and distant, like they didn’t

want me around. I don't think they liked that I'm a son of Mars. Honestly, I don't think they liked that I'm Chinese, either.'

Piper glared into the sky. The seagull was long gone, which was probably a good thing. She would have been tempted to shoot it out of the air with a glazed ham. 'If your cousins feel that way, they're idiots. They don't know how great you are.'

Frank shuffled from foot to foot. 'They got a little more friendly when I told them I was just passing through. They gave me a going-away present.'

He opened his hand. In his palm gleamed a metallic vial no bigger than an eyedropper.

Piper resisted the urge to step away. 'Is that the poison?'

Frank nodded. 'They call it *Pylosian mint*. Apparently the plant sprang from the blood of a nymph who died on a mountain near here, back in ancient times. I didn't ask for details.'

The vial was so tiny ... Piper worried there wouldn't be enough. Normally she didn't wish for *more* deadly poison. Nor was she sure how it would help them make the so-called *physician's cure* that Nike had mentioned. But, if the cure could really cheat death, Piper wanted to brew a six-pack – one dose for each of her friends.

Frank rolled the vial around in his palm. 'I wish Vitellius Reticulus were here.'

Piper wasn't sure she'd heard him right. 'Ridiculous who?'

A smile flickered across his mouth. '[Gaius Vitellius Reticulus](#), although we *did* call him Ridiculous sometimes. He was one of the Lares of the Fifth Cohort. Kind of a goofball, but he was the son of Aesculapius, the healing god. If anybody knew about this physician's cure ... he might.'

'A healing god would be nice,' Piper mused. 'Better than having a screaming, tied-up victory goddess on board.'

'Hey, you're lucky. My cabin is closest to the stables. I can hear her yelling all night: *FIRST PLACE OR DEATH! AN A-MINUS IS A FAILING GRADE!* Leo really needs to design a gag that's better than my old sock.'

Piper shuddered. She still didn't understand why it had been a good idea to take the goddess captive. The sooner they got rid of Nike, the better. 'So your

cousins ... did they have any advice about what comes next? This chained god we're supposed to find in Sparta?'

Frank's expression darkened. 'Yeah. I'm afraid they had some thoughts on that. Let's get back to the ship and I'll tell you about it.'

Piper's feet were killing her. She wondered if she could convince Frank to turn into a giant eagle and carry her, but, before she could ask, she heard footsteps in the sand behind them.

'Hello, nice tourists!' A scraggly fisherman with a white captain's hat and a mouth full of gold teeth beamed at them. 'Boat ride? Very cheap!'

He gestured to the shore, where a skiff with an outboard motor waited.

Piper returned his smile. She loved it when she could communicate with the locals.

'Yes, please,' she said in her best charmspeak. 'And we'd like you to take us somewhere special.'

The boat captain dropped them at the *Argo II*, anchored a quarter of a mile out to sea. Piper pressed a wad of euros into the captain's hands.

She wasn't above using charmspeak on mortals, but she'd decided to be as fair and careful as possible. Her days of stealing BMWs from car dealerships were over.

'Thank you,' she told him. 'If anyone asks, you took us around the island and showed us the sights. You dropped us at the docks in Pylos. You never saw any giant warship.'

'No warship,' the captain agreed. 'Thank you, nice American tourists!'

They climbed aboard the *Argo II* and Frank smiled at her awkwardly. 'Well ... nice killing giant warthogs with you.'

Piper laughed. 'You too, Mr Zhang.'

She gave him a hug, which seemed to fluster him, but Piper couldn't help liking Frank. Not only was he a kind and considerate boyfriend to Hazel, but whenever Piper saw him wearing Jason's old praetor's badge she felt grateful to him for stepping up and accepting that job. He had taken a huge responsibility off Jason's shoulders and left him free (Piper hoped) to pursue a new path at Camp Half-Blood ... assuming, of course, that they all lived through the next eight days.

The crew gathered for a hurried meeting on the foredeck – mostly because Percy was keeping an eye on a giant red sea serpent swimming off the port side.

‘That thing is *really* red,’ Percy muttered. ‘I wonder if it’s cherry-flavoured.’

‘Why don’t you swim over and find out?’ Annabeth asked.

‘How about no.’

‘Anyway,’ Frank said, ‘according to my Pylos cousins, the chained god we’re looking for in Sparta is my dad ... uh, I mean Ares, not Mars. Apparently the Spartans kept a statue of him chained up in their city so the spirit of war would never leave them.’

‘Oo-kay,’ Leo said. ‘The Spartans were freaks. Of course, we’ve got Victory tied up downstairs, so I guess we can’t talk.’

Jason leaned against the forward ballista. ‘On to Sparta, then. But how does a chained god’s heartbeat help us find a cure for dying?’

From the tightness in his face, Piper could tell he was still in pain. She remembered what Aphrodite had told her: *It’s not just his sword wound, my dear. It’s the ugly truth he saw in Ithaca. If the poor boy doesn’t stay strong, that truth will eat right through him.*

‘Piper?’ Hazel asked.

She stirred. ‘Sorry, what?’

‘I was asking you about the visions,’ Hazel prompted. ‘You told me you’d seen some stuff in your dagger blade?’

‘Uh ... right.’ Piper reluctantly unsheathed Katoptris. Ever since she’d used it to stab the snow goddess Khione, the visions in the blade had become colder and harsher, like images etched in ice. She’d seen eagles swirling over Camp Half-Blood, a wave of earth destroying New York. She’d seen scenes from the past: her father beaten and bound at the top of Mount Diablo, Jason and Percy fighting giants in the Roman Colosseum, the river god Achelous reaching out to her, pleading for the cornucopia she’d cut from his head.

‘I, um ...’ She tried to clear her thoughts. ‘I don’t see anything right now. But one vision kept popping up. Annabeth and I are exploring some ruins –’

‘Ruins!’ Leo rubbed his hands. ‘Now we’re talking. How many ruins can there be in Greece?’

‘Quiet, Leo,’ Annabeth scolded. ‘Piper, do you think it was Sparta?’

‘Maybe,’ Piper said. ‘Anyway ... suddenly we’re in this dark place like a cave. We’re staring at this bronze warrior statue. In the vision I touch the statue’s face and flames start swirling around us. That’s all I saw.’

‘Flames.’ Frank scowled. ‘I don’t like that vision.’

‘Me neither.’ Percy kept one eye on the red sea serpent, which was still slithering through the waves about a hundred yards to port. ‘If the statue engulfs people in fire, we should send Leo.’

‘I love you too, man.’

‘You know what I mean. You’re immune. Or, heck, give me some of those nice water grenades and *I’ll* go. Ares and I have tangled before.’

Annabeth stared at the coastline of Pylos, now retreating in the distance. ‘If Piper saw the two of us going after the statue, then that’s who should go. We’ll be all right. There’s always a way to survive.’

‘Not always,’ Hazel warned.

Since she was the only one in the group who had actually died and come back to life, her observation sort of killed the mood.

Frank held out the vial of Pylosian mint. ‘What about this stuff? After the House of Hades, I kind of hoped we were done drinking poison.’

‘Store it securely in the hold,’ Annabeth said. ‘For now, that’s all we can do. Once we figure out this chained god situation, we’ll head to the island of Delos.’

‘*The curse of Delos*,’ Hazel remembered. ‘That sounds fun.’

‘Hopefully Apollo will be there,’ Annabeth said. ‘Delos was his home island. He’s the god of medicine. He should be able to advise us.’

Aphrodite’s words came back to Piper: *You must bridge the gap between Roman and Greek, my child. Neither storm nor fire can succeed without you.*

Aphrodite had warned her of what was to come, told her what Piper would have to do to stop Gaia. Whether or not she would have the courage ... Piper didn’t know.

Off the port bow, the cherry-flavoured sea serpent spewed steam.

‘Yeah, it’s definitely checking us out,’ Percy decided. ‘Maybe we should take to the air for a while.’

‘Airborne it is!’ Leo said. ‘Festus, do the honours!’

The bronze dragon figurehead creaked and clacked. The ship’s engine hummed. The oars lifted, expanding into aerial blades with a sound like ninety

umbrellas opening at once, and the *Argo II* rose into the sky.

‘We should reach Sparta by morning,’ Leo announced. ‘And remember to come by the mess hall tonight, folks, ’cause Chef Leo is making his famous three-alarm tofu tacos!’



XVIII

Piper

PIPER DIDN'T WANT TO get yelled at by a three-legged table.

When Jason visited her cabin that evening, she made sure to keep the door open, because Buford the Wonder Table took his duties as acting chaperone very seriously. If he had the slightest suspicion a girl and a boy were in the same cabin without supervision, he would steam and clatter down the hall, his holographic projection of Coach Hedge yelling, 'CUT THAT OUT! GIVE ME TWENTY PUSH-UPS! PUT SOME CLOTHES ON!'

Jason sat at the foot of her bunk. 'I was about to go on duty. Just wanted to check on you first.'

Piper nudged his leg with her foot. 'The guy who got run through with a sword wants to check on *me*? How are *you* feeling?'

He gave her a lopsided smile. His face was so tanned from their time on the coast of Africa that the scar on his lip looked like a chalk mark. His blue eyes were even more startling. His hair had grown out corn-silk white, though he still had a groove along his scalp where he'd been grazed by a bullet from the bandit Sciron's flintlock. If such a minor scrape from Celestial bronze took so long to heal, Piper wondered how he'd ever get over the Imperial gold wound in his gut.

'I've been worse,' Jason assured her. 'Once, in Oregon, this *dracaena* cut off my arms.'

Piper blinked. Then she slapped his arm gently. 'Shut up.'

'I had you for a second.'

They held hands in comfortable silence. For a moment, Piper could almost imagine they were normal teenagers, enjoying each other's company and learning to be together as a couple. Sure, Jason and she had had a few months at Camp Half-Blood, but the war with Gaia had always been looming. Piper

wondered what it would be like if they didn't have to worry about dying a dozen times every day.

'I never thanked you.' Jason's expression turned serious. 'Back on Ithaca, after I saw my mom's ... remnant, her *mania* ... When I was wounded, you kept me from slipping away, Pipes. Part of me ...' His voice faltered. 'Part of me wanted to close my eyes and stop fighting.'

Piper's heart did a slow twist. She felt her own pulse in her fingers. 'Jason ... you're a fighter. You'd never give up. When you faced your mother's spirit – that was *you* being strong. Not me.'

'Maybe.' His voice was dry. 'I didn't mean to lay something so heavy on you, Pipes. It's just ... I have my mom's DNA. The human part of me is all *her*. What if I make the wrong choices? What if I make a mistake I can't take back when we're fighting Gaia? I don't want to end up like my mom – reduced to a *mania*, chewing on my regrets forever.'

Piper cupped her hands around his. She felt like she was back on the deck of the *Argo II*, holding the Boreads' ice grenade just before it detonated.

'You'll make the right choices,' she said. 'I don't know what will happen to any of us, but you could *never* end up like your mom.'

'How can you be so sure?'

Piper studied the tattoo on his forearm – SPQR, the eagle of Jupiter, twelve lines for his years in the legion. 'My dad used to tell me this story about making choices ...' She shook her head. 'No, never mind. I'll sound like Grandpa Tom.'

'Go on,' Jason said. 'What's the story?'

'Well ... these two Cherokee hunters were out in the woods, right? Each of them was under a taboo.'

'A taboo – something they weren't allowed to do.'

'Yeah.' Piper began to relax. She wondered if this was why her dad and granddad always liked telling stories. You could make even the most terrifying topic easier to talk about by framing it as something that happened to a couple of Cherokee hunters hundreds of years ago. Take a problem; turn it into entertainment. Perhaps that's why her dad had become an actor.

'So one of the hunters,' she continued, 'he wasn't supposed to eat deer meat. The other guy wasn't supposed to eat squirrel meat.'

'Why?'

‘Hey, I don’t know. Some Cherokee taboos were permanent no-no’s, like killing eagles.’ She tapped the symbol on Jason’s arm. ‘*That* was bad luck for almost everybody. But sometimes, individual Cherokee took on temporary taboos – maybe to cleanse their spirit, or because they *knew*, from listening to the spirit world or whatever, that the taboo was important. They went with their instincts.’

‘Okay.’ Jason sounded unsure. ‘So back to these two hunters.’

‘They were out hunting in the woods all day. The only things they caught were squirrels. At night they made camp, and the guy who *could* eat squirrel meat started cooking it over the fire.’

‘Yum.’

‘Another reason I’m a vegetarian. Anyway, the second hunter, who wasn’t allowed squirrel meat – *he* was starving. He just sat there clutching his stomach while his friend ate. Finally the first hunter started feeling guilty. “Ah, go ahead,” he said. “Eat some.” But the second hunter resisted. “It’s taboo for me. I’ll get in serious trouble. I’ll probably turn into a snake or something.” The first hunter laughed. “Where did you get that crazy idea? Nothing will happen to you. You can go back to avoiding squirrel meat tomorrow.” The second hunter knew he shouldn’t, but he ate.’

Jason traced his finger across her knuckles, which made it hard to concentrate. ‘What happened?’

‘In the middle of the night, the second hunter woke up screaming in pain. The first hunter ran over to see what was wrong. He threw off his friend’s covers and saw that his friend’s legs had fused together in a leathery tail. As he watched, snakeskin crept up his friend’s body. The poor hunter wept and apologized to the spirits and cried in fear, but there was nothing to be done. The first hunter stayed by his side and tried to comfort him until the unfortunate guy fully transformed into a giant snake and slithered away. The end.’

‘I love these Cherokee stories,’ Jason said. ‘They’re so cheerful.’

‘Yeah, well.’

‘So the guy turned into a snake. The moral is: Frank has been eating squirrels?’

She laughed, which felt good. ‘No, stupid. The point is, trust your instincts. Squirrel meat might be just fine for one person, but taboo for another. The

second hunter *knew* he had a serpent spirit inside him, waiting to take over. He *knew* he shouldn't feed that bad spirit by eating squirrel meat, but he did it anyway.'

'So ... *I* shouldn't eat squirrels.'

Piper was relieved to see the gleam in his eyes. She thought about something Hazel had confided to her a few nights ago: *I think Jason is the linchpin to Hera's whole scheme. He was her first play; he's going to be her last.*

'My point,' Piper said, poking his chest, 'is that you, Jason Grace, are very familiar with your own bad spirits, and you try your best not to feed them. You have solid instincts, and you know how to follow them. Whatever annoying qualities you have, you are a genuinely good person who always tries to make the right choice. So no more talk about giving up.'

Jason frowned. 'Wait. I have annoying qualities?'

She rolled her eyes. 'Come here.'

She was about to kiss him when there was a knock on the door.

Leo leaned inside. 'A party? Am I invited?'

Jason cleared his throat. 'Hey, Leo. What's going on?'

'Oh, not much.' He pointed upstairs. 'The usual obnoxious *venti* trying to destroy the ship. You ready for guard duty?'

'Yeah.' Jason leaned forward and kissed Piper. 'Thanks. And don't worry. I'm good.'

'That,' she told him, 'was kind of my point.'

After the boys left, Piper lay on her pegasus-down pillows and watched the constellations her lamp projected on the ceiling. She didn't think she could sleep, but a full day of fighting monsters in the summer heat had taken its toll. At last she closed her eyes and drifted into a nightmare.

The Acropolis.

Piper had never been there, but she recognized it from pictures – an ancient stronghold perched on a hill almost as impressive as Gibraltar. Rising four hundred feet over the night-time sprawl of modern Athens, the sheer cliffs were topped with a crown of limestone walls. On the clifftop, a collection of ruined temples and modern cranes gleamed silver in the moonlight.

In her dream, Piper flew above the [Parthenon](#) – the ancient temple of Athena, the left side of its hollow shell encased in metal scaffolding.

The Acropolis seemed devoid of mortals, perhaps because of the financial problems in Greece. Or perhaps Gaia's forces had arranged some pretext to keep the tourists and construction workers away.

Piper's view zoomed to the centre of the temple. So many giants had gathered there it looked like a cocktail party for redwood trees. A few Piper recognized: those horrible twins from Rome, [Otis](#) and [Ephialtes](#), dressed in matching construction worker outfits; Polybotes, looking just as Percy had described him, with poison dripping from his dreadlocks and a breastplate sculpted to resemble hungry mouths; worst of all, [Enceladus](#), the giant who had kidnapped Piper's dad. His armour was etched with flame designs, his hair braided with bones. His flagpole-sized spear burned with purple fire.

Piper had heard that each giant was born to oppose a particular god, but there were way more than twelve giants gathered in the Parthenon. She counted at least twenty and, if that wasn't intimidating enough, around the giants' feet milled a horde of smaller monsters – Cyclopes, ogres, six-armed [Earthborn](#) and serpent-legged *dracaenae*.

In the centre of the crowd stood an empty, makeshift throne of twisted scaffolding and stone blocks apparently yanked at random from the ruins.

As Piper watched, a new giant lumbered up the steps at the far end of the Acropolis. He wore a massive velour tracksuit with gold chains around his neck and greased-back hair, so he looked like a thirty-foot-tall mobster – if mobsters had dragon feet and burnt-orange skin. The mafia giant ran towards the Parthenon and stumbled inside, flattening several Earthborn under his feet. He stopped, gasping for breath at the foot of the throne.

'Where is Porphyryon?' he demanded. 'I have news!'

Piper's old enemy Enceladus stepped forward. 'Tardy as usual, [Hippolytos](#). I hope your news is worth the wait. King Porphyryon should be ...'

The ground between them split. An even larger giant leaped from the earth like a breaching whale.

'King Porphyryon is here,' announced the king.

He looked just as Piper remembered from the Wolf House in Sonoma. Forty feet tall, he towered over his brethren. In fact, Piper realized queasily, he was the

same size as the Athena Parthenos that had once dominated the temple. In his seaweed-coloured braids, captured demigod weapons glittered. His face was cruel and pale green, his eyes as white as the Mist. His body radiated its own sort of gravity, causing the other monsters to lean towards him. Soil and pebbles skittered across the ground, pulled towards his massive dragon feet.

The mobster giant Hippolytos kneeled. ‘My king, I bring word of the enemy!’
Porphyrion took his throne. ‘Speak.’

‘The demigod ship sails around the Peloponnese. Already they have destroyed the ghosts at Ithaca and captured the goddess Nike in Olympia!’

The crowd of monsters stirred uneasily. A Cyclops chewed his fingernails. Two *dracaenae* exchanged coins like they were taking bets for the End-of-the-World office sweepstake.

Porphyrion just laughed. ‘Hippolytos, do you wish to kill your enemy Hermes and become the messenger of the giants?’

‘Yes, my king!’

‘Then you will have to bring fresher news. I know all this already. None of it matters! The demigods have taken the route *we expected* them to take. They would have been fools to go any other way.’

‘But, sire, they will arrive at Sparta by morning! If they manage to unleash the *makhai* –’

‘Idiot!’ Porphyrion’s voice shook the ruins. ‘Our brother *Mimas* awaits them at Sparta. You need not worry. The demigods cannot change their fate. One way or another, their blood shall be spilled upon these stones and wake the Earth Mother!’

The crowd roared approval and brandished their weapons. Hippolytos bowed and retreated, but another giant approached the throne.

With a start, Piper realized this one was *female*. Not that it was easy to tell. The giantess had the same dragon-like legs and the same long braided hair. She was just as tall and burly as the males, but her breastplate was definitely fashioned for a woman. Her voice was higher and reedier.

‘Father!’ she cried. ‘I ask again: Why here, in this place? Why not on the slopes of Mount Olympus itself? Surely –’

‘*Periboia*,’ the king growled, ‘the matter is settled. The original Mount Olympus is now a barren peak. It offers us no glory. Here, in the centre of the

Greek world, the roots of the gods truly run deep. There may be older temples, but this *Parthenon* holds their memory best. In the minds of mortals, it is the most powerful symbol of the Olympians. When the blood of the last heroes is spilled here, the Acropolis shall be razed. This hill shall crumble, and the entire city shall be consumed by the Earth Mother. We will be the masters of Creation!’

The crowd hollered and howled, but the giantess Periboia didn’t look convinced.

‘You tempt fate, Father,’ she said. ‘The demigods have friends here as well as enemies. It is not wise –’

‘WISE?’ Porphyrion rose from his throne. All the giants took a step back. ‘Enceladus, my counsellor, explain to my daughter what wisdom is!’

The fiery giant came forward. His eyes glowed like diamonds. Piper loathed his face. She’d seen it too many times in her dreams when her father was held captive.

‘You need not worry, princess,’ Enceladus said. ‘We have taken Delphi. Apollo was driven out of Olympus in shame. The future is closed to the gods. They stumble forward blindly. As for tempting fate ...’ He gestured to his left, and a smaller giant shuffled forward. He had ratty grey hair, a wrinkled face and eyes that were milky with cataracts. Instead of armour, he wore a tattered sackcloth tunic. His dragon-scale legs were as white as frost.

He didn’t look like much, but Piper noticed that the other monsters kept their distance. Even Porphyrion leaned away from the old giant.

‘This is [Thoon](#),’ Enceladus said. ‘Just as many of us were born to kill certain gods, Thoon was born to kill the [Three Fates](#). He will strangle the old ladies with his bare hands. He will shred their yarn and destroy their loom. He will destroy Fate itself!’

King Porphyrion rose and spread his arms in triumph. ‘No more prophecies, my friends! No more futures foretold! The time of Gaia shall be our era, and we will make our own destiny!’

The crowd cheered so loudly that Piper felt as if she were crumbling to pieces. Then she realized someone was shaking her awake.

‘Hey,’ Annabeth said. ‘We made it to Sparta. Can you get ready?’

Piper sat up groggily, her heart still pounding.

‘Yeah ...’ She gripped Annabeth’s arm. ‘But first there’s something you need to hear.’



XIX

Piper

WHEN SHE RECOUNTED her dream for Percy, the ship's toilets exploded.

'No way are you two going down there alone,' Percy said.

Leo ran down the hall waving a wrench. 'Man, did you *have* to destroy the plumbing?'

Percy ignored him. Water ran down the gangway. The hull rumbled as more pipes burst and sinks overflowed. Piper guessed that Percy hadn't meant to cause so much damage, but his glowering expression made her want to leave the ship as soon as possible.

'We'll be all right,' Annabeth told him. 'Piper foresaw the two of us going down there, so that's what needs to happen.'

Percy glared at Piper like it was all her fault. 'And this Mimas dude? I'm guessing he's a giant?'

'Probably,' she said. 'Porphyron called him *our brother*.'

'And a bronze statue surrounded by fire,' Percy said. 'And those ... other things you mentioned. Mackies?'

'*Makhai*,' Piper said. 'I think the word means *battles* in Greek, but I don't know how that applies, exactly.'

'That's my point!' Percy said. 'We don't know what's down there. I'm going with you.'

'No.' Annabeth put her hand on his arm. 'If the giants want our blood, the *last* thing we need is a boy and a girl going down there together. Remember? They want one of each for their big sacrifice.'

'Then I'll get Jason,' Percy said. 'And the two of us —'

'Seaweed Brain, are you implying that two boys can handle this better than two girls?'

‘No. I mean ... no. But –’

Annabeth kissed him. ‘We’ll be back before you know it.’

Piper followed her upstairs before the whole lower deck could flood with toilet water.

An hour later, the two of them stood on a hill overlooking the ruins of Ancient Sparta. They’d already scouted the modern city, which, strangely, reminded Piper of Albuquerque – a bunch of low, boxy, whitewashed buildings sprawled across a plain at the foot of some purplish mountains. Annabeth had insisted on checking the archaeology museum, then the giant metal statue of the Spartan warrior in the public square, then the National Museum of Olives and Olive Oil (yes, that was a real thing). Piper had learned more about olive oil than she ever wanted to know, but no giants attacked them. They found no statues of chained gods.

Annabeth seemed reluctant to check the ruins on the edge of town, but finally they ran out of other places to look.

There wasn’t much to see. According to Annabeth, the hill they stood on had once been Sparta’s acropolis – its highest point and main fortress – but it was nothing like the massive Athenian acropolis Piper had seen in her dreams.

The weathered slope was covered with dead grass, rocks and stunted olive trees. Below, ruins stretched out for maybe a quarter of a mile: limestone blocks, a few broken walls and some tiled holes in the ground like wells.

Piper thought about her dad’s most famous movie, *King of Sparta*, and how the Spartans were portrayed as invincible supermen. She found it sad that their legacy had been reduced to a field of rubble and a small modern town with an olive-oil museum.

She wiped the sweat from her forehead. ‘You’d think if there was a thirty-foot-tall giant around we’d see him.’

Annabeth stared at the distant shape of the *Argo II* floating above downtown Sparta. She fingered the red coral pendant on her necklace – a gift from Percy when they started dating.

‘You’re thinking about Percy,’ Piper guessed.

Annabeth nodded.

Since she'd come back from Tartarus, Annabeth had told Piper a lot of scary things that had happened down there. At the top of her list: Percy controlling a tide of poison and suffocating the goddess Akhlys.

'He seems to be adjusting,' Piper said. 'He's smiling more often. You know he cares about you more than ever.'

Annabeth sat, her face suddenly pale. 'I don't know why it's hitting me so hard all of a sudden. I can't quite get that memory out of my head ... how Percy looked when he was standing at the edge of Chaos.'

Maybe Piper was just picking up on Annabeth's uneasiness, but she started to feel agitated as well.

She thought about what Jason had said last night: *Part of me wanted to close my eyes and stop fighting.*

She had tried her best to reassure him, but still she worried. Like that Cherokee hunter who changed into a serpent, *all* demigods had their share of bad spirits inside. Fatal flaws. Some crises brought them out. Some lines shouldn't be crossed.

If that was true for Jason, how could it not be true for Percy? The guy had literally been through hell and back. Even when he wasn't trying, he made the toilets explode. What would Percy be like if he *wanted* to act scary?

'Give him time.' She sat next to Annabeth. 'The guy is crazy about you. You've been through so much together.'

'I know ...' Annabeth's grey eyes reflected the green of the olive trees. 'It's just ... Bob the Titan, he warned me there would be more sacrifices ahead. I want to believe we can have a normal life someday ... But I allowed myself to hope for that last summer, after the Titan War. Then Percy disappeared for *months*. Then we fell into that pit ...' A tear traced its way down her cheek. 'Piper, if you'd seen the face of the god Tartarus, all swirling darkness, devouring monsters and vaporizing them – I've never felt so *helpless*. I try not to think about it ...'

Piper took her friend's hands. They were trembling badly. She remembered her first day at Camp Half-Blood, when Annabeth had given her a tour. Annabeth had been shaken up about Percy's disappearance and, though Piper was pretty disoriented and scared herself, comforting Annabeth had made her

feel needed, like she might actually have a place among these crazy-powerful demigods.

Annabeth Chase was the bravest person she knew. If even *she* needed a shoulder to cry on once in a while ... well, Piper was glad to offer hers.

‘Hey,’ she said gently. ‘Don’t try to shut out the feelings. You won’t be able to. Just let them wash over you and drain out again. You’re scared.’

‘Gods, yes, I’m scared.’

‘You’re angry.’

‘At Percy for frightening me,’ she said. ‘At my mom for sending me on that horrible quest in Rome. At ... well, pretty much everybody. Gaia. The giants. The gods for being jerks.’

‘At me?’ Piper asked.

Annabeth managed a shaky laugh. ‘Yes, for being so annoyingly calm.’

‘It’s all a lie.’

‘And for being a good friend.’

‘Ha!’

‘And for having your head on straight about guys and relationships and –’

‘I’m sorry. Have you *met* me?’

Annabeth punched her arm, but there was no force to it. ‘I’m stupid, sitting here talking about my feelings when we have a quest to finish.’

‘The chained god’s heartbeat can wait.’ Piper tried for a smile, but her own fears welled up inside her – for Jason and her friends on the *Argo II*, for herself, if she wasn’t able to do what Aphrodite had advised. *In the end, you will only have the power for one word. It must be the right word, or you will lose everything.*

‘Whatever happens,’ she told Annabeth, ‘I’m your friend. Just ... remember that, okay?’

Especially if I’m not around to remind you, Piper thought.

Annabeth started to say something. Suddenly a roaring sound came from the ruins. One of the stone-lined pits, which Piper had mistaken for wells, spewed out a three-storey geyser of flames and shut off just as quickly.

‘What the heck?’ Piper asked.

Annabeth sighed. ‘I don’t know, but I have a feeling it’s something we should check out.’

Three pits lay side by side like finger holes on a recorder. Each one was perfectly round, two feet in diameter, tiled around the rim with limestone; each one plunged straight into darkness. Every few seconds, seemingly at random, one of the three pits shot a column of fire into the sky. Each time, the colour and intensity of the flames were different.

‘They weren’t doing this before.’ Annabeth walked a wide arc around the pits. She still looked shaky and pale, but her mind was now obviously engaged in the problem at hand. ‘There doesn’t seem to be any pattern. The timing, the colour, the height of the fire ... I don’t get it.’

‘Did we activate them somehow?’ Piper wondered. ‘Maybe that surge of fear you felt on the hill ... Uh, I mean we *both* felt.’

Annabeth didn’t seem to hear her. ‘There must be some kind of mechanism ... a pressure plate, a proximity alarm.’

Flames shot from the middle pit. Annabeth counted silently. The next time, a geyser erupted on the left. She frowned. ‘That’s not right. It’s inconsistent. It has to follow some kind of logic.’

Piper’s ears started to ring. Something about these pits ...

Each time one ignited, a horrible thrill went through her – fear, panic, but also a strong desire to get closer to the flames.

‘It isn’t rational,’ she said. ‘It’s emotional.’

‘How can fire pits be emotional?’

Piper held her hand over the pit on the right. Instantly, flames leaped up. Piper barely had time to withdraw her fingers. Her nails steamed.

‘Piper!’ Annabeth ran over. ‘What were you *thinking*?’

‘I wasn’t. I was feeling. What we want is down there. These pits are the way in. I’ll have to jump.’

‘Are you *crazy*? Even if you don’t get stuck in the tube, you have no idea how deep it is.’

‘You’re right.’

‘You’ll be burned alive!’

‘Possibly.’ Piper unbuckled her sword and tossed it into the pit on the right. ‘I’ll let you know if it’s safe. Wait for my word.’

‘Don’t you dare,’ Annabeth warned.

Piper jumped.

For a moment she was weightless in the dark, the sides of the hot stone pit burning her arms. Then the space opened up around her. Instinctively she tucked and rolled, absorbing most of the impact as she hit the stone floor.

Flames shot up in front of her, singeing her eyebrows, but Piper snatched up her sword, unsheathed it and swung before she'd even stopped rolling. A bronze dragonhead, neatly decapitated, wobbled across the floor.

Piper stood, trying to get her bearings. She looked down at the fallen dragonhead and felt a moment of guilt, as if she'd killed Festus. But this wasn't Festus.

Three bronze dragon statues stood in a row, aligned with the holes in the roof. Piper had decapitated the middle one. The two intact dragons were each three feet tall, their snouts pointed upward and their steaming mouths open. They were clearly the source of the flames, but they didn't seem to be automatons. They didn't move or try to attack her. Piper calmly sliced off the heads of the other two.

She waited. No more flames shot upward.

'Piper?' Annabeth's voice echoed from far above like she was yelling down a chimney.

'Yeah!' Piper shouted.

'Thank the gods! You okay?'

'Yeah. Hold on a sec.'

Her eyesight adjusted to the dark. She scanned the chamber. The only light came from her glowing blade and the openings above. The ceiling was about thirty feet high. By all rights, Piper should've broken both legs in the fall, but she wasn't going to complain.

The chamber itself was round, about the size of a helicopter pad. The walls were made of rough-hewn stone blocks chiselled with Greek inscriptions – thousands and thousands of them, like graffiti.

At the far end of the room, on a stone dais, stood the human-sized bronze statue of a warrior – the god Ares, Piper guessed – with heavy bronze chains wrapped around his body, anchoring him to the floor.

On either side of the statue loomed two dark doorways, ten feet high, with a gruesome stone face carved over each archway. The faces reminded Piper of gorgons, except they had lions' manes instead of snakes for hair.

Piper suddenly felt very much alone.

‘Annabeth!’ she called. ‘It’s a long drop, but it’s safe to come down. Maybe ... uh, you have a rope you could fasten so we can get back up?’

‘On it!’

A few minutes later a rope dropped from the centre pit. Annabeth shinned down.

‘Piper McLean,’ she grumbled, ‘that was without a doubt the *dumbest* risk I’ve ever seen anyone take, and I *date* a dumb risk-taker.’

‘Thank you.’ Piper nudged the nearest decapitated dragon-head with her foot. ‘I’m guessing these are the dragons of Ares. That’s one of his sacred animals, right?’

‘And there’s the chained god himself. Where do you think those doorways –’ Piper held up her hand. ‘Do you hear that?’

The sound was like a drumbeat ... with a metallic echo.

‘It’s coming from inside the statue,’ Piper decided. ‘The heartbeat of the chained god.’

Annabeth unsheathed her drakon-bone sword. In the dim light, her face was ghostly pale, her eyes colourless. ‘I – I don’t like this, Piper. We need to leave.’

The rational part of Piper agreed. Her skin crawled. Her legs ached to run. But something about this room felt strangely familiar ...

‘The shrine is ramping up our emotions,’ she said. ‘It’s like being around my mom, except this place radiates fear, not love. That’s why you started feeling overwhelmed on the hill. Down here, it’s a thousand times stronger.’

Annabeth scanned the walls. ‘Okay ... we need a plan to get the statue out. Maybe haul it up with the rope, but –’

‘Wait.’ Piper glanced at the snarling stone faces above the doorways. ‘A shrine that radiates fear. Ares had two divine sons, didn’t he?’

‘Ph-phobos and Deimos.’ Annabeth shivered. ‘Panic and Fear. Percy met them once in Staten Island.’

Piper decided not to ask what the twin gods of panic and fear had been doing in Staten Island. ‘I think those are their faces above the doors. This place isn’t just a shrine to Ares. It’s a temple of fear.’

Deep laughter echoed through the chamber.

On Piper's right, a giant appeared. He didn't come through either doorway. He simply emerged from the darkness as if he'd been camouflaged against the wall.

He was small for a giant – perhaps twenty-five feet tall, which would give him enough room to swing the massive sledgehammer in his hands. His armour, his skin and his dragon-scale legs were all the colour of charcoal. Copper wires and smashed circuit boards glittered in the braids of his oil-black hair.

'Very good, child of Aphrodite.' The giant smiled. 'This is indeed the Temple of Fear. And I am here to make you believers.'



X X

Piper

PIPER KNEW FEAR, BUT THIS WAS DIFFERENT.

Waves of terror crashed over her. Her joints turned to jelly. Her heart refused to beat.

Her worst memories crowded her mind – her father tied up and beaten on Mount Diablo; Percy and Jason fighting to the death in Kansas; the three of them drowning in the nymphaeum in Rome; herself standing alone against Khione and the Boreads. Worst of all, she relived her conversation with her mother about what was to come.

Paralysed, she watched as the giant raised his sledgehammer to smash them flat. At the last moment, she leaped to one side, tackling Annabeth.

The hammer cracked the floor, peppering Piper's back with stone shrapnel.

The giant chuckled. 'Oh, that wasn't fair!' He hefted his sledgehammer again.

'Annabeth, get up!' Piper helped her to her feet. She pulled her towards the far end of the room, but Annabeth moved sluggishly, her eyes wide and unfocused.

Piper understood why. The temple was amplifying their personal fears. Piper had seen some horrible things, but it was *nothing* compared to what Annabeth had experienced. If she was having flashbacks of Tartarus, enhanced and compounded with all her other bad memories, her mind wouldn't be able to cope. She might literally go insane.

'I'm here,' Piper promised, filling her voice with reassurance. 'We *will* get out of this.'

The giant laughed. 'A child of Aphrodite leading a child of Athena! Now I've seen everything. How would you defeat me, girl? With makeup and fashion tips?'

A few months ago that comment might've stung, but Piper was way past that. The giant lumbered towards them. Fortunately, he was slow and carrying a heavy hammer.

'Annabeth, trust me,' Piper said.

'A – a plan,' she stammered. 'I go left. You go right. If we –'

'Annabeth, no plans.'

'W-what?'

'No plans. Just follow me!'

The giant swung his hammer, but they dodged it easily. Piper leaped forward and slashed her sword across the back of the giant's knee. As the giant bellowed in outrage, Piper pulled Annabeth into the nearest tunnel. Immediately they were engulfed in total darkness.

'Fools!' the giant roared somewhere behind them. 'That is the wrong way!'

'Keep moving.' Piper held tight to Annabeth's hand. 'It's fine. Come on.'

She couldn't see anything. Even the glow of her sword was snuffed out. She barrelled ahead anyway, trusting her emotions. From the echo of their footfalls, the space around them must have been a vast cavern, but she couldn't be sure. She simply went in the direction that made her fear the sharpest.

'Piper, it's like the House of Night,' Annabeth said. 'We should close our eyes.'

'No!' Piper said. 'Keep them open. We can't try to hide.'

The giant's voice came from somewhere in front of them. 'Lost forever. Swallowed by the darkness.'

Annabeth froze, forcing Piper to stop, too.

'Why did we just plunge in?' Annabeth demanded. 'We're lost. We did what he *wanted* us to! We should have bided our time, talked to the enemy, figured out a plan. That *always* works!'

'Annabeth, I *never* ignore your advice.' Piper kept her voice soothing. 'But this time I have to. We can't defeat this place with reason. You can't *think* your way out of your emotions.'

The giant's laughter echoed like a detonating depth charge. 'Despair, Annabeth Chase! I am Mimas, born to slay Hephaestus. I am the breaker of plans, the destroyer of the well-oiled machines. Nothing goes right in my

presence. Maps are misread. Devices break. Data is lost. The finest minds turn to mush!’

‘I – I’ve faced worse than you!’ Annabeth cried.

‘Oh, I see!’ The giant sounded much closer now. ‘Are you not afraid?’

‘Never!’

‘Of course we’re afraid,’ Piper corrected. ‘Terrified!’

The air moved. Just in time, Piper pushed Annabeth to one side.

CRASH!

Suddenly they were back in the circular room, the dim light almost blinding now. The giant stood close by, trying to yank his hammer out of the floor where he’d embedded it. Piper lunged and drove her blade into the giant’s thigh.

‘AROOO!’ Mimas let go of the hammer and arched his back.

Piper and Annabeth scrambled behind the chained statue of Ares, which still pulsed with a metallic heartbeat: *thump, thump, thump*.

The giant Mimas turned towards them. The wound on his leg was already closing.

‘You cannot defeat me,’ he growled. ‘In the last war, it took *two* gods to bring me down. I was born to kill Hephaestus, and would have done so if Ares hadn’t ganged up on me as well! You should have stayed paralysed in your fear. Your death would’ve been quicker.’

Days ago, when she faced Khione on the *Argo II*, Piper had started talking without thinking, following her heart no matter what her brain said. Now she did the same thing. She moved in front of the statue and faced the giant, though the rational part of her screamed, *RUN, YOU IDIOT!*

‘This temple,’ she said. ‘The Spartans didn’t chain Ares because they wanted his spirit to stay in their city.’

‘You think not?’ The giant’s eyes glittered with amusement. He wrapped his hands around his sledgehammer and pulled it from the floor.

‘This is the temple of my brothers, Deimos and Phobos.’ Piper’s voice shook, but she didn’t try to hide it. ‘The Spartans came here to prepare for battle, to face their fears. Ares was chained to remind them that war has consequences. His power – the spirits of battle, the *makhai* – should never be unleashed unless you understand how terrible they are, unless you’ve *felt* fear.’

Mimas laughed. ‘A child of the love goddess lectures me about war. What do you know of the *makhai*?’

‘We’ll see.’ Piper ran straight at the giant, unbalancing his stance. At the sight of her jagged blade coming at him, his eyes widened and he stumbled backwards, cracking his head against the wall. A jagged fissure snaked upward in the stones. Dust rained from the ceiling.

‘Piper, this place is unstable!’ Annabeth warned. ‘If we don’t leave –’

‘Don’t think about escape!’ Piper ran towards their rope, which dangled from the ceiling. She leaped as high as she could and cut it.

‘Piper, have you lost your mind?’

Probably, she thought. But Piper knew this was the only way to survive. She had to go against reason, follow emotion instead, keep the giant off balance.

‘That hurt!’ Mimas rubbed his head. ‘You *realize* you cannot kill me without the help of a god and Ares is not here! The next time I face that blustering idiot, I will smash him to bits. I wouldn’t have had to fight him in the *first* place if that cowardly fool [Damasen](#) had done his job –’

Annabeth let loose a guttural cry. ‘Do *not* insult Damasen!’

She ran at Mimas, who barely managed to parry her drakon-blade with the handle of his hammer. He tried to grab Annabeth, and Piper lunged, slashing her blade across the side of the giant’s face.

‘GAHHH!’ Mimas staggered.

A severed pile of dreadlocks fell to the floor along with something else – a large fleshy *thing* lying in a pool of golden ichor.

‘My ear!’ Mimas wailed. Before he could recover his wits, Piper grabbed Annabeth’s arm and together they plunged through the second doorway.

‘I will bring down this chamber!’ the giant thundered. ‘The Earth Mother shall deliver me, but you shall be crushed!’

The floor shook. The sound of breaking stone echoed all around them.

‘Piper, stop,’ Annabeth begged. ‘How – how are you dealing with this? The fear, the anger –’

‘Don’t try to control it. That’s what the temple is about. You have to accept the fear, adapt to it, ride it like the rapids on a river.’

‘How do you *know* that?’

‘I don’t know it. I just feel it.’

Somewhere nearby, a wall crumbled with a sound like an artillery blast.

‘You cut the rope,’ Annabeth said. ‘We’re going to die down here!’

Piper cupped her friend’s face. She pulled Annabeth forward until their foreheads touched. Through her fingertips, she could feel Annabeth’s rapid pulse. ‘Fear can’t be reasoned with. Neither can hate. They’re like love. They’re almost *identical* emotions. That’s why Ares and Aphrodite like each other. Their twin sons – Fear and Panic – were spawned from both war and love.’

‘But I don’t ... this doesn’t make sense.’

‘No,’ Piper agreed. ‘Stop thinking about it. Just *feel*.’

‘I *hate* that.’

‘I know. You can’t plan for feelings. Like with Percy, and your future – you can’t control every contingency. You have to accept that. *Let* it scare you. Trust that it’ll be okay anyway.’

Annabeth shook her head. ‘I don’t know if I can.’

‘Then for right now concentrate on revenge for Damasen. Revenge for Bob.’

A moment of silence. ‘I’m good now.’

‘Great, because I need your help. We’re going to run out there together.’

‘Then what?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘Gods, I hate it when you lead.’

Piper laughed, which surprised even her. Fear and love really *were* related. At that moment she clung to the love she had for her friend. ‘Come on!’

They ran in no particular direction and found themselves back in the shrine room, right behind the giant Mimas. They each slashed one of his legs and brought him to his knees.

The giant howled. More chunks of stone tumbled from the ceiling.

‘Weak mortals!’ Mimas struggled to stand. ‘No plan of yours can defeat me!’

‘That’s good,’ Piper said. ‘Because I don’t have a plan.’

She ran towards the statue of Ares. ‘Annabeth, keep our friend occupied!’

‘Oh, he’s occupied!’

‘GAHHHHH!’

Piper stared at the cruel bronze face of the war god. The statue thrummed with a low metallic pulse.

The spirits of battle, she thought. They’re inside, waiting to be freed.

But they weren't hers to unleash – not until she'd proven herself.

The chamber shook again. More cracks appeared in the walls. Piper glanced at the stone carvings above the doorways: the scowling twin faces of Fear and Panic.

'My brothers,' Piper said, 'sons of Aphrodite ... I give you a sacrifice.'

At the feet of Ares, she set her cornucopia. The magic horn had become so attuned to her emotions it could amplify her anger, love or grief and spew forth its bounty accordingly. She hoped that would appeal to the gods of fear. Or maybe they would just appreciate some fresh fruits and vegetables in their diets.

'I'm terrified,' she confessed. 'I hate doing this. But I accept that it's necessary.'

She swung her blade and took off the bronze statue's head.

'No!' Mimas yelled.

Flames roared up from the statue's severed neck. They swirled around Piper, filling the room with a firestorm of emotions: hatred, bloodlust and fear, but also love – because no one could face battle without caring for *something*: comrades, family, home.

Piper held out her arms and the *makhai* made her the centre of their whirlwind.

We will answer your call, they whispered in her mind. Once only, when you need us, destruction, waste, carnage shall answer. We shall complete your cure.

The flames vanished along with the cornucopia, and the chained statue of Ares crumbled into dust.

'Foolish girl!' Mimas charged her, Annabeth at his heels. 'The *makhai* have abandoned you!'

'Or maybe they've abandoned *you*,' Piper said.

Mimas raised his hammer, but he'd forgotten about Annabeth. She jabbed him in the thigh and the giant staggered forward, off balance. Piper stepped in calmly and stabbed him in the gut.

Mimas crashed face-first into the nearest doorway. He turned over just as the stone face of Panic cracked off the wall above him and toppled down for a one-ton kiss.

The giant's cry was cut short. His body went still. Then he disintegrated into a twenty-foot pile of ash.

Annabeth stared at Piper. ‘What just happened?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘Piper, you were amazing, but those fiery spirits you released –’

‘The *makhai*.’

‘How does that help us find the cure we’re looking for?’

‘I don’t know. They said I could summon them when the time comes. Maybe Artemis and Apollo can explain –’

A section of the wall calved like a glacier.

Annabeth stumbled and almost slipped on the giant’s severed ear. ‘We need to get out of here.’

‘I’m working on it,’ Piper said.

‘And, uh, I think this ear is your spoil of war.’

‘Gross.’

‘Would make a lovely shield.’

‘Shut up, Chase.’ Piper stared at the second doorway, which still had the face of Fear above it. ‘Thank you, brothers, for helping to kill the giant. I need one more favour – an escape. And, believe me, I am properly terrified. I offer you this, uh, lovely ear as a sacrifice.’

The stone face made no answer. Another section of the wall peeled away. A starburst of cracks appeared in the ceiling.

Piper grabbed Annabeth’s hand. ‘We’re going through that doorway. If this works, we might find ourselves back on the surface.’

‘And if it doesn’t?’

Piper looked up at the face of Fear. ‘Let’s find out.’

The room collapsed around them as they plunged into the dark.



XXI

Reyna

AT LEAST THEY DIDN'T END UP ON ANOTHER CRUISE SHIP.

The jump from Portugal had landed them in the middle of the Atlantic, where Reyna had spent her whole day on the lido deck of the *Azores Queen*, shooin' little kids off the *Athena Parthenos*, which they seemed to think was a waterslide.

Unfortunately, the next jump brought Reyna home.

They appeared ten feet in the air, hovering over a restaurant courtyard that Reyna recognized. She and Nico dropped onto a large birdcage, which promptly broke, dumping them into a cluster of potted ferns along with three very alarmed parrots. Coach Hedge hit the canopy over a bar. The *Athena Parthenos* landed on her feet with a *THUMP*, flattening a patio table and flipping a dark green umbrella, which settled onto the Nike statue in Athena's hand, so the goddess of wisdom looked like she was holding a tropical drink.

'Gah!' Coach Hedge yelled. The canopy ripped and he fell behind the bar with a crash of bottles and glasses. The satyr recovered well. He popped up with a dozen miniature plastic swords in his hair, grabbed the soda gun and served himself a drink.

'I like it!' He tossed a wedge of pineapple into his mouth. 'But next time, kid, can we land on the floor and not ten feet *above* it?'

Nico dragged himself out of the ferns. He collapsed into the nearest chair and waved off a blue parrot that was trying to land on his head. After the fight with Lycaon, Nico had discarded his shredded aviator jacket. His black skull-pattern T-shirt wasn't in much better shape. Reyna had stitched up the gashes on his biceps, which gave Nico a slightly creepy Frankenstein look, but the cuts were still swollen and red. Unlike bites, werewolf claw marks wouldn't transmit

lycanthropy, but Reyna knew firsthand that they healed slowly and burned like acid.

‘I’ve gotta sleep.’ Nico looked up in a daze. ‘Are we safe?’

Reyna scanned the courtyard. The place seemed deserted, though she didn’t understand why. This time of night, it should’ve been packed. Above them, the evening sky glowed a murky terracotta, the same colour as the building’s walls. Ringing the atrium, the second-storey balconies were empty except for potted azaleas hanging from the white metal railings. Behind a wall of glass doors, the restaurant’s interior was dark. The only sound was the fountain gurgling forlornly and the occasional squawk of a disgruntled parrot.

‘This is [Barrachina](#),’ Reyna said.

‘What kind of bear?’ Hedge opened a jar of maraschino cherries and chugged them down.

‘It’s a famous restaurant,’ Reyna said, ‘in the middle of Old San Juan. They invented the piña colada here, back in the 1960s, I think.’

Nico pitched out of his chair, curled up on the floor and started snoring.

Coach Hedge belched. ‘Well, it looks like we’re staying for a while. If they haven’t invented any new drinks since the sixties, they’re overdue. I’ll get to work!’

While Hedge rummaged behind the bar, Reyna whistled for Aurum and Argentum. After their fight with the werewolves, the dogs looked a little worse for wear, but Reyna placed them on guard duty. She checked the street entrance to the atrium. The decorative ironwork gates were locked. A sign in Spanish and English announced that the restaurant was closed for a private party. That seemed odd, since the place was deserted. At the bottom of the sign were embossed initials: НТК. These bothered Reyna, though she wasn’t sure why.

She peered through the gates. Calle Fortaleza was unusually quiet. The blue cobblestone pavement was free of traffic and pedestrians. The pastel-coloured shop fronts were closed and dark. Was it Sunday? Or some sort of holiday? Reyna’s unease grew.

Behind her, Coach Hedge whistled happily as he set up a row of blenders. The parrots roosted on the shoulders of the Athena Parthenos. Reyna wondered whether the Greeks would be offended if their sacred statue arrived covered in tropical bird poop.

Of all the places Reyna could have ended up ... San Juan.

Maybe it was a coincidence, but she feared not. Puerto Rico wasn't really on the way from Europe to New York. It was much too far south.

Besides, Reyna had been lending Nico her strength for days now. Perhaps she'd influenced him subconsciously. He was drawn to painful thoughts, fear, darkness. And Reyna's darkest, most painful memory was San Juan. Her biggest fear? Coming back here.

Her dogs picked up on her agitation. They prowled the courtyard, snarling at shadows. Poor Argentum turned in circles, trying to aim his sideways head so he could see out of his one ruby eye.

Reyna tried to concentrate on positive memories. She'd missed the sound of the little *coquí* frogs, singing around the neighbourhood like a chorus of popping bottle caps. She'd missed the smell of the ocean, the blossoming magnolias and citrus trees, the fresh-baked bread from the local *panaderías*. Even the humidity felt comfortable and familiar – like the scented air from a dryer vent.

Part of her wanted to open the gates and explore the city. She wanted to visit the Plaza de Armas, where the old men played dominos and the coffee kiosk sold *espresso* so strong it made your ears pop. She wanted to stroll down her old street, Calle San Jose, counting and naming the stray cats, making up a story for each one, the way she used to do with her sister. She wanted to break into Barrachina's kitchen and cook up some real *mofongo* with fried plantains and bacon and garlic – a taste that would always remind her of Sunday afternoons, when she and Hylla could briefly escape the house and, if they were lucky, eat here in the kitchen, where the staff knew them and took pity on them.

On the other hand, Reyna wanted to leave immediately. She wanted to wake up Nico, no matter how tired he was, and force him to shadow-travel out of here – *anywhere* but San Juan.

Being so close to her old house made Reyna feel ratcheted tight like a catapult winch.

She glanced at Nico. Despite the warm night, he shivered on the tile floor. She pulled a blanket out of her pack and covered him up.

Reyna no longer felt self-conscious about wanting to protect him. For better or worse, they shared a connection now. Each time they shadow-travelled, his exhaustion and torment washed over her and she understood him a little better.

Nico was devastatingly alone. He'd lost his big sister Bianca. He'd pushed away all other demigods who'd tried to get close to him. His experiences at Camp Half-Blood, in the Labyrinth and in Tartarus had left him scarred, afraid to trust anyone.

Reyna doubted she could change his feelings, but she wanted Nico to have support. All heroes deserved that. It was the whole point of the Twelfth Legion. You joined forces to fight for a higher cause. You weren't alone. You made friends and earned respect. Even when you mustered out, you had a place in the community. No demigod should have to suffer alone the way Nico did.

Tonight was 25 July. Seven more days until 1 August. In theory, that was plenty of time to reach Long Island. Once they completed their mission, *if* they completed their mission, Reyna would make sure Nico was recognized for his bravery.

She slipped off her backpack. She tried to place it under Nico's head as a makeshift pillow, but her fingers passed right through him as if he were a shadow. She recoiled her hand.

Cold with dread, she tried again. This time, she was able to lift his neck and slide the pillow under. His skin felt cool, but otherwise normal.

Had she been hallucinating?

Nico had expended so much energy travelling through shadows ... perhaps he was starting to fade permanently. If he kept pushing himself to the limit for seven more days ...

The sound of a blender startled her out of her thoughts.

'You want a smoothie?' asked the coach. 'This one is pineapple, mango, orange and banana, buried under a mound of shaved coconut. I call it the Hercules!'

'I – I'm all right, thanks.' She glanced up at the balconies ringing the atrium. It still didn't seem right to her that the restaurant was empty. A private party. HTK. 'Coach, I think I'll scout the second floor. I don't like –'

A wisp of movement caught her eye. The balcony on the right – a dark shape. Above that, at the edge of the roof, several more silhouettes appeared against the orange clouds.

Reyna drew her sword, but it was too late.

A flash of silver, a faint *whoosh*, and the point of a needle buried itself in her neck. Her vision blurred. Her limbs turned to spaghetti. She collapsed next to Nico.

As her eyes dimmed, she saw her dogs running towards her, but they froze in mid-bark and toppled over.

At the bar, the coach yelled, 'Hey!'

Another *whoosh*. The coach collapsed with a silver dart in his neck.

Reyna tried to say, *Nico, wake up*. Her voice wouldn't work. Her body had been deactivated as completely as her metal dogs had.

Dark figures lined the rooftop. Half a dozen leaped into the courtyard, silent and graceful.

One leaned over Reyna. She could only make out a hazy smudge of grey.

A muffled voice said, 'Take her.'

A cloth sack was wrestled over her head. Reyna wondered dimly if this was how she would die – without even a fight.

Then it didn't matter. Several pairs of rough hands lifted her like an unwieldy piece of furniture and she drifted into unconsciousness.



XXII

Reyna

THE ANSWER CAME TO HER before she was fully conscious.

The initials on the sign at Barrachina: HTK.

‘Not funny,’ Reyna muttered to herself. ‘Not *remotely* funny.’

Years ago, Lupa had taught her how to sleep lightly, wake up alert and be ready to attack. Now, as her senses returned, she took stock of her situation.

The cloth sack still covered her head, but it didn’t seem to be cinched around her neck. She was tied to a hard chair – wood, by the feel of it. Cords were tight against the ribs. Her hands were bound behind her, but her legs were free at the ankles.

Either her captors were sloppy, or they hadn’t expected her to wake up so quickly.

Reyna wriggled her fingers and toes. Whatever tranquilizer they’d used, the effects had worn off.

Somewhere in front of her, footsteps echoed down a corridor. The sound got closer. Reyna let her muscles go slack. She rested her chin against her chest.

A lock clicked. A door creaked open. Judging from the acoustics, Reyna was in a small room with brick or concrete walls: maybe a basement or a cell. One person entered the room.

Reyna calculated the distance. No more than five feet.

She surged upward, spinning so the chair legs smashed against her captor’s body. The force broke the chair. Her captor fell with a pained grunt.

Shouts from the corridor. More footsteps.

Reyna shook the cloth sack off her head. She dropped into a backward roll, pulling her bound hands under her legs so her arms were in front of her. Her

captor – a teen girl in grey camouflage – lay dazed on the floor, a knife at her belt.

Reyna grabbed the knife and straddled her, pressing the blade against her captor's throat.

Three more girls crowded the doorway. Two drew knives. The third nocked an arrow in her bow.

For a moment, everyone froze.

Her hostage's carotid artery pulsed under the blade. Wisely, the girl made no attempt to move.

Reyna ran scenarios on how she could overcome the three in the doorway. All of them wore grey camouflage T-shirts, faded black jeans, black athletic shoes and utility belts as if they were going camping or hiking ... or hunting.

'You're the Hunters of Artemis,' Reyna realized.

'Take it easy,' said the girl with the bow. Her ginger hair was shaved on the sides, long on top. She had the build of a professional wrestler. 'You've got the wrong impression.'

The girl on the floor exhaled, but Reyna knew that trick – trying to loosen an enemy's hold. Reyna pressed the knife tighter against the girl's throat.

'You've got the wrong impression,' Reyna said, 'if you think you can attack me and take me captive. Where are my friends?'

'Unharméd, right where you left them,' the ginger girl promised. 'Look, it's three to one and your hands are tied.'

'You're right,' Reyna growled. 'Get another six of you in here and it might be a fair fight. I demand to see your lieutenant, Thalia Grace.'

The ginger girl blinked. Her comrades gripped their knives uneasily.

On the floor, Reyna's hostage began to shake. Reyna thought she might be having a fit. Then she realized the girl was laughing.

'Something funny?' Reyna asked.

The girl's voice was a gravelly whisper. 'Jason told me you were good. He didn't say *how* good.'

Reyna focused more carefully on her hostage. The girl looked about sixteen, with choppy black hair and startling blue eyes. Across her forehead glinted a circlet of silver.

'You're Thalia?'

‘And I’d be happy to explain,’ Thalia said, ‘if you’d kindly not cut my throat.’

The Hunters guided her through a maze of corridors. The walls were concrete blocks painted army green, devoid of windows. The only light came from dim fluorescents spaced every twenty feet. The passages twisted, turned and doubled back, but the ginger-haired Hunter, Phoebe, took the lead. She seemed to know where she was going.

Thalia Grace limped along, holding her ribs where Reyna had hit her with the chair. The Hunter must’ve been in pain, but her eyes sparkled with amusement.

‘Again, my apologies for abducting you.’ Thalia didn’t sound very sorry. ‘This lair is secret. The Amazons have certain protocols –’

‘The Amazons. You work for them?’

‘*With* them,’ Thalia corrected. ‘We have a mutual understanding. Sometimes the Amazons send recruits our way. Sometimes, if we come across girls who don’t wish to be maidens forever, we send them to the Amazons. The Amazons do not have such vows.’

One of the other Hunters snorted in disgust. ‘Keeping male slaves in collars and orange jumpsuits. I’d rather keep a pack of dogs any day.’

‘Their males aren’t slaves, Celyn,’ Thalia chided. ‘Merely subservient.’ She glanced at Reyna. ‘The Amazons and Hunters don’t see eye to eye on everything, but since Gaia began to stir we have been cooperating closely. With Camp Jupiter and Camp Half-Blood at each other’s throats, well ... someone has to deal with all the monsters. Our forces are spread across the entire continent.’

Reyna massaged the rope marks on her wrists. ‘I thought you told Jason you knew nothing of Camp Jupiter.’

‘That was true *then*. But those days are over, thanks to Hera’s scheming.’ Thalia’s expression turned serious. ‘How is my brother?’

‘When I left him in Epirus, he was fine.’ Reyna told her what she knew.

She found Thalia’s eyes distracting: electric blue, intense and alert, so much like Jason’s. Otherwise the siblings looked nothing alike. Thalia’s hair was choppy and dark. Her jeans were tattered, held together with safety pins. She wore metal chains around her neck and wrists, and her grey camo shirt sported a badge that read PUNK IS NOT DEAD. YOU ARE.

Reyna had always thought of Jason Grace as the all-American boy. Thalia looked more like the girl who robbed all-American boys at knifepoint in an alley.

‘I hope he’s still well,’ Thalia mused. ‘A few nights ago I dreamed about our mother. It ... wasn’t pleasant. Then I got Nico’s message in my dreams – about Orion hunting you. That was even *less* pleasant.’

‘That’s why you’re here. You got Nico’s message.’

‘Well, we didn’t rush to Puerto Rico for a vacation. This is one of the Amazons’ most secure strongholds. We took a gamble that we’d be able to intercept you.’

‘Intercept us ... how? And why?’

In front of them, Phoebe stopped. The corridor dead-ended at a set of metal doors. Phoebe tapped on them with the butt of her knife – a complicated series of knocks like Morse code.

Thalia rubbed her bruised ribs. ‘I’ll have to leave you here. The Hunters are patrolling the old city, keeping a lookout for Orion. I need to get back to the front lines.’ She held out her hand expectantly. ‘My knife, please?’

Reyna handed it back. ‘What about my own weapons?’

‘They’ll be returned when you leave. I know it seems silly – the kidnapping and blindfolding and whatnot – but the Amazons take their security seriously. Last month they had an incident at their main centre in Seattle. Maybe you heard about it. A girl named Hazel Levesque stole a horse.’

The Hunter Celyn grinned. ‘Naomi and I saw the security footage. Legendary.’

‘Epic,’ agreed the third Hunter.

‘At any rate,’ Thalia said, ‘we’re keeping an eye on Nico and the satyr. Unauthorized males aren’t allowed anywhere *near* this place, but we left them a note so they wouldn’t worry.’

From her belt, Thalia unfolded a piece of paper. She handed it to Reyna. It was a photocopy of a handwritten note:

*IOU one Roman praetor.
She will be returned safely.
Sit tight.
Otherwise you’ll be killed.
XOX, the Hunters of Artemis*

Reyna handed back the letter. ‘Right. That won’t worry them at all.’

Phoebe grinned. ‘It’s cool. I covered your Athena Parthenos with this new camouflage netting I designed. It should keep monsters – even Orion – from finding it. Besides, if my guess is right, Orion isn’t tracking the statue as much as he’s tracking *you*.’

Reyna felt like she’d been punched between the eyes. ‘How could you know that?’

‘Phoebe is my best tracker,’ Thalia said. ‘And my best healer. And ... well, she’s generally right about most things.’

‘*Most things?*’ Phoebe protested.

Thalia raised her hands in an *I give up* gesture. ‘As for why we intercepted you, I’ll let the Amazons explain. Phoebe, Celyn, Naomi – accompany Reyna inside. I have to see to our defences.’

‘You’re expecting a fight,’ Reyna noted. ‘But you said this place was secret and secure.’

Thalia sheathed her knife. ‘You don’t know Orion. I wish we had more time, Praetor. I’d like to hear about your camp and how you ended up there. You remind me so much of your sister, and yet –’

‘You know Hylla?’ Reyna asked. ‘Is she safe?’

Thalia tilted her head. ‘None of us are safe these days, Praetor, so I really must go. Good hunting!’

Thalia disappeared down the corridor.

The metal doors creaked open. The three Hunters led Reyna through.

After the claustrophobic tunnels, the size of the warehouse took Reyna’s breath away. An aerie of giant eagles could’ve done manoeuvres under the vast ceiling. Three-storey-tall rows of shelves stretched into the distance. Robotic forklifts zipped through the aisles retrieving boxes. Half a dozen young women in black trouser suits stood nearby, comparing notes on their tablet computers. In front of them were crates labelled: EXPLOSIVE ARROWS AND GREEK FIRE (16 OZ. EZ-OPEN PACK) and GRYPHON FILLETS (FREE-RANGE ORGANIC).

Directly in front of Reyna, behind a conference table piled high with reports and bladed weapons, sat a familiar figure.

‘Baby sister.’ Hylla rose. ‘Here we are, home again. Facing certain death again. We have to stop meeting like this.’



XXIII

Reyna

REYNA'S FEELINGS WEREN'T SO MUCH *MIXED*.

They were thrown into a blender with gravel and ice.

Every time she saw her sister, she didn't know whether to hug her, cry or walk away. Of course she loved Hylla. Reyna would have been dead many times over if not for her sister.

But their past together was beyond complicated.

Hylla walked around the table. She looked good in her black leather trousers and black vest top. Around her waist glittered a cord of gold Labyrinthine links – the belt of the Amazon queen. She was twenty-two now, but she could've been mistaken for Reyna's twin. They had the same long dark hair, the same brown eyes. They even wore the same silver ring with the torch-and-spear emblem of their mother, Bellona. The most obvious difference between them was the long white scar on Hylla's forehead. It had faded over the last four years. Anyone who didn't know better might've mistaken it for a worry line. But Reyna remembered the day Hylla got that scar in a duel on board the pirate ship.

'Well?' Hylla prompted. 'No warm words for your sister?'

'Thank you for having me abducted,' Reyna said. 'For shooting me with a tranquilizer dart, putting a bag over my head and tying me to a chair.'

Hylla rolled her eyes. 'Rules are rules. As a praetor, you should understand that. This distribution centre is one of our most important bases. We have to control access. I can't make exceptions, especially not for my family.'

'I think you just enjoyed it.'

'That, too.'

Reyna wondered if her sister was as cool and collected as she seemed. She found it amazing, and a little scary, how quickly Hylla had adapted to her new

identity.

Six years ago, she'd been a scared big sister, doing her best to shield Reyna from their father's rage. Her main skills had been running and finding them places to hide.

Then on [Circe](#)'s island Hylla had worked hard to be noticed. She wore flashy clothes and makeup. She smiled and laughed and always stayed perky, as if acting happy would *make* her happy. She'd become one of Circe's favourite attendants.

After their island sanctuary burned, they were taken prisoner aboard the pirates' ship. Again Hylla changed. She'd duelled for their freedom, out-pirated the pirates, gained the crew's respect so well that Blackbeard finally put them ashore lest Hylla take over his ship.

Now she'd reinvented herself again as queen of the Amazons.

Of course, Reyna understood why her sister was such a chameleon. If she kept changing, she could never fossilize into the thing their father had become ...

'Those initials on the reservation sign at Barrachina,' Reyna said. 'HTK. Hylla Twice-Kill, your new nickname. A little joke?'

'Just checking to see if you were paying attention.'

'You knew we would land in that courtyard. How?'

Hylla shrugged. 'Shadow-travel is magic. Several of my followers are daughters of Hecate. It was a simple enough matter for them to pull you off course, especially since you and I share a connection.'

Reyna tried to keep her anger in check. Hylla, of all people, should know how she would feel about being dragged back to Puerto Rico.

'You went to a lot of trouble,' Reyna noted. 'The queen of the Amazons and the lieutenant of Artemis both rushing to Puerto Rico on a moment's notice to intercept us – I'm guessing that's not because you missed me.'

Phoebe the ginger-haired Hunter chuckled. 'She's smart.'

'Of course,' Hylla said. 'I taught her everything she knows.'

Other Amazons started to gather around, probably sensing a potential fight. Amazons loved violent entertainment almost as much as pirates did.

'Orion,' Reyna guessed. 'That's what brought you here. His name got your attention.'

'I couldn't let him kill you,' Hylla said.

‘It’s more than that.’

‘Your mission to escort the Athena Parthenos –’

‘– is important. But it’s more than that, too. This is personal for you. And for the Hunters. What’s your game?’

Hylla ran her thumbs along her golden belt. ‘Orion is a problem. Unlike the other giants, Orion has been walking the earth for centuries. He takes a special interest in killing Amazons, or Hunters, or *any* female who dares to be strong.’

‘Why would he want that?’

A ripple of dread seemed to pass through the girls around her.

Hylla looked at Phoebe. ‘Do you want to explain? You were there.’

The Hunter’s smile faded. ‘In the ancient times, Orion joined the Hunters. He was Lady Artemis’s best friend. He had no rivals at the bow – except for the goddess herself, and perhaps her brother, Apollo.’

Reyna shivered. Phoebe looked no older than fourteen. To think that she knew Orion three or four thousand years ago ...

‘What went wrong?’ she asked.

Phoebe’s ears reddened. ‘Orion crossed the line. He fell in love with Artemis.’

Hylla sniffed. ‘Always happens with men. They promise friendship. They promise to treat you as an equal. In the end, all they want is to possess you.’

Phoebe picked at her thumbnail. Behind her, the other two Hunters, Naomi and Celyn, shifted uneasily.

‘Lady Artemis rebuffed him, of course,’ Phoebe said. ‘Orion became bitter. He started going on longer and longer trips by himself in the wilderness. Finally ... I’m not sure what happened. One day Artemis came back to camp and told us Orion had been killed. She refused to speak of it.’

Hylla frowned, which accentuated the white scar across her brow. ‘Whatever the case, when Orion rose again from Tartarus, he was Artemis’s bitterest enemy. No one can hate you with more intensity than someone who used to love you.’

Reyna understood that. She thought back to a conversation she’d had with the goddess Aphrodite two years ago in Charleston ...

‘If he’s such a problem,’ Reyna said, ‘why doesn’t Artemis simply slay him again?’

Phoebe grimaced. 'Easier said than done. Orion is sneaky. Whenever Artemis is with us, he stays far away. Whenever we Hunters are on our own, like we are now ... he strikes without warning and disappears again. Our last lieutenant, [Zoë Nightshade](#), spent centuries trying to track him down and kill him.'

'The Amazons have also tried,' Hylla said. 'Orion doesn't distinguish between us and the Hunters. I think we *all* remind him too much of Artemis. He sabotages our warehouses, disrupts our distribution centres, kills our warriors –'

'In other words,' Reyna said dryly, 'he's getting in the way of your plans for world domination.'

Hylla shrugged. 'Exactly.'

'That's why you rushed here to intercept me,' Reyna said. 'You knew Orion would be right behind me. You're setting up an ambush. I'm the bait.'

The other girls all found somewhere else to look besides Reyna's face.

'Oh, please,' Reyna chided, 'don't develop a guilty conscience now. It's a good plan. How do we proceed?'

Hylla gave her comrades a lopsided smile. 'I told you my sister was tough. Phoebe, you want to explain the details?'

The Hunter shouldered her bow. 'Like I said, I believe Orion is tracking *you*, not the Athena Parthenos. He seems especially good at sensing the presence of female demigods. I guess you'd say that we're his natural prey.'

'Charming,' Reyna said. 'So my friends, Nico and Gleeson Hedge – are they safe?'

'I still don't see why you travel with *males*,' Phoebe grumbled, 'but my guess is that they are safer without you around. I did my best to camouflage your statue. With luck, Orion will follow you here, straight into our line of defences.'

'And then?' Reyna asked.

Hylla gave her the sort of cold smile that used to make Blackbeard's pirates nervous. 'Thalia and most of her Hunters are scouting the perimeter of Viejo San Juan. As soon as Orion gets close, we'll know. We've set traps at every approach. I have my best fighters on alert. We'll snare the giant. Then, one way or another, we'll send him back to Tartarus.'

'*Can* he be killed?' Reyna asked. 'I thought most giants could only be destroyed by a god and demigod working together.'

‘We intend to find out,’ Hylla said. ‘Once Orion is taken down, your quest will be much easier. We’ll send you on your way with our blessings.’

‘We could use more than your blessings,’ Reyna said. ‘Amazons ship things all around the world. Why not provide safe transport for the Athena Parthenos? Get us to Camp Half-Blood before August first –’

‘I can’t,’ Hylla said. ‘If I could, sister, I would, but surely you’ve felt the anger radiating from the statue. We Amazons are honorary daughters of Ares. The Athena Parthenos would never tolerate our interference. Besides, you know how the Fates operate. For your quest to succeed, *you* have to deliver the statue personally.’

Reyna must’ve looked crestfallen.

Phoebe shoulder-bumped her like an over-friendly cat. ‘Hey, not so glum. We’ll help you as much as we can. The Amazon service department has repaired those metal dogs of yours. And we have some cool parting gifts!’

Celyn handed Phoebe a leather satchel.

Phoebe rummaged inside. ‘Let’s see ... healing potions. Tranquilizer darts like the ones we used on you. Hmm, what else? Oh, yeah!’ Phoebe triumphantly produced a rectangle of folded silvery cloth.

‘A handkerchief?’ Reyna asked.

‘Better. Back up a little.’ Phoebe tossed the cloth on the floor. Instantly it expanded into a ten-by-ten camping tent.

‘It’s air-conditioned,’ Phoebe said. ‘Sleeps four. It has a buffet table and sleeping bags inside. Whatever extra gear you put in it will collapse with the tent. Um, within reason ... don’t try to stick your giant statue in there.’

Celyn snickered. ‘If your male travelling companions get annoying, you could always leave them inside.’

Naomi frowned. ‘That wouldn’t work ... would it?’

‘Anyway,’ Phoebe said, ‘these tents are great. I have one just like it; use it all the time. When you’re ready to close it up, the command word is *actaeon*.’

The tent collapsed into a tiny rectangle. Phoebe picked it up, stuffed it into the satchel and handed the bag to Reyna.

‘I ... I don’t know what to say,’ Reyna stammered. ‘Thank you.’

‘Aww ...’ Phoebe shrugged. ‘It’s the least I can do for –’

Fifty feet away, a side door banged open. An Amazon ran straight towards Hylla. The newcomer wore a black trouser suit, her long auburn hair pulled back in a ponytail.

Reyna recognized her from the battle at Camp Jupiter. 'Kinzie, isn't it?'

The girl gave her a distracted nod. 'Praetor.' She whispered something in Hylla's ear.

Hylla's expression hardened. 'I see.' She glanced at Reyna. 'Something is wrong. We've lost contact with the outer defences. I'm afraid Orion –'

Behind Reyna, the metal doors exploded.



XXIV

Reyna

REYNA REACHED FOR HER SWORD – then realized she didn't have one.

'Get out of here!' Phoebe readied her bow.

Celyn and Naomi ran to the smoking doorway, only to be cut down by black arrows.

Phoebe screamed in rage. She returned fire as Amazons rushed forward with shields and swords.

'Reyna!' Hylla pulled her arm. 'We must leave!'

'We can't just –'

'My guards will buy you time!' Hylla shouted. 'Your quest *must* succeed!'

Reyna hated it, but she ran after Hylla.

They reached the side door and Reyna glanced back. Dozens of wolves – grey wolves like the ones in Portugal – surged into the warehouse. Amazons hurried to intercept them. The smoke-filled doorway was piled with bodies of the fallen: Celyn, Naomi, Phoebe. The ginger-haired Hunter who'd lived for thousands of years now sprawled unmoving, her eyes wide with shock, an oversized black-and-red arrow buried in her gut. The Amazon Kinzie charged forward, long knives flashing. She leaped over the bodies and into the smoke.

Hylla pulled Reyna into the passageway. Together they ran.

'They'll all die!' Reyna yelled. 'There must be something –'

'Don't be stupid, sister!' Hylla's eyes were bright with tears. 'Orion outfoxed us. He's turned the ambush into a massacre. All we can do now is hold him back while you escape. You *must* get that statue to the Greeks and defeat Gaia!'

She led Reyna up a flight of stairs. They navigated a maze of corridors, then rounded a corner into a locker room. They found themselves face to face with a

large grey wolf, but before the beast could even snarl Hylla punched it between the eyes. The wolf crumpled.

‘Over here.’ Hylla ran to the nearest row of lockers. ‘Your weapons are inside. Hurry.’

Reyna grabbed her knife, her sword and her pack. Then she followed her sister up a circular metal stairwell.

The top dead-ended at the ceiling. Hylla turned and gave her a stern look. ‘I won’t have time to explain this, all right? Stay strong. Stay close.’

Reyna wondered what could be worse than the scene they’d just left. Hylla pushed open the trapdoor and they climbed through ... into their old home.

The main room was just as Reyna remembered. Opaque skylights glowed on the twenty-foot ceilings. The stark white walls were devoid of decoration. The furniture was oak, steel and white leather – impersonal and masculine. Both sides of the room were overhung with terraces, which had always made Reyna feel like she was being watched (because often, she *was*).

Their father had done everything he could to make the centuries-old hacienda feel like a modern home. He’d added the skylights, painted everything white to make it brighter and airier. But he’d only succeeded in making the place look like a well-groomed corpse in a new suit.

The trapdoor had opened into the massive fireplace. Why they even *had* a fireplace in Puerto Rico, Reyna had never understood, but she and Hylla used to pretend the hearth was a secret hideout where their father couldn’t find them. They used to imagine they could step inside and go to other places.

Now, Hylla had made that true. She had linked her underground lair to their childhood home.

‘Hylla –’

‘I told you, we don’t have time.’

‘But –’

‘I own the building now. I put the deed in my name.’

‘You did *what?*’

‘I was tired of running from the past, Reyna. I decided to reclaim it.’

Reyna stared at her, dumbfounded. You could reclaim a lost phone or a bag at the airport. You could even reclaim a hazardous waste dump. But this house and what had happened here? There was *no* reclaiming that.

‘Sister,’ Hylla said, ‘we’re wasting time. Are you coming or not?’

Reyna eyed the balconies, half expecting luminous shapes to flicker at the railing. ‘Have you seen them?’

‘Some of them.’

‘Papa?’

‘Of course not,’ Hylla snapped. ‘You know he’s gone for good.’

‘I don’t know anything of the sort. How *could* you come back? Why?’

‘To understand!’ Hylla shouted. ‘Don’t you want to know how it happened to him?’

‘No! You can’t learn anything from ghosts, Hylla. You of all people should realize –’

‘I’m leaving,’ Hylla said. ‘Your friends are a few blocks away. Are you coming with me, or should I tell them you died because you got lost in the past?’

‘*I’m* not the one who took possession of this place!’

Hylla turned on her heel and marched out of the front door.

Reyna looked around one more time. She remembered her last day here, when she was ten years old. She could almost hear her father’s angry roar echoing through the main room, the chorus of wailing ghosts on the balconies.

She ran for the exit. She burst into warm afternoon sunlight and found that the street hadn’t changed – the crumbling pastel houses, the blue cobblestones, dozens of cats sleeping under cars or in the shade of banana trees.

Reyna might have felt nostalgic ... except that her sister stood a few feet away, facing Orion.

‘Well, now.’ The giant smiled. ‘Both daughters of Bellona together. Excellent!’

Reyna felt personally offended.

She had worked up an image of Orion as a towering ugly demon, even worse than Polybotes, the giant who had attacked Camp Jupiter.

Instead, Orion could have passed for human – a tall, muscular, *handsome* human. His skin was the colour of wheat toast. His dark hair was undercut, swept into spikes on top. With his black leather breeches and jerkin, his hunting knife and his bow and quiver, he might have been Robin Hood’s evil, better-looking brother.

Only his eyes ruined the image. At first glance, he appeared to be wearing military night-vision goggles. Then Reyna realized they weren't goggles. They were the work of Hephaestus – bronze mechanical eyes embedded in the giant's sockets. Focusing rings spun and clicked as he regarded Reyna. Targeting lasers flashed red to green. Reyna got the uncomfortable impression he was seeing much more than her form – her heat signature, her heart rate, her level of fear.

At his side he held a black composite bow almost as fancy as his eyes. Multiple strings ran through a series of pulleys that looked like miniature steam-train wheels. The grip was polished bronze, studded with dials and buttons.

He had no arrow nocked. He made no threatening moves. He smiled so dazzlingly it was hard to remember he was an enemy – someone who'd killed at least half a dozen Hunters and Amazons to get here.

Hylla drew her knives. 'Reyna, go. I will deal with this monster.'

Orion chuckled. 'Hylla Twice-Kill, you have courage. So did your lieutenants. They are dead.'

Hylla took a step forward.

Reyna grabbed her arm. 'Orion!' she said. 'You have enough Amazon blood on your hands. Perhaps it's time you try a Roman.'

The giant's eyes clicked and dilated. Red laser dots floated across Reyna's breastplate. 'Ah, the young praetor. I admit, I've been curious. Before I slay you, perhaps you'll enlighten me. Why would a child of Rome go to such lengths to help the Greeks? You have forfeited your rank, abandoned your legion, made yourself an outlaw – and for what? Jason Grace scorned you. Percy Jackson refused you. Haven't you been ... what's the word ... *dumped* enough?'

Reyna's ears buzzed. She recalled Aphrodite's warning, two years ago in Charleston: *You will not find love where you wish or where you hope. No demigod shall heal your heart.*

She forced herself to meet the giant's gaze. 'I don't define myself by the boys who may or may not like me.'

'Brave words.' The giant's smile was infuriating. 'But you are no different from the Amazons, or the Hunters, or Artemis herself. You speak of strength and independence. As soon as you face a man of *true* prowess, your confidence crumbles. You feel threatened by my dominance and how it *attracts* you. So you run, or you surrender, or you die.'

Hylla shrugged off Reyna's hand. 'I will kill you, giant. I will chop you into pieces so small –'

'Hylla,' Reyna interrupted. Whatever else happened here, she could *not* watch her sister die. Reyna had to keep the giant focused on her. 'Orion, you claim to be strong. Yet you couldn't keep the vows of the Hunt. You died rejected. And now you're running errands for your mother. So tell me again, how exactly are you threatening?'

Orion's jaw muscles clenched. His smile became thinner and colder.

'A good try,' he admitted. 'You're hoping to unbalance me. You think, perhaps, if you keep me talking, reinforcements will save you. Alas, Praetor, there *are* no reinforcements. I burned your sister's underground lair with her own Greek fire. No one survived.'

Hylla roared and attacked. Orion hit her with the butt of his bow. She flew backwards into the street. Orion pulled an arrow from his quiver.

'Stop!' Reyna yelled.

Her heart hammered in her ribcage. She needed to find the giant's weakness.

Barrachina was only a few blocks away. If they could make it that far, Nico might be able to shadow-travel them away. And the Hunters couldn't *all* be dead ... They'd been patrolling the entire perimeter of the old city. Surely some of them were still out there ...

'Orion, you asked what motivates me.' She kept her voice level. 'Don't you want your answer before you kill us? Surely it must puzzle you, why women keep rejecting a big handsome guy like you.'

The giant nocked his arrow. 'Now you have mistaken me for Narcissus. I cannot be flattered.'

'Of course not,' Reyna said. Hylla rose with a murderous look on her face, but Reyna reached out with her senses, trying to share with her sister the most difficult kind of strength – restraint. 'Still ... it must infuriate you. First you were dumped by a mortal princess –'

'[Merope](#).' Orion sneered. 'A beautiful girl, but stupid. If she'd had any sense, she would have understood I was flirting with her.'

'Let me guess,' Reyna said. 'She screamed and called for the guards instead.'

'I was without my weapons at the time. You don't bring your bow and knives when you're courting a princess. The guards took me easily. Her father the king

had me blinded and exiled.’

Just above Reyna’s head, a pebble skittered across a clay-tiled roof. It might have been her imagination, but she remembered that sound from the many nights Hylla would sneak out of her own locked room and creep across the roof to check on her.

It took all of Reyna’s willpower not to glance up.

‘But you got new eyes,’ she said to the giant. ‘Hephaestus took pity on you.’

‘Yes ...’ Orion’s gaze became unfocused. Reyna could tell, because the laser targets disappeared from her chest. ‘I ended up on Delos, where I met Artemis. Do you know how strange it is to meet your mortal enemy and end up being attracted to her?’ He laughed. ‘Praetor, what am I saying? Of *course* you know. Perhaps you feel for the Greeks as I felt for Artemis – a guilty fascination, an admiration that turns to love. But too much love is poison, especially when that love is not returned. If you do not understand that already, Reyna Ramírez-Arellano, you soon will.’

Hylla limped forward, her knives still in hand. ‘Sister, why do you let this beast talk? Let’s put him down.’

‘Can you?’ Orion mused. ‘Many have tried. Even Artemis’s own brother, Apollo, was not able to kill me back in the ancient times. He had to use trickery to get rid of me.’

‘He didn’t like you hanging out with his sister?’ Reyna listened for more sounds from the roofs, but heard nothing.

‘Apollo was jealous.’ The giant’s fingers curled around his bowstring. He drew it back, setting the bow’s wheels and pulleys spinning. ‘He feared I might charm Artemis into forgetting her vows of maidenhood. And who knows? Without Apollo’s interference, perhaps I would have. She would have been happier.’

‘As your servant?’ Hylla growled. ‘Your meek little housewife?’

‘It hardly matters now,’ Orion said. ‘At any rate, Apollo inflicted me with madness – a bloodlust to kill all the beasts of the earth. I slaughtered thousands before my mother, Gaia, finally put a stop to my rampage. She summoned a giant scorpion from the earth. It stabbed me in the back and its poison killed me. I owe her for that.’

‘You owe Gaia,’ Reyna said, ‘for killing you.’

Orion's mechanical pupils spiralled into tiny, glowing points. 'My mother showed me the truth. I was fighting against my own nature, and it brought me nothing but misery. Giants are not *meant* to love mortals or gods. Gaia helped me accept what I am. Eventually we all must return home, Praetor. We must embrace our past, no matter how bitter and dark.' He nodded his chin towards the villa behind her. 'Just as you have done. You have your own share of ghosts, eh?'

Reyna drew her sword. *You can't learn anything from ghosts*, she had told her sister. Perhaps she couldn't learn anything from giants, either.

'This is not my home,' she said. 'And we are not alike.'

'I have seen the truth.' The giant sounded truly sympathetic. 'You cling to the fantasy that you can make your enemies love you. You cannot, Reyna. There is no love for you at Camp Half-Blood.'

Aphrodite's words echoed in her head: *No demigod shall heal your heart*.

Reyna studied the giant's handsome, cruel face, his glowing mechanical eyes. For a terrible moment, she could understand how even a goddess, even an eternal maiden like Artemis, might fall for Orion's honeyed words.

'I could have killed you twenty times by now,' the giant said. 'You realize that, don't you? Let me spare you. A simple show of faith is all I need. Tell me where the statue is.'

Reyna almost dropped her sword. *Where the statue is ...*

Orion hadn't located the Athena Parthenos. The Hunters' camouflage had worked. All this time, the giant had been tracking Reyna, which meant that even if she died right now Nico and Coach Hedge might stay safe. The quest was not doomed.

She felt as if she'd shed a hundred pounds of armour. She laughed. The sound echoed down the cobblestone street.

'Phoebe outsmarted you,' she said. 'By tracking me, you lost the statue. Now my friends are free to continue their mission.'

Orion curled his lip. 'Oh, I will find them, Praetor. After I deal with you.'

'Then I suppose,' Reyna said, 'we will have to deal with you first.'

'That is my sister,' Hylla said proudly.

Together they charged.

The giant's first shot would have skewered Reyna, but Hylla was fast. She sliced the arrow out of the air and lunged at Orion. Reyna stabbed at his chest. The giant intercepted both of their attacks with his bow.

He kicked Hylla backwards into the hood of an old Chevy. Half a dozen cats scattered from underneath it. The giant spun, a dagger suddenly in his hand, and Reyna just managed to dodge the blade.

She stabbed again, ripping through his leather jerkin, but only managed to graze his chest.

'You fight well, Praetor,' he admitted. 'But not well enough to live.'

Reyna willed her blade to extend into a *pilum*. 'My death means nothing.'

If her friends could continue their quest in peace, she was fully prepared to go down fighting. But first she intended to hurt this giant so badly he would never forget her name.

'What about your sister's death?' Orion asked. 'Does that mean something?'

Faster than Reyna could blink, he sent an arrow flying towards Hylla's chest. A scream built in Reyna's throat, but somehow Hylla *caught* the arrow.

Hylla slid off the hood of the car and snapped the arrow with one hand. 'I am the queen of the Amazons, you idiot. I wear the royal belt. With the strength it gives me, I will avenge the Amazons you killed today.'

Hylla grabbed the front bumper of the Chevy and flipped the entire car towards Orion, as easily as if she were splashing him with water in a swimming pool.

The Chevy sandwiched Orion against the wall of the nearest house. Stucco cracked. A banana tree toppled. More cats fled.

Reyna ran towards the wreckage, but the giant bellowed and shoved away the car.

'You will die together!' he promised. Two arrows appeared nocked in his bow, the string fully drawn back.

Then the rooftops exploded with noise.

'DIE!' Gleeson Hedge dropped directly behind Orion, smacking his baseball bat over the giant's head so hard the Louisville Slugger cracked in half.

At the same time, Nico di Angelo dropped in front. He slashed his Stygian sword across the giant's bowstring, causing pulleys and gears to zip and creak,

the string recoiling with hundreds of pounds of force until it whacked Orion in the nose like a hydraulic bullwhip.

‘OOOOOOOW!!’ Orion staggered backwards, dropping his bow.

Hunters of Artemis appeared along the rooftops, shooting Orion full of silver arrows until he resembled a glowing hedgehog. He staggered blindly, holding his nose, his face streaming with golden ichor.

Someone grabbed Reyna’s arm. ‘Come on!’ Thalia Grace had returned.

‘Go with her!’ Hylla ordered.

Reyna’s heart felt like it was shattering. ‘Sister –’

‘You have to leave! NOW!’ It was exactly what Hylla had said to her six years ago, the night they escaped their father’s house. ‘I’ll delay Orion as long as possible.’

Hylla grabbed one of the giant’s legs. She yanked him off balance and tossed him several blocks down the Calle San Jose, to the general consternation of several dozen more cats. The Hunters ran after him along the rooftops, shooting arrows that exploded in Greek fire, wreathing the giant in flames.

‘Your sister’s right,’ Thalia said. ‘You need to go.’

Nico and Hedge fell in alongside her, both looking very pleased with themselves. They had apparently gone shopping at the Barrachina souvenir shop, where they’d replaced their dirty tattered shirts with loud tropical numbers.

‘Nico,’ Reyna said, ‘you look –’

‘Not a word about the shirt,’ he warned. ‘Not one word.’

‘Why did you come looking for me?’ she demanded. ‘You could have got away free. The giant has been tracking *me*. If you had just left –’

‘You’re welcome, cupcake,’ the coach grumbled. ‘We weren’t about to leave without you. Now let’s get out of ...’

He glanced over Reyna’s shoulder and his voice faltered.

Reyna turned.

Behind her, the second-storey balconies of her family house were crowded with glowing figures: a man with a forked beard and rusted conquistador armour; another bearded man in eighteenth-century pirate clothes, his shirt peppered with gunshot holes; a lady in a bloody nightgown; a U.S. Navy captain in his dress whites; and a dozen more Reyna knew from her childhood – all of

them glaring at her accusingly, their voices whispering in her mind: *Traitor. Murderer.*

‘No ...’ Reyna felt like she was ten years old again. She wanted to curl up in the corner of her room and press her hands over her ears to stop the whispering.

Nico took her arm. ‘Reyna, who are they? What do they – ?’

‘I can’t,’ she pleaded. ‘I – I can’t.’

She’d spent so many years building a dam inside her to hold back the fear. Now, it broke. Her strength washed away.

‘It’s all right.’ Nico gazed up at the balconies. The ghosts disappeared, but Reyna knew they weren’t really gone. They were *never* really gone. ‘We’ll get you out of here,’ Nico promised. ‘Let’s move.’

Thalia took Reyna’s other arm. The four of them ran for the restaurant and the Athena Parthenos. Behind them, Reyna heard Orion roaring in pain, Greek fire exploding.

And in her mind the voices still whispered: *Murderer. Traitor. You can never flee your crime.*



XXV

Jason

JASON ROSE FROM HIS DEATHBED so he could drown with the rest of the crew.

The ship was tilting so violently he had to climb the floor to get out of sickbay. The hull creaked. The engine groaned like a dying water buffalo. Cutting through the roar of the wind, the goddess Nike screamed from the stables: ‘YOU CAN DO BETTER, STORM! GIVE ME A HUNDRED AND TEN PERCENT!’

Jason climbed the stairs to the middle deck. His legs shook. His head spun. The ship pitched to port, knocking him against the opposite wall.

Hazel stumbled out of her cabin, hugging her stomach. ‘I *hate* the ocean!’

When she saw him, her eyes widened. ‘What are you doing out of bed?’

‘I’m going up there!’ he insisted. ‘I can help!’

Hazel looked like she wanted to argue. Then the ship tilted to starboard and she staggered towards the bathroom, her hand over her mouth.

Jason fought his way to the stairs. He hadn’t been out of bed in a day and a half, ever since the girls got back from Sparta and he’d unexpectedly collapsed. His muscles rebelled at the effort. His gut felt like Michael Varus was standing behind him, repeatedly stabbing him and yelling, *Die like a Roman! Die like a Roman!*

Jason forced down the pain. He was tired of people taking care of him, whispering how worried they were. He was tired of dreaming about being a shish kebab. He’d spent enough time nursing the wound in his gut. Either it would kill him or it wouldn’t. He wasn’t going to wait around for the wound to decide. He had to help his friends.

Somehow he made it above deck.

What he saw there made him almost as nauseous as Hazel. A wave the size of a skyscraper crashed over the forward deck, washing the front crossbows and half the port railing out to sea. The sails were ripped to shreds. Lightning flashed all around, hitting the sea like spotlights. Horizontal rain blasted Jason's face. The clouds were so dark he honestly couldn't tell if it was day or night.

The crew was doing what they could ... which wasn't much.

Leo had lashed himself to the console with a bungee cord harness. That might have seemed like a good idea when he rigged it up, but every time a wave hit he was washed away, then smacked back into his control board like a human paddleball.

Piper and Annabeth were trying to save the rigging. Since Sparta they'd become quite a team – able to work together without even talking, which was just as well, since they couldn't have heard each other over the storm.

Frank – at least Jason *assumed* it was Frank – had turned into a gorilla. He was swinging upside down off the starboard rail, using his massive strength and his flexible feet to hang on while he untangled some broken oars. Apparently the crew was trying to get the ship airborne, but, even if they managed to take off, Jason wasn't sure the sky would be any safer.

Even Festus the figurehead was trying to help. He spewed fire at the rain, though that didn't seem to discourage the storm.

Only Percy was having any luck. He stood by the centre mast, his hands extended like he was on a tightrope. Every time the ship tilted, he pushed in the opposite direction and the hull stabilized. He summoned giant fists of water from the ocean to slam into the larger waves before they could reach the deck, so it looked like the ocean was hitting itself repeatedly in the face.

With the storm as bad as it was, Jason realized the ship would've already capsized or been smashed to bits if Percy wasn't on the job.

Jason staggered towards the mast. Leo yelled something – probably *Go downstairs!* – but Jason only waved back. He made it to Percy's side and grabbed his shoulder.

Percy nodded like *'sup*. He didn't look shocked, or demand that Jason go back to sickbay, which Jason appreciated.

Percy could stay dry if he concentrated, but obviously he had bigger things to worry about right now. His dark hair was plastered to his face. His clothes were

soaked and ripped.

He shouted something in Jason's ear, but Jason could only make out a few words: 'THING ... DOWN ... STOP IT!'

Percy pointed over the side.

'Something is causing the storm?' Jason asked.

Percy grinned and tapped his ears. Clearly, he couldn't hear a word. He made a gesture with his hand like diving overboard. Then he tapped Jason on the chest.

'You want me to go?' Jason felt kind of honoured. Everybody else had been treating him like a glass vase, but Percy ... well, he seemed to figure that if Jason was on deck he was ready for action.

'Happy to!' Jason shouted. 'But I can't breathe underwater!'

Percy shrugged. *Sorry, can't hear you.*

Then Percy ran to the starboard rail, pushed another massive wave away from the ship and jumped overboard.

Jason glanced at Piper and Annabeth. They both clung to the rigging, staring at him in shock. Piper's expression said, *Are you out of your mind?*

He gave her an *okay* sign, partly to assure her that he would be fine (which he wasn't sure about), partly to agree that he was in fact crazy (which he *was* sure about).

He staggered to the railing and looked up at the storm.

Winds raged. Clouds churned. Jason sensed an entire army of *venti* swirling above him, too angry and agitated to take physical form, but hungry for destruction.

He raised his arm and summoned a lasso of wind. Jason had learned long ago that the best way to control a crowd of bullies was to pick the meanest, biggest kid and force him into submission. Then the others would fall in line. He lashed out with his wind rope, searching for strongest, most ornery *ventus* in the storm.

He lassoed a nasty patch of storm cloud and pulled it in. 'You're serving me today.'

Howling in protest, the *ventus* encircled him. The storm above the ship seemed to lessen just a bit, as if the other *venti* were thinking, *Oh, crud. That guy means business.*

Jason levitated off the deck, encased in his own miniature tornado. Spinning like a corkscrew, he plunged into the water.

Jason assumed things would be calmer underwater.

Not so much.

Of course, that could've been due to his mode of travel. Riding a cyclone to the bottom of the ocean definitely gave him some unexpected turbulence. He dropped and swerved with no apparent logic, his ears popping, his stomach pressed against his ribs.

Finally he drifted to a stop next to Percy, who stood on a ledge jutting over a deeper abyss.

'Hey,' Percy said.

Jason could hear him perfectly, though he wasn't sure how. 'What's going on?'

In his *ventus* air cocoon, his own voice sounded like he was talking through a vacuum cleaner.

Percy pointed into the void. 'Wait for it.'

Three seconds later, a shaft of green light swept through the darkness like a spotlight, then disappeared.

'Something's down there,' Percy said, 'stirring up this storm.' He turned and sized up Jason's tornado. 'Nice outfit. Can you hold it together if we go deeper?'

'I have no idea how I'm doing this,' Jason said.

'Okay,' Percy said. 'Well, just don't get knocked unconscious.'

'Shut up, Jackson.'

Percy grinned. 'Let's see what's down there.'

They sank so deep that Jason couldn't see anything except Percy swimming next to him in the dim light of their gold and bronze blades.

Every so often the green searchlight shot upward. Percy swam straight towards it. Jason's *ventus* crackled and roared, straining to escape. The smell of ozone made him lightheaded, but he kept his shell of air intact.

At last, the darkness lessened below them. Soft white luminous patches, like schools of jellyfish, floated before Jason's eyes. As he approached the seafloor, he realized the patches were glowing fields of algae surrounding the ruins of a palace. Silt swirled through empty courtyards with abalone floors. Barnacle-covered Greek columns marched into the gloom. In the centre of the complex rose a citadel larger than Grand Central Station, its walls encrusted with pearls, its domed golden roof cracked open like an egg.

‘Atlantis?’ Jason asked.

‘That’s a myth,’ Percy said.

‘Uh ... don’t we deal in myths?’

‘No, I mean it’s a *made-up* myth. Not, like, an actual true myth.’

‘So this is why Annabeth is the brains of the operation, then?’

‘Shut up, Grace.’

They floated through the broken dome and down into shadows.

‘This place seems familiar.’ Percy’s voice became edgy. ‘Almost like I’ve been here –’

The green spotlight flashed directly below them, blinding Jason.

He dropped like a stone, touching down on the smooth marble floor. When his vision cleared, he saw that they weren’t alone.

Standing before them was a twenty-foot-tall woman in a flowing green dress, cinched at the waist with a belt of abalone shells. Her skin was as luminous white as the fields of algae. Her hair swayed and glowed like jellyfish tendrils.

Her face was beautiful but unearthly – her eyes too bright, her features too delicate, her smile too cold, as if she’d been studying human smiles and hadn’t quite mastered the art.

Her hands rested on a disc of polished green metal about six feet in diameter, sitting on a bronze tripod. It reminded Jason of a steel drum he’d once seen a street performer play at the Embarcadero in San Francisco.

The woman turned the metal disc like a steering wheel. A shaft of green light shot upward, churning the water, shaking the walls of the old palace. Shards from the domed ceiling broke and tumbled down in slow motion.

‘You’re making the storm,’ Jason said.

‘Indeed I am.’ The woman’s voice was melodic – yet it had a strange resonance, as if it extended past the human range of hearing. Pressure built between Jason’s eyes. His sinuses felt like they might explode.

‘Okay, I’ll bite,’ Percy said. ‘Who are you, and what do you want?’

The woman turned towards him. ‘Why, I am your sister, Perseus Jackson. And I wanted to meet you before you die.’



XXVI

Jason

JASON SAW TWO OPTIONS: FIGHT OR TALK.

Usually, when faced with a creepy twenty-foot-tall lady with jellyfish hair, he would've gone with *fight*.

But since she called Percy *brother* – that made him hesitate.

'Percy, do you know this ... individual?'

Percy shook his head. 'Doesn't look like my mom, so I'm gonna guess we're related on the godly side. You a daughter of Poseidon, Miss ... uh ... ?'

The pale lady raked her fingernails against the metal disc, making a screeching sound like a tortured whale. 'No one knows me,' she sighed. 'Why would I assume my *own brother* would recognize me? I am [Kymopoleia!](#)'

Percy and Jason exchanged looks.

'So ...' Percy said. 'We're going to call you Kym. And you'd be a, hmm, [Nereid](#), then? Minor goddess?'

'*Minor?*'

'By which,' Jason said quickly, 'he means under the drinking age! Because obviously you're so young and beautiful.'

Percy flashed him a look: *Nice save*.

The goddess turned her full attention to Jason. She pointed her index finger and traced his outline in the water. Jason could feel his captured air spirit rippling around him, as if it were being tickled.

'Jason Grace,' said the goddess. 'Son of Jupiter.'

'Yeah. I'm a friend of Percy's.'

Kym's narrowed. 'So it's true ... these times make for strange friends and unexpected enemies. The Romans never worshipped me. To them, I was a

nameless fear – a sign of Neptune’s greatest wrath. They never worshipped Kymopoleia, the goddess of violent sea storms!’

She spun her disc. Another beam of green light flashed upward, churning the water and making the ruins rumble.

‘Uh, yeah,’ Percy said. ‘The Romans aren’t big on navies. They had, like, one rowboat. Which I sank. Speaking of violent storms, you’re doing a first-rate job upstairs.’

‘Thank you,’ said Kym.

‘Thing is, our ship is caught in it, and it’s kind of being ripped apart. I’m sure you didn’t mean to –’

‘Oh, yes, I did.’

‘You did.’ Percy grimaced. ‘Well ... that sucks. I don’t suppose you’d cut it out, then, if we asked nicely?’

‘No,’ the goddess agreed. ‘Even now, the ship is close to sinking. I’m rather amazed it’s held together this long. Excellent workmanship.’

Sparks flew from Jason’s arms into the tornado. He thought about Piper and the rest of the crew frantically trying to keep the ship in one piece. By coming down here, he and Percy had left the others defenceless. They had to act soon.

Besides, Jason’s air was getting stale. He wasn’t sure if it was possible to use up a *ventus* by inhaling it, but, if he was going to have to fight, he’d better take on Kym before he ran out of oxygen.

The thing was ... fighting a goddess on her home court wouldn’t be easy. Even if they managed to take her down, there was no guarantee the storm would stop.

‘So ... Kym,’ he said, ‘what could we do to make you change your mind and let our ship go?’

Kym gave him that creepy alien smile. ‘Son of Jupiter, do you know where you are?’

Jason was tempted to answer *underwater*. ‘You mean these ruins. An ancient palace?’

‘Indeed,’ Kym said. ‘The original palace of my father, Poseidon.’

Percy snapped his fingers, which sounded like a muffled explosion. ‘That’s why I recognized it. Dad’s new crib in the Atlantic is kind of like this.’

‘I wouldn’t know,’ Kym said. ‘I am never invited to see my parents. I can only wander the ruins of their *old* domains. They find my presence ... disruptive.’

She spun her wheel again. The entire back wall of the building collapsed, sending a cloud of silt and algae through the chamber. Fortunately the *ventus* acted like a fan, blowing the debris out of Jason’s face.

‘Disruptive?’ Jason said. ‘You?’

‘My father does not welcome me in his court,’ Kym said. ‘He restricts my powers. This storm above? I haven’t had this much fun in ages, yet it is only a small *taste* of what I can do!’

‘A little goes a long way,’ Percy said. ‘Anyway, to Jason’s question about changing your mind –’

‘My father even married me off,’ Kym said, ‘without my permission. He gave me away like a trophy to [Briares](#), a Hundred-Handed One, as a reward for supporting the gods in the war with Kronos aeons ago.’

Percy’s face brightened. ‘Hey, I *know* Briares. He’s a friend of mine! I freed him from Alcatraz.’

‘Yes, I know.’ Kym’s eyes glinted coldly. ‘I *hate* my husband. I was not *at all* pleased to have him back.’

‘Oh. So ... is Briares around?’ Percy asked hopefully.

Kym’s laugh sounded like dolphin chatter. ‘He’s off at Mount Olympus in New York, shoring up the gods’ defences. Not that it will matter. My point, dear brother, is that Poseidon has never treated me fairly. I like to come here, to his old palace, because it pleases me to see his works in ruins. Someday soon his *new* palace will look like this one, and the seas will rage unchecked.’

Percy looked at Jason. ‘This is the part where she tells us she’s working for Gaia.’

‘Yeah,’ Jason said. ‘And the Earth Mother promised her a better deal once the gods are destroyed, blah, blah, blah.’ He turned to Kym. ‘You understand that Gaia won’t keep her promises, right? She’s using you, just like she’s using the giants.’

‘I am touched by your concern,’ said the goddess. ‘The Olympian gods, on the other hand, have *never* used me, eh?’

Percy spread his hands. ‘At least the Olympians are trying. After the last Titan war, they started paying more attention to the other gods. A lot of them have cabins now at Camp Half-Blood: Hecate, Hades, [Hebe](#), Hypnos ... uh, and probably some that don’t begin with *H*, too. We give them offerings at every meal, cool banners, special recognition in the end-of-summer programme –’

‘And do *I* get such offerings?’ Kym asked.

‘Well ... no. We didn’t know you existed. But –’

‘Then save your words, brother.’ Kym’s jellyfish-tentacle hair floated towards him, as if anxious to paralyse new prey. ‘I have heard so much about the great Percy Jackson. The giants are quite obsessed with capturing you. I must say ... I don’t see what the fuss is about.’

‘Thanks, sis. But, if you’re going to try to kill me, I gotta warn you it’s been tried before. I’ve faced a lot of goddesses recently – Nike, Akhlys, even [Nyx](#) herself. Compared to them, you’re not scaring me. Also, you laugh like a dolphin.’

Kym’s delicate nostrils flared. Jason got his sword ready.

‘Oh, I won’t kill you,’ Kym said. ‘My part of the bargain was simply to get your attention. Someone else is here, though, who very much wants to kill you.’

Above them, at the edge of the broken roof, a dark shape appeared – a figure even taller than Kymopoleia.

‘The son of [Neptune](#),’ boomed a deep voice.

The giant floated down. Clouds of dark viscous fluid – poison, perhaps – curled from his blue skin. His green breastplate was fashioned to resemble a cluster of open hungry mouths. In his hands were the weapons of a [retiarius](#) – a trident and a weighted net.

Jason had never met this particular giant, but he’d heard stories. ‘Polybotes,’ he said, ‘the anti-Poseidon.’

The giant shook his dreadlocks. A dozen serpents swam free – each one lime green with a frilled crown around its head. *Basilisks*.

‘Indeed, son of Rome,’ the giant said. ‘But, if you’ll excuse me, my immediate business is with Perseus Jackson. I tracked him all the way across Tartarus. Now, here in his father’s ruins, I mean to crush him once and for all.’



XXVII

Jason

JASON HATED BASILISKS.

The little scum-suckers loved to burrow under the temples in New Rome. Back when Jason was a centurion, his cohort always got the unpopular chore of clearing out their nests.

A basilisk didn't look like much – just an arm-length serpent with yellow eyes and a white frill collar – but it moved fast and could kill anything it touched. Jason had never faced more than two at a time. Now a dozen were swimming around the giant's legs. The only good thing: underwater, basilisks wouldn't be able to breathe fire, but that didn't make them any less deadly.

Two of the serpents shot towards Percy. He sliced them in half. The other ten swirled around him, just out of blade's reach. They writhed back and forth in a hypnotic pattern, looking for an opening. One bite, one touch was all it would take.

'Hey!' Jason yelled. 'How about some love over here?'

The snakes ignored him.

So did the giant, who stood back and watched with a smug smile, apparently happy for his pets to do the killing.

'Kymopoleia.' Jason tried his best to pronounce her name right. 'You have to stop this.'

She regarded him with her glowing white eyes. 'Why would I do that? The Earth Mother has promised me unrestricted power. Could you make me a better offer?'

A better offer ...

He sensed the possibility of an opening – room to negotiate. But what did he have that a storm goddess would want?

The basilisks closed in on Percy. He blasted them away with currents of water, but they just kept circling.

‘Hey, basilisks!’ Jason yelled.

Still no reaction. He could charge in and help, but even together he and Percy couldn’t possibly fight off ten basilisks at once. He needed a better solution.

He glanced up. A thunderstorm raged above, but they were hundreds of feet down. He couldn’t possibly summon lightning at the bottom of the sea, could he? Even if he could, water conducted electricity a little too well. He might fry Percy.

But he couldn’t think of a better option. He thrust up his sword. Immediately the blade glowed red-hot.

A diffuse cloud of yellow light billowed through the depths, like someone had poured liquid neon into the water. The light hit Jason’s sword and sprayed outwards in ten separate tendrils, zapping the basilisks.

Their eyes went dark. Their frills disintegrated. All ten serpents turned belly-up and floated dead in the water.

‘Next time,’ Jason said, ‘*look* at me when I’m talking to you.’

Polybotes’s smile curdled. ‘Are you so anxious to die, Roman?’

Percy raised his sword. He hurled himself at the giant, but Polybotes swept his hand through the water, leaving an arc of black oily poison. Percy charged straight into it faster than Jason could yell, *Dude, what are you thinking?*

Percy dropped Riptide. He gasped, clawing at his throat. The giant threw his weighted net and Percy collapsed to the floor, hopelessly entangled as the poison thickened around him.

‘Let him go!’ Jason’s voice cracked with panic.

The giant chuckled. ‘Don’t worry, son of Jupiter. Your friend will take a *long* time to die. After all the trouble he’s caused me, I wouldn’t dream of killing him quickly.’

Noxious clouds expanded around the giant, filling the ruins like thick cigar smoke. Jason scrambled backwards, not fast enough, but his *ventus* proved a useful filter. As the poison engulfed him, the miniature tornado spun faster, repelling the clouds. Kymopoleia wrinkled her nose and waved away the darkness, but otherwise it didn’t seem to affect her.

Percy writhed in the net, his face turning green. Jason charged to help him, but the giant blocked him with his huge trident.

‘Oh, I can’t let you ruin my fun,’ Polybotes chided. ‘The poison will kill him eventually, but first come the paralysis and hours of excruciating pain. I want him to have the full experience! He can watch as I destroy you, Jason Grace!’

Polybotes advanced slowly, giving Jason plenty of time to contemplate the three-storey-tall tower of armour and muscle bearing down on him.

He dodged the trident and, using his *ventus* to shoot forward, jabbed his sword into the giant’s reptilian leg. Polybotes roared and stumbled, golden ichor pluming from the wound.

‘Kym!’ Jason yelled. ‘Is this really what you want?’

The storm goddess looked rather bored, idly spinning her metal disc.

‘Unlimited power? Why not?’

‘But is it any fun?’ Jason asked. ‘So you destroy our ship. You destroy the entire coastline of the world. Once Gaia wipes out human civilization, who’s left to fear you? You’ll still be unknown.’

Polybotes turned. ‘You are a pest, son of Jupiter. You will be crushed!’

Jason tried to summon more lightning. Nothing happened. If he ever met his dad, he’d have to petition for an increased daily allowance of bolts.

Jason managed to avoid the prongs of the trident again, but the giant swung the other end around and smacked him in the chest.

Jason reeled back, stunned and in pain. Polybotes came in for the kill. Just before the trident would have perforated him, Jason’s *ventus* acted on its own. It spiralled sideways, whisking Jason thirty feet across the courtyard.

Thanks, buddy, Jason thought. I owe you some air freshener.

If the *ventus* liked that idea, Jason couldn’t tell.

‘Actually, Jason Grace,’ Kym said, studying her fingernails, ‘now that you mention it, I *do* enjoy being feared by mortals. I am not feared enough.’

‘I can help with that!’ Jason dodged another swipe of the trident. He extended his *gladius* into a javelin and poked Polybotes in the eye.

‘AUGH!’ The giant staggered.

Percy writhed in the net, but his movements were getting sluggish. Jason needed to hurry. He had to get Percy to sickbay, and if the storm kept raging above them there wouldn’t be any sickbay to get him to.

He flew to Kym's side. 'You know gods depend on mortals. The more we honour you, the more powerful you get.'

'I wouldn't know. I've never been honoured!'

She ignored Polybotes, who was now stampeding around her, trying to swat Jason out of his whirlwind. Jason did his best to keep the goddess between them.

'I can change that,' he promised. 'I will *personally* arrange a shrine for you on Temple Hill in New Rome. Your first *ever* Roman shrine! I'll raise one at Camp Half-Blood as well, right on the shore of Long Island Sound. Imagine, being honoured –'

'And feared.'

'– and feared by both Greeks and Romans. You'll be famous!'

'STOP TALKING!' Polybotes swung his trident like a baseball bat.

Jason ducked. Kym did not. The giant slammed her in the ribcage so hard that strands of her jellyfish hair came loose and drifted through the poisoned water.

Polybotes's eyes widened. 'I'm sorry, Kymopoleia. You shouldn't have been in the way!'

'IN THE WAY?' The goddess straightened. 'I am *in the way*?'

'You heard him,' Jason said. 'You're nothing but a tool for the giants. They'll cast you aside as soon as they're through destroying the mortals. Then no demigods, no shrines, no fear, no respect.'

'LIES!' Polybotes tried to stab him, but Jason hid behind the goddess's dress. 'Kymopoleia, when Gaia rules, you will rage and storm without restraint!'

'Will there be mortals to terrorize?' Kym asked.

'Well ... no.'

'Ships to destroy? Demigods to cower in awe?'

'Um ...'

'Help me,' Jason urged. 'Together, a goddess and a demigod can kill a giant.'

'No!' Polybotes suddenly looked very nervous. 'No, that's a terrible idea. Gaia will be most displeased!'

'If Gaia wakes,' Jason said. 'The mighty Kymopoleia can help us make sure that never happens. Then all demigods will honour you *big-time*!'

'Will they cower?' Kym asked.

'Tons of cowering! Plus your name in the summer programme. A custom-designed banner. A cabin at Camp Half-Blood. Two shrines. I'll even throw in a

Kymopoleia action figure.’

‘No!’ Polybotes wailed. ‘Not merchandising rights!’

Kymopoleia turned on the giant. ‘I’m afraid that deal beats what Gaia has offered.’

‘Unacceptable!’ the giant bellowed. ‘You cannot trust this vile Roman!’

‘If I don’t honour the bargain,’ Jason said, ‘Kym can always kill me. With Gaia, she has no guarantee at all.’

‘That,’ Kym said, ‘is difficult to argue with.’

As Polybotes struggled to answer, Jason charged forward and stabbed his javelin in the giant’s gut.

Kym lifted her bronze disc from its pedestal. ‘Say goodbye, Polybotes.’

She spun the disc at the giant’s neck. Turned out, the rim was sharp.

Polybotes found it difficult to say goodbye, since he no longer had a head.



XXVIII

Jason

‘POISON IS A NASTY HABIT.’ Kymopoleia waved her hand and the murky clouds dissipated. ‘Secondhand poison can kill a person, you know.’

Jason wasn’t too fond of firsthand poison either, but he decided not to mention that. He cut Percy out of the net and propped him against the temple wall, enveloping him in the airy shell of the *ventus*. The oxygen was getting thin, but Jason hoped it might help expel the poison from his friend’s lungs.

It seemed to work. Percy doubled over and began to retch. ‘Ugh. Thanks.’

Jason exhaled with relief. ‘You had me worried there, bro.’

Percy blinked, cross-eyed. ‘I’m still a little fuzzy. But did you ... promise Kym an action figure?’

The goddess loomed over them. ‘Indeed he did. And I expect him to deliver.’

‘I will,’ Jason said. ‘When we win this war, I’m going to make sure *all* the gods get recognized.’ He put a hand on Percy’s shoulder. ‘My friend here started that process last summer. He made the Olympians promise to pay you guys more attention.’

Kym sniffed. ‘We know what an Olympian promise is worth.’

‘Which is why I’m going to finish the job.’ Jason didn’t know where these words were coming from, but the idea felt absolutely right. ‘I’ll make sure none of the gods are forgotten at either camp. Maybe they’ll get temples, or cabins, or at least shrines –’

‘Or collectible trading cards,’ Kym suggested.

‘Sure.’ Jason smiled. ‘I’ll go back and forth between the camps until the job is done.’

Percy whistled. ‘You’re talking about dozens of gods.’

‘Hundreds,’ Kym corrected.

‘Well, then,’ Jason said, ‘it might take a while. But you’ll be first on the list, Kymopoleia ... the storm goddess who beheaded a giant and saved our quest.’

Kym stroked her jellyfish hair. ‘That will do nicely.’ She regarded Percy. ‘Though I am still sorry I won’t see you die.’

‘I get that comment a lot,’ Percy said. ‘Now about our ship –’

‘Still in one piece,’ said the goddess. ‘Not in very good shape, but you should be able to make it to Delos.’

‘Thank you,’ Jason said.

‘Yeah,’ Percy said. ‘And, really, your husband Briares is a good dude. You should give him a chance.’

The goddess picked up her bronze disc. ‘Don’t push your luck, brother. Briares has fifty faces; all of them are ugly. He’s got a hundred hands, and he’s *still* all thumbs around the house.’

‘Okay,’ Percy relented. ‘Not pushing my luck.’

Kym turned over the disc, revealing straps on the bottom side like a shield. She slipped it over her shoulders, Captain America style. ‘I will be watching your progress. Polybotes was not boasting when he warned that your blood would awaken the Earth Mother. The giants are very confident of this.’

‘My blood, personally?’ Percy asked.

Kym’s smile was even creepier than usual. ‘I am not an Oracle. But I heard what the seer Phineas told you in the city of Portland. You will face a sacrifice that you may not be able to make, and it will cost you the world. You have yet to face your fatal flaw, my brother. Look around. All works of gods and men eventually turn to ruins. Would it not be easier to flee into the depths with that girlfriend of yours?’

Percy put his hand on Jason’s shoulder and struggled to his feet. ‘Juno offered me a choice like that, back when I found Camp Jupiter. I’ll give you the same answer. I don’t run when my friends need me.’

Kym turned up her palms. ‘And there is your flaw: being unable to step away. I will retreat to the depths and watch this battle unfold. You should know that the forces of the ocean are also at war. Your friend Hazel Levesque made quite an impression on the merpeople and on their mentors, Aphros and [Bythos](#).’

‘The fish pony dudes,’ Percy muttered. ‘They didn’t want to meet me.’

‘Even now they are waging war for your sake,’ Kym said, ‘trying to keep Gaia’s allies away from Long Island. Whether or not they will survive ... that remains to be seen. As for you, Jason Grace, your path will be no easier than your friend’s. You will be tricked. You will face unbearable sorrow.’

Jason tried to keep from sparking. He wasn’t sure Percy’s heart could take the shock. ‘Kym, you said you’re not an Oracle? They should give you the job. You’re definitely depressing enough.’

The goddess let loose her dolphin laugh. ‘You amuse me, son of Jupiter. I hope you live to defeat Gaia.’

‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘Any pointers on defeating a goddess who can’t be defeated?’

Kymopoleia tilted her head. ‘Oh, but you know the answer. You are a child of the sky, with storms in your blood. A primordial god has been defeated once before. You know of whom I speak.’

Jason’s insides started swirling faster than the *ventus*. ‘**Ouranos**, the first god of the sky. But that means –’

‘Yes.’ Kym’s alien features took on an expression that almost resembled sympathy. ‘Let us hope it does not come to that. If Gaia *does* wake ... well, your task will not be easy. But, if you win, remember your promise, Pontifex.’

Jason took a moment to process her words. ‘I’m not a priest.’

‘No?’ Kym’s white eyes gleamed. ‘By the way, your *ventus* servant says he wishes to be freed. Since he has helped you, he hopes you will let him go when you reach the surface. He promises he will not bother you a third time.’

‘A *third* time?’

Kym paused, as if listening. ‘He says he joined the storm above to take revenge on you, but had he known how strong you’ve become since the Grand Canyon he never would’ve approached your ship.’

‘The Grand Canyon ...’ Jason recalled that day on the Skywalk, when one of his jerk classmates turned out to be a wind spirit. ‘Dylan? Are you kidding me? I’m breathing *Dylan*?’

‘Yes,’ Kym said. ‘That seems to be his name.’

Jason shuddered. ‘I’ll let him go as soon as I reach the surface. No worries.’

‘Farewell, then,’ said the goddess. ‘And may the Fates smile upon you ... assuming the Fates survive.’

They needed to leave.

Jason was running out of air (Dylan air – gross) and everyone on the *Argo II* would be worried about them.

But Percy was still woozy from the poison, so they sat on the edge of the ruined golden dome for a few minutes to let Percy catch his breath ... or catch his water, whatever a son of Poseidon catches when he's at the bottom of the ocean.

'Thanks, man,' Percy said. 'You saved my life.'

'Hey, that's what we do for our friends.'

'But, uh, the Jupiter guy saving the Poseidon guy at the bottom of the ocean ... maybe we can keep the details to ourselves? Otherwise I'll never hear the end of it.'

Jason grinned. 'You got it. How you feeling?'

'Better. I ... I have to admit, when I was choking on that poison, I kept thinking about Akhlys, the misery goddess in Tartarus. I almost destroyed her with poison.' He shivered. 'It felt *good*, but in a bad way. If Annabeth hadn't stopped me –'

'But she did,' Jason said. 'That's another thing friends have to do for each other.'

'Yeah ... Thing is, as I was choking just now, I kept thinking: this is payback for Akhlys. The Fates are letting me die the same way I tried to kill that goddess. And ... honestly, a part of me felt I deserved it. That's why I didn't try to control the giant's poison and move it away from me. That probably sounds crazy.'

Jason thought back to Ithaca, when he was despairing over the visit from his mom's spirit. 'No. I think I get it.'

Percy studied his face. When Jason didn't say any more, Percy changed the subject. 'What did Kym mean about defeating Gaia? You mentioned Ouranos ...'

Jason stared at the silt swirling between the columns of the old palace. 'The sky god ... the **Titans** defeated him by calling him down to the earth. They got him away from his home territory, ambushed him, held him down and cut him up.'

Percy looked like his nausea was coming back. 'How would we do that with Gaia?'

Jason recalled a line from the prophecy: *To storm or fire the world must fall.* He had an idea what that meant now ... but, if he was right, Percy wouldn't be able to help. In fact, he might unintentionally make things harder.

I don't run when my friends need me, Percy had said.

And there is your flaw, Kym had warned, *being unable to step away.*

Today was 27 July. In five days, Jason would know if he was right.

'Let's get to Delos first,' he said. 'Apollo and Artemis might have some advice.'

Percy nodded, though he didn't seem satisfied with that answer. 'Why did Kymopoleia call you a *Pontiac*?'

Jason's laugh literally cleared the air. '*Pontifex*. It means priest.'

'Oh.' Percy frowned. 'Still sounds like a kind of car. "The new Pontifex XLS." Will you have to wear a collar and bless people?'

'Nah. Romans used to have a *Pontifex Maximus*, who oversaw all the proper sacrifices and whatnot, to make sure none of the gods got mad. Which I offered to do ... I guess it does sound like a *pontifex*'s job.'

'So you meant it?' Percy asked. 'You're really going to try building shrines for all the minor gods?'

'Yeah. I never really thought about it before, but I like the idea of going back and forth between the two camps – assuming, you know, we make it through next week and the two camps still exist. What you did last year on Olympus, turning down immortality and asking the gods to play nice instead – that was noble, man.'

Percy grunted. 'Believe me, some days I regret the choice. *Oh, you want to turn down our offer? Okay, fine! ZAP! Lose your memory! Go to Tartarus!*'

'You did what a hero should do. I admire you for that. The least I can do, if we survive, is continue that work – make sure all the gods get some recognition. Who knows? If the gods get along better, maybe we can stop more of these wars from breaking out.'

'That would most definitely be good,' Percy agreed. 'You know, you look different ... *better* different. Does your wound still hurt?'

'My wound ...' Jason had been so busy with the giant and the goddess, he'd forgotten about the sword wound in his gut, even though he'd been dying from it in sickbay only an hour ago.

He lifted his shirt and pulled away the bandages. No smoke. No bleeding. No scar. No pain.

‘It’s ... gone,’ he said, stunned. ‘I feel completely normal. What the heck?’

‘You beat it, man!’ Percy laughed. ‘You found your own cure.’

Jason considered that. He guessed it must be true. Maybe putting aside his pain to help his friends had done the trick.

Or maybe his decision to honour the gods at both camps had healed him, giving him a clear path to the future. Roman or Greek ... the difference didn’t matter. Like he’d told the ghosts at Ithaca, his family had just got bigger. Now he saw his place in it. He would keep his promise to the storm goddess. And because of that, Michael Varus’s sword meant nothing.

Die a Roman.

No. If he had to die, he would die a son of Jupiter, a child of the gods – the blood of Olympus. But he wasn’t about to let himself get sacrificed – at least not without a fight.

‘Come on.’ Jason clapped his friend on the back. ‘Let’s go check on our ship.’



XXIX

Nico

GIVEN A CHOICE between death and the Buford Zippy Mart, Nico would've had a tough time deciding. At least he knew his way around the Land of the Dead. Plus the food was fresher.

'I still don't get it,' Coach Hedge muttered as they roamed the centre aisle. 'They named a whole town after Leo's table?'

'I think the town was here first, Coach,' Nico said.

'Huh.' The coach picked up a box of powdered doughnuts. 'Maybe you're right. These look at least a hundred years old. I miss those Portuguese *farturas*.'

Nico couldn't think about Portugal without his arms hurting. Across his biceps, the werewolf claw marks were still swollen and red. The store clerk had asked Nico if he'd picked a fight with a bobcat.

They bought a first-aid kit, a pad of paper (so Coach Hedge could write more paper aeroplane messages to his wife), some junk food and soda (since the banquet table in Reyna's new magic tent only provided healthy food and fresh water) and some miscellaneous camping supplies for Coach Hedge's useless but impressively complicated monster traps.

Nico had been hoping to find some fresh clothes. Two days since they'd fled San Juan, he was tired of walking around in his tropical ISLA DEL ENCANTORICO shirt, especially since Coach Hedge had a matching one. Unfortunately, the Zippy Mart only carried T-shirts with Confederate flags and corny sayings like KEEP CALM AND FOLLOW THE REDNECK. Nico decided he'd stick with parrots and palm trees.

They walked back to the campsite down a two-lane road under the blazing sun. This part of South Carolina seemed to consist mostly of overgrown fields, punctuated by telephone poles and trees covered in kudzu vines. The town of

Buford itself was a collection of portable metal sheds – six or seven, which was probably also the town’s population.

Nico wasn’t exactly a sunshine person, but for once he welcomed the warmth. It made him feel more substantial – anchored to the mortal world. With every shadow-jump, coming back got harder and harder. Even in broad daylight his hand passed through solid objects. His belt and sword kept falling around his ankles for no apparent reason. Once, when he wasn’t looking where he was going, he walked straight through a tree.

Nico remembered something Jason Grace had told him in the palace of Notus: *Maybe it’s time you come out of the shadows.*

If only I could, he thought. For the first time in his life, he had begun to fear the dark, because he might melt into it permanently.

Nico and Hedge had no trouble finding their way back to camp. The Athena Parthenos was the tallest landmark for miles around. In its new camouflage netting, it glittered silver like an extremely flashy forty-foot-tall ghost.

Apparently, the Athena Parthenos had wanted them to visit a place with educational value, because she’d landed right next to a historical marker that read MASSACRE OF BUFORD, on a gravel layby at the intersection of Nowhere and Nothing.

Reyna’s tent sat in a grove of trees about thirty yards back from the road. Nearby lay a rectangular cairn – hundreds of stones piled in the shape of an oversized grave with a granite obelisk for a headstone. Scattered around it were faded wreathes and crushed bouquets of plastic flowers, which made the place seem even sadder.

Aurum and Argentum were playing keep-away in the woods with one of the coach’s handballs. Ever since getting repaired by the Amazons, the metal dogs had been frisky and full of energy – unlike their owner.

Reyna sat cross-legged at the entrance of the tent, staring at the memorial obelisk. She hadn’t said much since they fled San Juan two days ago. They’d also not encountered any monsters, which made Nico uneasy. They’d had no further word from the Hunters or the Amazons. They didn’t know what had happened to Hylla, or Thalia, or the giant Orion.

Nico didn’t like the Hunters of Artemis. Tragedy followed them as surely as their dogs and birds of prey. His sister Bianca had died after joining the Hunters.

Then Thalia Grace became their leader and started recruiting even more young women to their cause, which grated on Nico – as if Bianca’s death could be forgotten. As if she could be replaced.

When Nico had woken up at Barrachina and found the Hunters’ note about kidnapping Reyna, he’d torn apart the courtyard in rage. He didn’t want the Hunters stealing another important person from him.

Fortunately, he’d got Reyna back, but he didn’t like how brooding she had become. Every time he tried to ask her about the incident on the Calle San Jose – those ghosts on the balcony, all staring at her, whispering accusations – Reyna shut him down.

Nico knew something about ghosts. Letting them get inside your head was dangerous. He wanted to help Reyna, but since his own strategy was to deal with his problems alone, spurning anyone who tried to get close, he couldn’t exactly criticize Reyna for doing the same thing.

She glanced up as they approached. ‘I figured it out.’

‘What historical site this is?’ Hedge asked. ‘Good, ’cause it’s been driving me crazy.’

‘The Battle of Waxhaws,’ she said.

‘Ah, right ...’ Hedge nodded sagely. ‘That was a vicious little smackdown.’

Nico tried to sense any restless spirits in the area, but he felt nothing. Unusual for a battleground. ‘Are you sure?’

‘In 1780,’ Reyna said. ‘The American Revolution. Most of the Colonial leaders were Greek demigods. The British generals were Roman demigods.’

‘Because England was like Rome back then,’ Nico guessed. ‘A rising empire.’

Reyna picked up a crushed bouquet. ‘I think I know why we landed here. It’s my fault.’

‘Ah, come on,’ Hedge scoffed. ‘The Buford Zippy Mart isn’t anybody’s fault. Those things just happen.’

Reyna picked at the faded plastic flowers. ‘During the Revolution, four hundred Americans got overtaken here by British cavalry. The Colonial troops tried to surrender, but the British were out for blood. They massacred the Americans even after they threw down their weapons. Only a few survived.’

Nico supposed he should have been shocked. But after travelling through the Underworld, hearing so many stories of evil and death, a wartime massacre

hardly seemed newsworthy. ‘Reyna, how is that your fault?’

‘The British commander was [Banastre Tarleton](#).’

Hedge snorted. ‘I’ve heard of him. Crazy dude. They called him Benny the Butcher.’

‘Yes ...’ Reyna took a shaky breath. ‘He was a son of Bellona.’

‘Oh.’ Nico stared at the oversized grave. It still bothered him that he couldn’t sense any spirits. Hundreds of soldiers massacred at this spot ... that should’ve sent out *some* kind of death vibe.

He sat next to Reyna and decided to take a risk. ‘So you think we were drawn here because you have some sort of connection to the ghosts. Like what happened in San Juan?’

For a count of ten she said nothing, turning the plastic bouquet in her hand. ‘I don’t want to talk about San Juan.’

‘You should.’ Nico felt like a stranger in his own body. Why was he encouraging Reyna to share? It wasn’t his style or his business. Nevertheless, he kept talking. ‘The main thing about ghosts – most of them have lost their voices. In Asphodel, millions of them wander around aimlessly, trying to remember who they were. You know why they end up like that? Because in life they never took a stand one way or another. They never spoke out, so they were never heard. Your voice is your identity. If you don’t use it,’ he said with a shrug, ‘you’re halfway to Asphodel already.’

Reyna scowled. ‘Is that your idea of a pep talk?’

Coach Hedge cleared his throat. ‘This is getting too psychological for me. I’m going to write some letters.’

He took his notepad and headed into the woods. The last day or so, he’d been writing a lot – apparently not just to Mellie. The coach wouldn’t share details, but he hinted that he was calling in some favours to help with the quest. For all Nico knew, he was writing to Jackie Chan.

Nico opened his shopping bag. He pulled out a box of Little Debbie Oatmeal Creme Pies and offered one to Reyna.

She wrinkled her nose. ‘Those look like they went stale in dinosaur times.’

‘Maybe. But I’ve got a big appetite these days. *Any* kind of food tastes good ... except maybe pomegranate seeds. I’m done with those.’

Reyna picked out a creme pie and took a bite. ‘The ghosts in San Juan ... they were my ancestors.’

Nico waited. The breeze ruffled the camouflage netting over the Athena Parthenos.

‘The Ramírez-Arellano family goes back a long way,’ Reyna continued. ‘I don’t know the whole story. My ancestors lived in Spain when it was a Roman province. My great-great-something-something-grandfather was a conquistador. He came over to Puerto Rico with Ponce de León.’

‘One of the ghosts on the balcony was wearing conquistador armour,’ Nico recalled.

‘That’s him.’

‘So ... is your whole family descended from Bellona? I thought you and Hylla were her daughters, not legacies.’

Too late, Nico realized he shouldn’t have brought up Hylla. A look of despair passed over Reyna’s face, though she managed to hide it quickly.

‘We *are* her daughters,’ Reyna said. ‘We’re the first actual children of Bellona in the Ramírez-Arellano family. And Bellona has always favoured our clan. Millennia ago, she decreed that we would play pivotal roles in many battles.’

‘Like you’re doing now,’ Nico said.

Reyna brushed crumbs from her chin. ‘Perhaps. Some of my ancestors have been heroes. Some have been villains. You saw the ghost with the gunshot wounds in the chest?’

Nico nodded. ‘A pirate?’

‘The most famous in Puerto Rican history. He was known as the Pirate Cofresí, but his family name was Ramírez de Arellano. Our house, the family villa, was built with money from treasure that he buried.’

For a moment, Nico felt like a little kid again. He was tempted to blurt out, *That’s so cool!* Even before he got into Mythomagic, he’d been obsessed with pirates. Probably that was one reason he’d been so smitten with Percy, a son of the sea god.

‘And the other ghosts?’ he asked.

Reyna took another bite of creme pie. ‘The guy in the U.S. Navy uniform ... he’s my great-great-uncle from World War Two, the first Latino submarine

commander. You get the idea. A lot of warriors. Bellona was our patron goddess for generations.'

'But she never had demigod children in your family – until you.'

'The goddess ... she fell in love with my father, Julian. He was a soldier in Iraq. He was –' Reyna's voice broke. She tossed aside the plastic bouquet of flowers. 'I can't do this. I can't talk about him.'

A cloud passed overhead, blanketing the woods in shadows.

Nico didn't want to push Reyna. What right did he have?

He set down his oatmeal creme pie ... and noticed that his fingertips were turning to smoke. The sunlight returned. His hands became solid again, but Nico's nerves jangled. He felt as if he'd been pulled back from the edge of a high balcony.

Your voice is your identity, he'd told Reyna. If you don't use it, you're halfway to Asphodel already.

He hated when his own advice applied to himself.

'My dad gave me a present once,' Nico said. 'It was a zombie.'

Reyna stared at him. 'What?'

'His name is Jules-Albert. He's French.'

'A ... French zombie?'

'Hades isn't the greatest dad, but occasionally he has these *want to know my son* moments. I guess he thought the zombie was a peace offering. He said Jules-Albert could be my chauffeur.'

The corner of Reyna's mouth twitched. 'A French zombie chauffeur.'

Nico realized how ridiculous it sounded. He'd never told anyone about Jules-Albert – not even Hazel. But he kept talking.

'Hades had this idea that I should, you know, try to act like a modern teenager. Make friends. Get to know the twenty-first century. He vaguely understood that mortal parents drive their kids around a lot. He couldn't do that. So his solution was a zombie.'

'To take you to the mall,' Reyna said. 'Or the drive-through at In-N-Out Burger.'

'I suppose.' Nico's nerves began to settle. 'Because nothing helps you make friends faster than a rotting corpse with a French accent.'

Reyna laughed. 'I'm sorry ... I shouldn't make fun.'

‘It’s okay. Point is ... I don’t like talking about my dad either. But sometimes,’ he said, looking her in the eyes, ‘you have to.’

Reyna’s expression turned serious. ‘I never knew my father in his better days. Hylla said he used to be gentler when she was very small, before I was born. He was a good soldier – fearless, disciplined, cool under fire. He was handsome. He could be very charming. Bellona blessed him, as she had with so many of my ancestors, but that wasn’t enough for my dad. He wanted her for his wife.’

Over in the woods, Coach Hedge muttered to himself as he wrote. Three paper aeroplanes were already spiralling upward in the breeze, heading to gods knew where.

‘My father dedicated himself completely to Bellona,’ Reyna continued. ‘It’s one thing to respect the power of war. It’s another thing to fall in love with it. I don’t know how he did it, but he managed to win Bellona’s heart. My sister was born just before he went to Iraq for his last tour of duty. He was honourably discharged, came home a hero. If ... if he’d been able to adjust to civilian life, everything might have been all right.’

‘But he couldn’t,’ Nico guessed.

Reyna shook her head. ‘Shortly after he got back, he had one last encounter with the goddess ... that’s the, um, reason I was born. Bellona gave him a glimpse of the future. She explained why our family was so important to her. She said the legacy of Rome would never fail as long as one of our bloodline remained, fighting to defend our homeland. Those words ... I think she meant them to be reassuring, but my father became fixated on them.’

‘War can be hard to get over,’ Nico said, remembering Pietro, one of his neighbours from his childhood in Italy. Pietro had come back from Mussolini’s African campaign in one piece, but, after shelling Ethiopian civilians with mustard gas, his mind was never the same.

Despite the heat, Reyna drew her cloak around her. ‘Part of the problem was post-traumatic stress. He couldn’t stop thinking about the war. And then there was the constant pain – a roadside bomb had left shrapnel in his shoulder and chest. But it was more than that. Over the years, as I was growing up, he ... he changed.’

Nico didn’t respond. He’d never had anyone talk to him this openly before, except maybe for Hazel. He felt like he was watching a flock of birds settle on a

field. One loud sound might startle them away.

‘He became paranoid,’ Reyna said. ‘He thought Bellona’s words were a warning that our bloodline would be exterminated and the legacy of Rome would fail. He saw enemies everywhere. He collected weapons. He turned our house into a fortress. At night, he would lock Hylla and me in our rooms. If we sneaked out, he would yell at us and throw furniture and ... well, he terrified us. At times, he even thought *we* were the enemies. He became convinced we were spying on him, trying to undermine him. Then the ghosts started appearing. I guess they’d always been there, but they picked up on my father’s agitation and began to manifest. They whispered to him, feeding his suspicions. Finally one day ... I can’t tell you for sure when, I realized he had ceased to be my father. He had become one of the ghosts.’

A cold tide rose in Nico’s chest. ‘*A mania*,’ he speculated. ‘I’ve seen it before. A human withers away until he’s not human any more. Only his worst qualities remain. His insanity ...’

It was clear from Reyna’s expression that his explanation wasn’t helping.

‘Whatever he was,’ Reyna said, ‘he became impossible to live with. Hylla and I escaped the house as often as we could, but eventually we’d come ... back ... and face his rage. We didn’t know what else to do. He was our only family. The last time we returned, he – he was so angry he was literally glowing. He couldn’t physically touch things any more, but he could move them ... like a poltergeist, I guess. He tore up the floor tiles. He ripped open the sofa. Finally he tossed a chair and it hit Hylla. She collapsed. She was only knocked unconscious, but I thought she was dead. She’d spent so many years protecting me ... I just lost it. I grabbed the nearest weapon I could find – a family heirloom, the Pirate Confresí’s sabre. I – I didn’t know it was Imperial gold. I ran at my father’s spirit and ...’

‘You vaporized him,’ Nico guessed.

Reyna’s eyes brimmed with tears. ‘I killed my own father.’

‘No. Reyna, no. That wasn’t him. That was a ghost. Even worse: a *mania*. You were protecting your sister.’

She twisted the silver ring on her finger. ‘You don’t understand. Patricide is the worst crime a Roman can commit. It’s unforgivable.’

‘You didn’t kill your father. The man was already dead,’ Nico insisted. ‘You dispelled a ghost.’

‘It doesn’t matter!’ Reyna sobbed. ‘If word of this got out at Camp Jupiter –’
‘You’d be executed,’ said a new voice.

At the edge of the woods stood a Roman legionnaire in full armour, holding a *pilum*. A mop of brown hair hung in his eyes. His nose had obviously been broken at least once, which made his smile look even more sinister. ‘Thank you for your confession, *former* praetor. You’ve made my job much easier.’



X X X

Nico

COACH HEDGE CHOSE THAT MOMENT to burst into the clearing, waving a paper aeroplane and yelling, ‘Good news, everyone!’

He froze when he saw the Roman. ‘Oh ... never mind.’

He quickly crumpled the aeroplane and ate it.

Reyna and Nico got to their feet. Aurum and Argentum scampered to Reyna’s side and growled at the intruder.

How this guy had got so close with *none* of them noticing, Nico didn’t understand.

‘Bryce Lawrence,’ Reyna said. ‘Octavian’s newest attack dog.’

The Roman inclined his head. His eyes were green, but not sea green like Percy’s ... more like pond-scum green.

‘The augur has many attack dogs,’ Bryce said. ‘I’m just the lucky one who found you. Your *Graecus* friend here –’ he pointed his chin at Nico – ‘he was easy to track. He stinks of the Underworld.’

Nico unsheathed his sword. ‘You know the Underworld? Would you like me to arrange a visit?’

Bryce laughed. His front teeth were two different shades of yellow. ‘Do you think you can frighten me? I’m a descendant of Orcus, the god of broken vows and eternal punishment. I’ve heard the screams in the Fields of Punishment firsthand. They’re music to my ears. Soon, I’ll be adding one more damned soul to the chorus.’

He grinned at Reyna. ‘Patricide, eh? Octavian will love this news. You are under arrest for multiple violations of Roman law.’

‘You *being* here is against Roman law,’ Reyna said. ‘Romans don’t quest alone. A mission has to be led by someone of centurion rank or higher. You’re *in*

probatio, and even giving you *that* rank was a mistake. You have no right to arrest me.'

Bryce shrugged. 'In times of war, some rules have to be flexible. But don't worry. Once I bring you in for trial, I'll be rewarded with full membership in the legion. I imagine I'll be promoted to centurion, too. Doubtless there will be vacancies after the coming battle. Some officers won't survive, especially if their loyalties aren't in the right place.'

Coach Hedge hefted his bat. 'I don't know the proper Roman etiquette, but can I bash this kid now?'

'A faun,' Bryce said. 'Interesting. I heard the Greeks actually *trusted* their goat men.'

Hedge bleated. 'I'm a satyr. And you can trust I'm going to put this bat upside your head, you little punk.'

The coach advanced, but, as soon as his foot touched the cairn, the stones rumbled like they were coming to the boil. Out of the grave site, skeletal warriors erupted – *spartoi* in the tattered remains of British redcoat uniforms.

Hedge scrambled away, but the first two skeletons grabbed his arms and lifted him off the ground. The coach dropped his bat and kicked his hooves.

'Lemme go, ya stupid boneheads!' he bellowed.

Nico watched, paralysed, as the grave spewed forth more dead British soldiers – five, ten, twenty, multiplying so quickly that Reyna and her metal dogs were surrounded before Nico even thought to raise his sword.

How could he *not* have sensed so many dead, so close at hand?

'I forgot to mention,' Bryce said, 'I'm actually not alone on this quest. As you can see, I have backup. These redcoats promised quarter to the colonials. Then they butchered them. Personally, I like a good massacre, but, because they broke their oaths, their spirits were damned and they are perpetually under the power of Orcus. Which means they are also under *my* control.' He pointed to Reyna. 'Seize the girl.'

The *spartoi* surged forward. Aurum and Argentum took down the first few, but they were quickly wrestled to the ground, skeletal hands clamped over their muzzles. The redcoats grabbed Reyna's arms. For undead creatures, they were surprisingly quick.

Finally, Nico came to his senses. He slashed at the *spartoi*, but his sword passed harmlessly through them. He exerted his will, ordering the skeletons to dissolve. They acted as if he didn't exist.

'What's wrong, son of Hades?' Bryce's voice was filled with fake sympathy. 'Losing your grip?'

Nico tried to push his way through the skeletons. There were too many. Bryce, Reyna and Coach Hedge might as well have been behind a metal wall.

'Nico, get out of here!' Reyna said. 'Get to the statue and leave.'

'Yes, off you go!' Bryce agreed. 'Of course, you realize that your next shadow-jump will be your last. You know you don't have the strength to survive another. But, by all means, take the Athena Parthenos.'

Nico glanced down. He still held his Stygian sword, but his hands were dark and transparent like smoky glass. Even in the direct sunlight, he was dissolving.

'Stop this!' he said.

'Oh, I'm not doing a thing,' Bryce said. 'But I am curious to see what will happen. If you take the statue, you'll disappear with it forever, right into oblivion. If you *don't* take it ... well, I have orders to bring Reyna in alive to stand trial for treason. I have no orders to bring *you* in alive, or the faun.'

'Satyr!' the coach yelled. He kicked a skeleton in its bony crotch, which seemed to hurt Hedge more than the redcoat. 'Ow! Stupid British dead guys!'

Bryce lowered his javelin and poked the coach in the belly. 'I wonder what this one's pain tolerance would be. I've experimented on all kinds of animals. I even killed my own centurion once. I've never tried a faun ... excuse me, *a satyr*. You reincarnate, don't you? How much pain can you take before you turn into a patch of daisies?'

Nico's anger turned as cold and dark as his blade. He'd been morphed into a few plants himself, and he didn't appreciate it. He hated people like Bryce Lawrence, who inflicted pain just for fun.

'Leave him alone,' Nico warned.

Bryce raised an eyebrow. 'Or what? By all means, try something Underworldy, Nico. I'd love to see it. I have a feeling anything major will make you fade out permanently. Go ahead.'

Reyna struggled. 'Bryce, forget about them. If you want me as your prisoner, fine. I'll go willingly and face Octavian's stupid trial.'

‘A fine offer.’ Bryce turned his javelin, letting the tip hover a few inches from Reyna’s eyes. ‘You really don’t know what Octavian has planned, do you? He’s been busy pulling in favours, spending the legion’s money.’

Reyna clenched her fists. ‘Octavian has no right –’

‘He has the right of *power*,’ Bryce said. ‘You forfeited your authority when you ran off to the ancient lands. On August first, your Greek friends at Camp Half-Blood will find out what a powerful enemy Octavian is. I’ve seen the designs for his machines ... Even *I*’m impressed.’

Nico’s bones felt like they were changing into helium, the way they’d felt when the god Favonius turned him into a breeze.

Then he locked eyes with Reyna. Her strength surged through him – a wave of courage and resilience that made him feel substantial again, anchored to the mortal world. Even surrounded by the dead and facing execution, Reyna Ramírez-Arellano had a huge reservoir of bravery to share.

‘Nico,’ she said, ‘do what you need to do. I’ve got your back.’

Bryce chuckled, clearly enjoying himself. ‘Oh, Reyna. *You’ve got his back?* It’s going to be so fun dragging you before a tribunal, forcing you to confess that you killed your father. I hope they’ll execute you in the ancient way – sewn into a sack with a rabid dog, then thrown into a river. I’ve always wanted to see that. I can’t wait until your little secret comes out.’

Until your little secret comes out.

Bryce flicked the point of his *pilum* across Reyna’s face, leaving a line of blood.

And Nico’s rage exploded.



XXXI

Nico

LATER, THEY TOLD HIM WHAT HAPPENED. All he remembered was the screaming.

According to Reyna, the air around him dropped to freezing. The ground blackened. In one horrible cry, he unleashed a flood of pain and anger on everyone in the clearing. Reyna and the coach experienced his journey through Tartarus, his capture by the giants, his days wasting away inside that bronze jar. They felt Nico's anguish from his days on the *Argo II* and his encounter with Cupid in the ruins of Salona.

They heard his unspoken challenge to Bryce Lawrence, loud and clear: *You want secrets? Here.*

The *spartoi* disintegrated into ashes. The rocks of the cairn turned white with frost. Bryce Lawrence stumbled, clutching his head, both nostrils bleeding.

Nico marched towards him. He grabbed Bryce's *probatio* tablet and ripped it off his neck.

'You aren't worthy of this,' Nico growled.

The earth split under Bryce's feet. He sank up to his waist. 'Stop!' Bryce clawed at the ground and the plastic bouquets, but his body kept sinking.

'You took an oath to the legion.' Nico's breath steamed in the cold. 'You broke its rules. You inflicted pain. You killed your own centurion.'

'I – I didn't! I –'

'You should've died for your crimes,' Nico continued. 'That was the punishment. Instead you got exile. You should have stayed away. Your father Orcus may not approve of broken oaths. But my father Hades *really* doesn't approve of those who escape punishment.'

'Please!'

That word didn't make sense to Nico. The Underworld had no mercy. It only had justice.

'You're already dead,' Nico said. 'You're a ghost with no tongue, no memory. You won't be sharing any secrets.'

'No!' Bryce's body turned dark and smoky. He slipped into the earth, up to his chest. 'No, I am Bryce Lawrence! I'm alive!'

'Who are you?' Nico asked.

The next sound from Bryce's mouth was a chattering whisper. His face became indistinct. He could have been anyone – just another nameless spirit among millions.

'Begone,' Nico said.

The spirit dissipated. The earth closed.

Nico looked back and saw that his friends were safe. Reyna and the coach stared at him in horror. Reyna's face was bleeding. Aurum and Argentum turned in circles, as if their mechanical brains had short-circuited.

Nico collapsed.

His dreams made no sense, which was almost a relief.

A flock of ravens circled in a dark sky. Then the ravens turned into horses galloping through the surf.

He saw his sister Bianca sitting in the dining pavilion at Camp Half-Blood with the Hunters of Artemis. She smiled and laughed with her new group of friends. Then Bianca changed into Hazel, who kissed Nico on the cheek and said, 'I want you to be an exception.'

He saw the harpy Ella with her shaggy red hair and red feathers, her eyes like dark coffee. She perched on the couch of the Big House's living room. Propped next to her was the magical stuffed leopard head Seymour. Ella rocked back and forth, feeding the leopard Cheetos.

'Cheese is not good for harpies,' she muttered. Then she scrunched up her face and chanted one of her memorized lines of prophecy: '*The fall of the sun, the final verse.*' She fed Seymour more Cheetos. 'Cheese is good for leopard heads.'

Seymour roared in agreement.

Ella changed into a dark-haired, extremely pregnant cloud nymph, writhing in pain on a camp bunk bed. Clarisse La Rue sat next to her, wiping the nymph's head with a cool cloth. 'Mellie, you'll be fine,' Clarisse said, though she sounded worried.

'No, nothing is fine!' Mellie wailed. 'Gaia is rising!'

The scene shifted. Nico stood with Hades in the Berkeley Hills on the day Hades first led him to Camp Jupiter. 'Go to them,' said the god. 'Introduce yourself as a child of Pluto. It is important you make this connection.'

'Why?' Nico asked.

Hades dissolved. Nico found himself back in Tartarus, standing before Akhlys, the goddess of misery. Blood streaked her cheeks. Tears streamed from her eyes, dripped on the shield of Hercules in her lap. 'Child of Hades, what more could I do to you? You are perfect! So much sorrow and pain!'

Nico gasped.

His eyes flew open.

He was flat on his back, staring at the sunlight in the tree branches.

'Thank the gods.' Reyna leaned over him, her hand cool on his forehead. The bleeding cut on her face was completely gone.

Next to her, Coach Hedge scowled. Sadly, Nico had a great view right up his nostrils.

'Good,' said the coach. 'Just a few more applications.'

He held up a large square bandage coated with sticky brown gunk and plastered it over Nico's nose.

'What is ... ? Ugh.'

The gunk smelled like potting soil, cedar chips, grape juice and just a hint of fertilizer. Nico didn't have the strength to remove it.

His senses started to work again. He realized he was lying on a sleeping bag outside the tent. He was wearing nothing but his boxer shorts and a thousand gross, brown-plastered bandages all over his body. His arms, legs and chest were itchy from the drying mud.

'Are – are you trying to plant me?' he murmured.

'It's sports medicine with a little nature magic,' said the coach. 'Kind of a hobby of mine.'

Nico tried to focus on Reyna's face. 'You approved this?'

She looked like she was about to pass out from exhaustion, but she managed a smile. ‘Coach Hedge brought you back from the brink. The unicorn draught, ambrosia, nectar ... we couldn’t use any of it. You were fading so badly.’

‘Fading ... ?’

‘Don’t worry about that now, kid.’ Hedge put a drinking straw next to Nico’s mouth. ‘Have some Gatorade.’

‘I – I don’t want –’

‘You’ll have some Gatorade,’ the coach insisted.

Nico had some Gatorade. He was surprised at how thirsty he was.

‘What happened to me?’ he asked. ‘To Bryce ... to those skeletons ... ?’

Reyna and the coach exchanged an uneasy look.

‘There’s good news and bad news,’ Reyna said. ‘But first eat something. You’ll need your strength back before you hear the bad news.’



XXXII

Nico

‘THREE DAYS?’

Nico wasn't sure he'd heard her right the first dozen times.

‘We couldn't move you,’ Reyna said. ‘I mean ... *literally*, you couldn't be moved. You had almost no substance. If it weren't for Coach Hedge –’

‘No biggie,’ the coach assured him. ‘One time in the middle of a play-off game I had to splint a quarterback's leg with nothing but tree branches and strapping tape.’

Despite his nonchalance, the satyr had bags under his eyes. His cheeks were sunken. He looked almost as bad as Nico felt.

Nico couldn't believe he'd been unconscious for so long. He recounted his weird dreams – the mutterings of Ella the harpy, the glimpse of Mellie the cloud nymph (which worried the coach) – but Nico felt as if those visions had lasted only seconds. According to Reyna, it was the afternoon of 30 July. He'd been in a shadow coma for *days*.

‘The Romans will attack Camp Half-Blood the day after tomorrow.’ Nico sipped more Gatorade, which was nice and cold, but without flavour. His taste buds seemed to have phased into the shadow world permanently. ‘We have to hurry. I have to get ready.’

‘No.’ Reyna pressed her hand against his forearm, making the bandages crinkle. ‘Any more shadow-travel would kill you.’

He gritted his teeth. ‘If it kills me, it kills me. We *have* to get the statue to Camp Half-Blood.’

‘Hey, kid,’ said the coach, ‘I appreciate your dedication, but, if you zap us all into eternal darkness along with the Athena Parthenos, it's not going to help anybody. Bryce Lawrence was right about that.’

At the mention of Bryce, Reyna's metallic dogs pricked up their ears and snarled.

Reyna stared at the cairn of rocks, her eyes full of torment, as if more unwelcome spirits might emerge from the grave.

Nico took a breath, getting a nose full of Hedge's fragrant home remedy. 'Reyna, I ... I didn't think. What I did to Bryce –'

'You destroyed him,' Reyna said. 'You turned him into a ghost. And, yes, it reminded me of what happened to my father.'

'I didn't mean to scare you,' Nico said bitterly. 'I didn't mean to ... to poison another friendship. I'm sorry.'

Reyna studied his face. 'Nico, I have to admit, the first day you were unconscious, I didn't know what to think or feel. What you did was hard to watch ... hard to process.'

Coach Hedge chewed on a stick. 'I gotta agree with the girl on this one, kid. Smashing somebody's head in with a baseball bat, that's one thing. But ghostifying that creep? That was some *dark* stuff.'

Nico expected to feel angry – to shout at them for trying to judge him. That's what he normally did.

But his anger wouldn't materialize. He still felt plenty of rage towards Bryce Lawrence, and Gaia and the giants. He wanted to find the augur Octavian and strangle him with his chain belt. But he wasn't mad at Reyna or the coach.

'Why did you bring me back?' he asked. 'You knew I couldn't help you any more. You should've found another way to keep going with the statue. But you wasted three days watching over me. Why?'

Coach Hedge snorted. 'You're part of the team, you idiot. We're not going to leave you behind.'

'It's more than that.' Reyna rested her hand on Nico's. 'While you were asleep, I did a lot of thinking. What I told you about my father ... I'd never shared that with anyone. I guess I knew you were the right person to confide in. You lifted some of my burden. I trust you, Nico.'

Nico stared at her, mystified. 'How can you trust me? You both felt my anger, saw my worst feelings ...'

'Hey, kid,' said Coach Hedge, his tone softer. 'We all get angry. Even a sweetheart like me.'

Reyna smirked. She squeezed Nico's hand. 'Coach is right, Nico. You're not the only one who lets out the darkness once in a while. I told you what happened with my dad, and you supported me. You shared your painful experiences; how can we not support you? We're friends.'

Nico wasn't sure what to say. They'd seen his deepest secrets. They knew who he was, what he was.

But they didn't seem to care. No ... they cared *more*.

They weren't judging him. They were concerned. None of it made sense to him.

'But Bryce. I ...' Nico couldn't continue.

'You did what had to be done. I see that now,' Reyna said. 'Just promise me: no more turning people into ghosts if we can avoid it.'

'Yeah,' Coach said. 'Unless you let me whale on them *first*. Besides, it's not all bad news.'

Reyna nodded. 'We've seen no sign of other Romans, so it appears Bryce didn't notify anyone else where he was. Also, no sign of Orion. Hopefully that means he was taken down by the Hunters.'

'And Hylla?' Nico asked. 'Thalia?'

The lines tightened around Reyna's mouth. 'No word. But I have to believe they're still alive.'

'You didn't tell him the best news,' the coach prompted.

Reyna frowned. 'Maybe because it's so hard to believe. Coach Hedge thinks he's found another way to transport the statue. It's all he's talked about for the past three days. But so far we've seen no sign of –'

'Hey, it'll happen!' Coach grinned at Nico. 'You remember that paper aeroplane I got right before Creepmeister Lawrence showed up? It was a message from one of Mellie's contacts in the palace of [Aeolus](#). This harpy, Nuggets – she and Mellie go way back. Anyway ... she knows a guy who knows a guy who knows a horse who knows a goat who knows another horse –'

'Coach,' Reyna chided, 'you'll make him sorry he came out of his coma.'

'Fine,' the satyr huffed. 'Long story short, I pulled in a lot of favours. I got word to the right wind-type spirits that we needed help. The letter I ate? Confirmation that the cavalry is coming. They said it would take a while to organize, but he should be here soon – any minute, in fact.'

‘Who’s *he*?’ Nico asked. ‘What cavalry?’

Reyna stood abruptly. She stared towards the north, her face slack with awe.

‘*That* cavalry ...’

Nico followed her gaze. A flock of birds was approaching – *large* birds.

They got closer, and Nico realized they were horses with wings – at least half a dozen in V formation, without riders.

Flying on point was a massive stallion with a golden coat and multicoloured plumage like an eagle’s, his wingspan twice as wide as the other horses’.

‘*Pegasi*,’ Nico said. ‘You summoned enough to carry the statue.’

Coach laughed with delight. ‘Not just any pegasi, kid. You’re in for a real treat.’

‘The stallion in front ...’ Reyna shook her head in disbelief. ‘That’s *the* Pegasus, the immortal lord of horses.’



XXXIII

Leo

TYPICAL.

Just as Leo finished his modifications, a big storm goddess came along and smacked the grommets right out of his ship.

After their encounter with Kymopo-what's-her-name, the *Argo II* limped through the Aegean, too damaged to fly, too slow to outrun monsters. They fought hungry sea serpents about every hour. They attracted schools of curious fish. At one point they got stuck on a rock, and Percy and Jason had to get out and push.

The wheezing sound of the engine made Leo want to cry. Over the course of three long days, he finally got the ship more or less back to working order just as they made port at the island of [Mykonos](#), which probably meant it was time for them to get bashed to pieces again.

Percy and Annabeth went ashore to scout while Leo stayed on the quarterdeck, fine-tuning the control console. He was so engrossed in the wiring that he didn't notice the landing party was back until Percy said, 'Hey, man. Gelato.'

Instantly, Leo's day got better. The whole crew sat on deck, without a storm or a monster attack to worry about for the first time in days, and ate ice cream. Well, except for Frank, who was lactose intolerant. He got an apple.

The day was hot and windy. The sea glittered with chop, but Leo had fixed the stabilizers well enough that Hazel didn't look too seasick.

Curving off to their starboard side was the town of Mykonos – a collection of white stucco buildings with blue roofs, blue windows and blue doors.

'We saw these pelicans walking around town,' Percy reported. 'Like, just going through the shops, stopping at the bars.'

Hazel frowned. ‘Monsters in disguise?’

‘No,’ Annabeth said, laughing, ‘just regular old pelicans. They’re the town mascots or something. And there’s a “Little Italy” section of town. That’s why the gelato is so good.’

‘Europe is messed up.’ Leo shook his head. ‘First we go to Rome for Spanish steps. Then we go to Greece for Italian ice cream.’

But he couldn’t argue with the gelato. He ate his double chocolate delight and tried to imagine that he and his friends were just chilling on a vacation. Which made him wish Calypso was with him, which made him wish the war was over and everybody was alive ... which made him sad. It was 30 July. Less than forty-eight hours until G-Day, when Gaia, the Princess of Potty Sludge, would awaken in all her dirt-faced glory.

The strange thing was, the closer they got to 1 August, the more upbeat his friends acted. Or maybe *upbeat* wasn’t the right word. They seemed to be pulling together for the final lap – aware that the next two days would make or break them. There was no point moping around when you faced imminent death. The end of the world made gelato taste a lot better.

Of course, the rest of the crew hadn’t been down in the stables with Leo, talking with the victory goddess Nike over the past three days ...

Piper set down her ice-cream cup. ‘So, the island of Delos is right across the harbour. Artemis and Apollo’s home turf. Who’s going?’

‘Me,’ Leo said immediately.

Everybody stared at him.

‘What?’ Leo demanded. ‘I’m diplomatic and stuff. Frank and Hazel volunteered to back me up.’

‘We did?’ Frank lowered his half-eaten apple. ‘I mean ... sure we did.’

Hazel’s gold eyes flashed in the sunlight. ‘Leo, did you have a dream about this or something?’

‘Yes,’ Leo blurted. ‘Well ... no. Not exactly. But ... you got to trust me on this, guys. I need to talk to Apollo and Artemis. I’ve got an idea I need to bounce off them.’

Annabeth frowned. She looked like she might object, but Jason spoke up.

‘If Leo has an idea,’ he said, ‘we need to trust him.’

Leo felt guilty about that, especially considering what his idea was, but he mustered a smile. ‘Thanks, man.’

Percy shrugged. ‘Okay. But a word of advice: when you see Apollo, don’t mention haiku.’

Hazel knitted her eyebrows. ‘Why not? Isn’t he the god of poetry?’

‘Just trust me.’

‘Got it.’ Leo rose to his feet. ‘And, guys, if they have a souvenir shop on Delos, I’m totally bringing you back some Apollo and Artemis bobbleheads!’

Apollo didn’t seem to be in the mood for haiku. He wasn’t selling bobbleheads, either.

Frank had turned into a giant eagle to fly to Delos, but Leo hitched a ride with Hazel on Arion’s back. No offence to Frank, but after the fiasco at Fort Sumter Leo had become a conscientious objector to riding giant eagles. He had a one hundred percent failure rate.

They found the island deserted, maybe because the seas were too choppy for the tourist boats. The windswept hills were barren except for rocks, grass and wildflowers – and, of course, a bunch of crumbling temples. The rubble was probably very impressive, but, ever since Olympia, Leo had been on ancient ruins overload. He was *so* done with white marble columns. He wanted to get back to the U.S., where the oldest buildings were the public schools and Ye Olde McDonald’s.

They walked down an avenue lined with white stone lions, the faces weathered almost featureless.

‘It’s eerie,’ Hazel said.

‘You sense any ghosts?’ Frank asked.

She shook her head. ‘The *lack* of ghosts is eerie. Back in ancient times, Delos was sacred ground. No mortal was allowed to be born here or die here. There are literally *no* mortal spirits on this whole island.’

‘Cool with me,’ Leo said. ‘Does that mean nobody’s allowed to kill us here?’

‘I didn’t say that.’ Hazel stopped at the summit of a low hill. ‘Look. Down there.’

Below them, the hillside had been carved into an amphitheatre. Scrubby plants sprouted between the rows of stone benches, so it looked like a concert for thorn

bushes. Down at the bottom, sitting on a block of stone in the middle of the stage, the god Apollo hunched over a ukulele, plucking out a mournful tune.

At least, Leo assumed it was Apollo. The dude looked about seventeen, with curly blond hair and a perfect tan. He wore tattered jeans, a black T-shirt and a white linen jacket with glittering rhinestone lapels, like he was trying for an Elvis/Ramones/Beach Boys hybrid look.

Leo didn't usually think of the ukulele as a sad instrument. (Pathetic, sure. But not sad.) Yet the tune Apollo strummed was so melancholy it broke Leo's feels.

Sitting in the front row was a young girl of about thirteen, wearing black leggings and a silver tunic, her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. She was whittling on a long piece of wood – making a bow.

'Those are the gods?' Frank asked. 'They don't look like twins.'

'Well, think about it,' Hazel said. 'If you're a god, you can look like whatever you want. If you had a twin –'

'I'd choose to look like anything *but* my sibling,' Frank agreed. 'So what's the plan?'

'Don't shoot!' yelled Leo. It seemed like a good opening line, facing two archery gods. He raised his arms and headed down to the stage.

Neither god looked surprised to see them.

Apollo sighed and went back to playing his ukulele.

When they got to the front row, Artemis muttered, 'There you are. We were beginning to wonder.'

That took the pressure out of Leo's pistons. He'd been ready to introduce himself, explain how they'd come in peace, maybe tell a few jokes and offer breath mints.

'So you were expecting us, then,' Leo said. 'I can tell, because you're both so excited.'

Apollo plucked a tune that sounded like the funeral version of 'Camptown Races'. 'We were expecting to be found, bothered and tormented. We didn't know by whom. Can you not leave us to our misery?'

'You know they can't, brother,' Artemis chided. 'They require our help with their quest, even if the odds are hopeless.'

'You two are full of good cheer,' Leo said. 'Why are you hiding out here anyway? Shouldn't you be ... I dunno, fighting giants or something?'

Artemis's pale eyes made Leo feel like he was a deer carcass about to be gutted.

'Delos is our birthplace,' said the goddess. 'Here, we are unaffected by the Greek-Roman schism. Believe me, Leo Valdez, if I could, I would be with my Hunters, facing our old enemy Orion. Unfortunately, if I stepped off this island, I would become incapacitated with pain. All I can do is watch helplessly while Orion slaughters my followers. Many gave their lives to protect your friends and that accursed Athena statue.'

Hazel made a strangled sound. 'You mean Nico? Is he all right?'

'*All right?*' Apollo sobbed over his ukulele. '*None* of us are all right, girl! Gaia is rising!'

Artemis glared at Apollo. 'Hazel Levesque, your brother is still alive. He is a brave fighter, like you. I wish I could say the same for *my* brother.'

'You wrong me!' Apollo wailed. 'I was misled by Gaia and that horrible Roman child!'

Frank cleared his throat. 'Uh, Lord Apollo, you mean Octavian?'

'Do not speak his name!' Apollo strummed a minor chord. 'Oh, Frank Zhang, if only you were my child. I heard your prayers, you know, all those weeks you wanted to be claimed. But alas! Mars gets all the good ones. I get ... *that creature* as my descendant. He filled my head with compliments. He told me of the great temples he would build in my honour.'

Artemis snorted. 'You are easily flattered, brother.'

'Because I have so many amazing qualities to praise! Octavian said he wanted to make the Romans strong again. I said fine! I gave him my blessing.'

'As I recall,' said Artemis, 'he also promised to make you the most important god of the legion, above even Zeus.'

'Well, who was I to argue with an offer like that? Does Zeus have a perfect tan? Can *he* play the ukulele? I think not! But I *never* thought Octavian would start a war! Gaia must have been clouding my thoughts, whispering in my ear.'

Leo remembered the crazy wind dude Aeolus, who'd gone homicidal after hearing Gaia's voice.

'So fix it,' he said. 'Tell Octavian to stand down. Or, you know, shoot him with one of your arrows. That would be fine, too.'

'I cannot!' Apollo wailed. 'Look!'

His ukulele turned into a bow. He aimed at the sky and shot. The golden arrow sailed about two hundred feet, then disintegrated into smoke.

‘To shoot my bow, I would have to step off Delos,’ Apollo cried. ‘Then I would be incapacitated, or Zeus would strike me down. Father never liked me. He hasn’t trusted me for millennia!’

‘Well,’ Artemis said, ‘to be fair, there was that time you conspired with Hera to overthrow him.’

‘That was a misunderstanding!’

‘And you killed some of Zeus’s Cyclopes.’

‘I had a good reason for that! At any rate, now Zeus blames me for *everything* – Octavian’s schemes, the fall of Delphi –’

‘Wait.’ Hazel made a time-out sign. ‘The fall of Delphi?’

Apollo’s bow turned back into a ukulele. He plucked a dramatic chord. ‘When the schism began between Greek and Roman, while I struggled with confusion, Gaia took advantage! She raised my old enemy [Python](#), the great serpent, to repossess the Delphic Oracle. That horrible creature is now coiled in the ancient caverns, blocking the magic of prophecy. I am stuck here, so I can’t even fight him.’

‘Bummer,’ Leo said, though secretly he thought that no more prophecies might be a good thing. His to-do list was already pretty full.

‘Bummer indeed!’ Apollo sighed. ‘Zeus was *already* angry with me for appointing that new girl, Rachel Dare, as my Oracle. Zeus seems to think I *hastened* the war with Gaia by doing so, since Rachel issued the Prophecy of Seven as soon as I blessed her. But prophecy doesn’t work that way! Father just needed someone to blame. So of course he picked the handsomest, most talented, hopelessly awesome god.’

Artemis made a gagging gesture.

‘Oh, stop it, sister!’ Apollo said. ‘You’re in trouble, too!’

‘Only because I stayed in touch with my Hunters against Zeus’s wishes,’ Artemis said. ‘But I can always charm Father into forgiving me. He’s never been able to stay mad at me. It’s *you* I’m worried about.’

‘I’m worried about me, too!’ Apollo agreed. ‘We have to do something. We can’t kill Octavian. Hmm. Perhaps we should kill *these* demigods.’

‘Whoa there, Music Man.’ Leo resisted the urge to hide behind Frank and yell, *Take the big Canadian dude!* ‘We’re on your side, remember? Why would you kill us?’

‘It might make me feel better!’ Apollo said. ‘I have to do something!’

‘Or,’ Leo said quickly, ‘you could help us. See, we’ve got this plan ...’

He told them how Hera had directed them to Delos, and how Nike had described the ingredients for the physician’s cure.

‘The physician’s cure?’ Apollo stood and smashed his ukulele on the stones. ‘That’s your plan?’

Leo raised his hands. ‘Hey, um, usually I’m all for smashing ukuleles, but –’

‘I cannot help you!’ Apollo cried. ‘If I told you the secret of the physician’s cure, Zeus would *never* forgive me!’

‘You’re already in trouble,’ Leo pointed out. ‘How could it get worse?’

Apollo glared at him. ‘If you knew what my father is capable of, mortal, you would not ask. It would be simpler if I just smote you all. That might please Zeus –’

‘Brother ...’ Artemis said.

The twins locked eyes and had a silent argument. Apparently Artemis won. Apollo heaved a sigh and kicked his broken ukulele across the stage.

Artemis rose. ‘Hazel Levesque, Frank Zhang, come with me. There are things you should know about the Twelfth Legion. As for you, Leo Valdez –’ The goddess turned those cold silver eyes on him. ‘Apollo will hear you out. See if you can strike a deal. My brother always likes a good bargain.’

Frank and Hazel both glanced at him, like *Please don’t die*. Then they followed Artemis up the steps of the amphitheatre and over the crest of the hill.

‘Well, Leo Valdez?’ Apollo folded his arms. His eyes glowed with golden light. ‘Let us bargain, then. What can you offer that would convince me to help you rather than kill you?’



XXXIV

Leo

‘**A BARGAIN.**’ Leo fingers twitched. ‘Yeah. Absolutely.’

His hands went to work before his mind knew what he was doing. He started pulling things out of the pockets of his magic tool belt – copper wire, some bolts, a brass funnel. For months he’d been stashing away bits and pieces of machinery, because he never knew what he might need. And the longer he used the belt, the more intuitive it became. He’d reach in and the right items would simply appear.

‘So the thing is,’ Leo said as his hands twisted wire, ‘Zeus is already P.O.’ed at you, right? If you help us defeat Gaia, you could make it up to him.’

Apollo wrinkled his nose. ‘I suppose that’s possible. But it would be easier to smite you.’

‘What kind of ballad would *that* make?’ Leo’s hands worked furiously, attaching levers, fastening the metal funnel to an old gear shaft. ‘You’re the god of music, right? Would you listen to a song called “Apollo Smites a Runty Little Demigod”? I wouldn’t. But “Apollo Defeats the Earth Mother and Saves the Freaking Universe” ... *that* sounds like a Billboard chart-topper!’

Apollo gazed into the air, as if envisioning his name on a marquee. ‘What do you want exactly? And what do I get out of it?’

‘First thing I need: advice.’ Leo strung some wires across the mouth of the funnel. ‘I want to know if a plan of mine will work.’

Leo explained what he had in mind. He’d been chewing on the idea for days, ever since Jason came back from the bottom of the sea and Leo started talking with Nike.

A primordial god has been defeated once before, Kymopoleia had told Jason. You know of whom I speak.

Leo's conversations with Nike had helped him fine-tune the plan, but he still wanted a second opinion from another god. Because, once Leo committed himself, there would be no going back.

He half hoped Apollo would laugh and tell him to forget it.

Instead, the god nodded thoughtfully. 'I will give you this advice for free. You *might* be able to defeat Gaia in the way you describe, similar to the way Ouranos was defeated aeons ago. However, any mortal close by would be utterly ...'

Apollo's voice faltered. 'What is that you have made?'

Leo looked down at the contraption in his hands. Layers of copper wires, like multiple sets of guitar strings, crisscrossed inside the funnel. Rows of striking pins were controlled by levers on the outside of the cone, which was fixed to a square metal base with a bunch of crank handles.

'Oh, this ... ?' Leo's mind raced furiously. The thing looked like a music box fused with an old-fashioned phonograph, but what *was* it?

A bargaining chip.

Artemis had told him to make a deal with Apollo.

Leo remembered a story the kids in Cabin Eleven used to brag about: how their father, Hermes, had avoided punishment for stealing Apollo's sacred cows. When Hermes got caught, he made a musical instrument – the first lyre – and traded it to Apollo, who immediately forgave him.

A few days ago, Piper mentioned seeing the cave on Pylos where Hermes hid those cows. That must've triggered Leo's subconscious. Without even meaning to, he'd built a musical instrument, which kind of surprised him, since he knew nothing about music.

'Um, well,' Leo said, 'this is quite simply the most amazing instrument ever!'

'How does it work?' asked the god.

Good question, Leo thought.

He turned the crank handles, hoping the thing wouldn't explode in his face. A few clear tones rang out – metallic yet warm. Leo manipulated the levers and gears. He recognized the song that sprang forth – the same wistful melody Calypso sang for him on Ogygia about homesickness and longing. But, through the strings of the brass cone, the tune sounded even sadder, like a machine with a broken heart – the way Festus might sound if he could sing.

Leo forgot Apollo was there. He played the song all the way through. When he was done, his eyes stung. He could almost smell the fresh-baked bread from Calypso's kitchen. He could taste the only kiss she'd ever given him.

Apollo stared in awe at the instrument. 'I must have it. What is it called? What do you want for it?'

Leo had a sudden instinct to hide the instrument and keep it for himself. But he swallowed his melancholy. He had a task to complete.

Calypso ... Calypso needed him to succeed.

'This is the Valdezinator, of course!' He puffed out his chest. 'It works by, um, translating your feelings into music as you manipulate the gears. It's really meant for me, a child of Hephaestus, to use, though. I don't know if you could –'

'I am the god of music!' Apollo cried. 'I can *certainly* master the Valdezinator. I must! It is my duty!'

'So let's wheel and deal, Music Man,' Leo said. 'I give you this; you give me the physician's cure.'

'Oh ...' Apollo bit his godly lip. 'Well, I don't actually *have* the physician's cure.'

'I thought you were the god of medicine.'

'Yes, but I'm the god of *many* things! Poetry, music, the Delphic Oracle –' He broke into a sob and covered his mouth with his fist. 'Sorry. I'm fine, I'm fine. As I was saying, I have many spheres of influence. Then, of course, I have the whole "sun god" gig, which I inherited from Helios. The point is, I'm rather like a general practitioner. For the physician's cure, you would need to see a specialist – the only one who has ever successfully cured death: my son [Asclepius](#), the god of healers.'

Leo's heart sank into his socks. The *last* thing they needed was another quest to find another god who would probably demand his own commemorative T-shirt or Valdezinator.

'That's a shame, Apollo. I was hoping we could make a deal.' Leo turned the levers on his Valdezinator, coaxing out an even sadder tune.

'Stop!' Apollo wailed. 'It's too beautiful! I'll give you directions to Asclepius. He's really very close!'

'How do we know he'll help us? We've only got two days until Gaia wakes.'

‘He’ll help!’ Apollo promised. ‘My son is *very* helpful. Just plead with him in my name. You’ll find him at his old temple in [Epidaurus](#).’

‘What’s the catch?’

‘Ah ... well, nothing. Except, of course, he’s guarded.’

‘Guarded by what?’

‘I don’t know!’ Apollo spread his hands helplessly. ‘I only know Zeus is keeping Asclepius under guard so he doesn’t go running around the world resurrecting people. The first time Asclepius raised the dead ... well, he caused quite an uproar. It’s a long story. But I’m *sure* you can convince him to help.’

‘This isn’t sounding like much of a deal,’ Leo said. ‘What about the last ingredient – the curse of Delos. What is it?’

Apollo eyed the Valdezinator greedily. Leo worried the god might just take it, and how could Leo stop him? Blasting the sun god with fire probably wouldn’t do much good.

‘I can give the last ingredient to you,’ Apollo said. ‘Then you’ll have everything you need for Asclepius to brew the potion.’

Leo played another verse. ‘I dunno. Trading this beautiful Valdezinator for some Delos curse –’

‘It’s not actually a curse! Look ...’ Apollo sprinted to the nearest patch of wildflowers and picked a yellow one from a crack between the stones. ‘*This* is the curse of Delos.’

Leo stared at it. ‘A cursed daisy?’

Apollo sighed in exasperation. ‘That’s just a nickname. When my mother, Leto, was ready to give birth to Artemis and me, Hera was angry, because Zeus had cheated on her again. So she went around to every single landmass on earth. She made the nature spirits in each place promise to turn my mother away so she couldn’t give birth anywhere.’

‘Sounds like something Hera would do.’

‘I know, right? Anyway, Hera exacted promises from every land that was rooted on the earth – but *not* from Delos, because back then Delos was a floating island. The nature spirits of Delos welcomed my mother. She gave birth to my sister and me, and the island was so happy to be our new sacred home it covered itself in these little yellow flowers. The flowers are a blessing, because we’re awesome. But they also symbolize a curse, because once we were born Delos

got rooted in place and wasn't able to drift around the sea any more. That's why yellow daisies are called the curse of Delos.'

'So I could have just picked a daisy myself and walked away.'

'No, no! Not for the potion you have in mind. The flower would have to be picked by either my sister or me. So what do you say, demigod? Directions to Asclepius and your last magical ingredient in exchange for that new musical instrument – do we have a deal?'

Leo hated to give away a perfectly good Valdezinator for a wildflower, but he saw no other choice. 'You drive a hard bargain, Music Man.'

They made the trade.

'Excellent!' Apollo turned the levers of the Valdezinator, which made a sound like a car engine on a cold morning. 'Hmm ... perhaps it'll take some practice, but I'll get it! Now let us find your friends. The sooner you leave, the better!'

Hazel and Frank waited at the Delos docks. Artemis was nowhere in sight.

When Leo turned to tell Apollo goodbye, the god was gone, too.

'Man,' Leo muttered, 'he was really anxious to practice his Valdezinator.'

'His *what*?' Hazel asked.

Leo told them about his new hobby as a genius inventor of musical funnels.

Frank scratched his head. 'And in exchange you got a daisy?'

'It's the final ingredient to cure death, Zhang. It's a super daisy! How about you guys? Learn anything from Artemis?'

'Unfortunately, yes.' Hazel gazed across the water, where the *Argo II* bobbed at anchor. 'Artemis knows a lot about missile weapons. She told us Octavian has ordered some ... *surprises* for Camp Half-Blood. He's used most of the legion's treasure to purchase Cyclopes-built onagers.'

'Oh, no, not onagers!' Leo said. 'Also, what's an **onager**?'

Frank scowled. 'You build machines. How can you not know what an onager is? It's just the biggest, baddest catapult ever used by the Roman army.'

'Fine,' Leo said. 'But *onager* is a stupid name. They should've called them Valdezapults.'

Hazel rolled her eyes. 'Leo, this is serious. If Artemis is right, six of these machines will be rolling into Long Island tomorrow night. That's what Octavian has been waiting for. At dawn on August first, he'll have enough firepower to

completely destroy Camp Half-Blood without a single Roman casualty. He thinks that'll make him a hero.'

Frank muttered a Latin curse. 'Except he's also summoned so many monstrous "allies" that the legion is completely surrounded by wild centaurs, tribes of dog-headed *cynocephali*, and who knows what else. As soon as the legion destroys Camp Half-Blood, the monsters will turn on Octavian and destroy the legion.'

'And then Gaia rises,' Leo said. 'And bad stuff happens.'

In his head, gears turned as the new information clicked into place. 'All right ... this just makes my plan even more important. Once we get this physician's cure, I'm going to need your help. Both of you.'

Frank glanced nervously at the cursed yellow daisy. 'What kind of help?'

Leo told them his plan. The more he talked, the more shocked they looked, but when he was done neither of them told him he was crazy. A tear glistened on Hazel's cheek.

'It has to be this way,' Leo said. 'Nike confirmed it. Apollo confirmed it. The others would never accept it, but you guys ... you're Romans. That's why I wanted you to come to Delos with me. You get the whole sacrifice thing – doing your duty, jumping on your sword.'

Frank sniffled. 'I think you mean falling on your sword.'

'Whatever,' Leo said. 'You know this *has* to be the answer.'

'Leo ...' Frank choked up.

Leo himself wanted to cry like a Valdezinator, but he kept his cool. 'Hey, big guy, I'm counting on you. Remember you told me about that conversation with Mars? Your dad said you'd have to step up, right? You'd have to make the call nobody else was willing to make.'

'Or the war would go sideways,' Frank remembered. 'But still –'

'And Hazel,' Leo said. 'Crazy Mist-magicky Hazel, you've got to cover for me. You're the only one who can. My great-granddad Sammy saw how special you were. He blessed me when I was a baby, because I think somehow he knew you were going to come back and help me. Our whole lives, *mi amiga*, they've been leading up to this.'

'Oh, Leo ...' She really did burst into tears then. She grabbed him and hugged him, which was sweet until Frank started crying too and wrapped them both in

his arms.

That got a little weird.

‘Okay, well ...’ Leo gently extricated himself. ‘So we’re in agreement?’

‘I hate this plan,’ Frank said.

‘I despise it,’ Hazel said.

‘Think how *I* feel,’ Leo said. ‘But you know it’s our best shot.’

Neither of them argued. Leo kind of wished they had.

‘Let’s get back to the ship,’ he said. ‘We have a healer god to find.’



XXXV

Leo

LEO SPOTTED THE SECRET ENTRANCE IMMEDIATELY.

‘Oh, that’s beautiful.’ He manoeuvred the ship over the ruins of Epidaurus.

The *Argo II* really wasn’t in good shape to fly, but Leo had got her airborne after only one night of work. With the world ending tomorrow morning, he was highly motivated.

He’d primed the oar flaps. He’d injected Styx water into the samophlange. He’d treated Festus the figurehead to his favourite brew – thirty-weight motor oil and Tabasco sauce. Even Buford the Wonder Table had pitched in, rattling around belowdecks while his holographic Mini-Hedge yelled, ‘GIVE ME THIRTY PUSH-UPS!’ to inspire the engine.

Now, at last, they hovered over the ancient temple complex of the healing god Asclepius, where they could hopefully find the physician’s cure and maybe also some ambrosia, nectar and Fonzies, because Leo’s supplies were running low.

Next to him on the quarterdeck, Percy peered over the railing.

‘Looks like more rubble,’ he noted.

His face was still green from his underwater poisoning, but at least he wasn’t running to the bathroom to upchuck quite so often. Between him and Hazel’s seasickness, it had been impossible to find an unoccupied toilet onboard for the past few days.

Annabeth pointed to the disc-shaped structure about fifty yards off their port side. ‘There.’

Leo smiled. ‘Exactly. See, the architect knows her stuff.’

The rest of the crew gathered around.

‘What are we looking at?’ Frank asked.

‘Ah, *Señor Zhang*,’ Leo said, ‘you know how you’re always saying, “Leo, you are the only true genius among demigods”?’

‘I’m pretty sure I never said that.’

‘Well, turns out there are other true geniuses! Because one of them must have made that work of art down there.’

‘It’s a stone circle,’ Frank said. ‘Probably the foundation of an old shrine.’

Piper shook her head. ‘No, it’s more than that. Look at the ridges and grooves carved around the rim.’

‘Like the teeth of a gear,’ Jason offered.

‘And those concentric rings.’ Hazel pointed to the centre of the structure, where curved stones formed a sort of bull’s-eye. ‘The pattern reminds me of Pasiphaë’s pendant: the symbol of the Labyrinth.’

‘Huh.’ Leo scowled. ‘Well, I hadn’t thought of that. But think *mechanical*. Frank, Hazel ... where did we see concentric circles like that before?’

‘The laboratory under Rome,’ Frank said.

‘The Archimedes lock on the door,’ Hazel recalled. ‘It had rings within rings.’

Percy snorted. ‘You’re telling me that’s a massive stone lock? It’s, like, fifty feet in diameter.’

‘Leo might be right,’ Annabeth said. ‘In ancient times, the temple of Asclepius was like the General Hospital of Greece. *Everybody* came here for the best healing. Aboveground, it was the size of a major city, but supposedly the real action happened belowground. That’s where the high priests had their intensive-care super-magical-type compound, accessed by a secret passage.’

Percy scratched his ear. ‘So, if that big round thing is the lock, how do we get the key?’

‘Way ahead of you, Aquaman,’ Leo said.

‘Okay, do *not* call me *Aquaman*. That’s even worse than *water boy*.’

Leo turned to Jason and Piper. ‘You guys remember the giant Archimedes grabber arm I told you I was building?’

Jason raised an eyebrow. ‘I thought you were kidding.’

‘Oh, my friend, I *never* kid about giant grabber arms!’ Leo rubbed his hands in anticipation. ‘It’s time to go fishing for prizes!’

Compared to the other modifications Leo had made to the ship, the grabber arm was a piece of cake. Originally, Archimedes had designed it to pluck enemy ships out of the water. Now Leo found another use for it.

He opened the hull's forward access vent and extended the arm, guided by the console monitor and Jason, who flew outside, yelling directions.

'Left!' Jason called. 'A couple of inches – yeah! Okay, down. Keep it coming. You're good.'

Using his trackpad and turntable controls, Leo opened the claw. Its prongs settled around the grooves in the circular stone structure below. He checked the aerial stabilizers and the monitor's video feed.

'Okay, little buddy.' Leo patted the Archimedes sphere embedded in the helm. 'This is all you.'

He activated the sphere.

The grabber arm began to turn like a corkscrew. It rotated the outer ring of stone, which ground and rumbled but thankfully didn't shatter. Then the claw detached, fixed itself around the second stone ring and turned it in the opposite direction.

Standing next to him at the monitor, Piper kissed him on the cheek. 'It's working. Leo, you're amazing.'

Leo grinned. He was about to make a comment about his own awesomeness, then he remembered the plan he had worked out with Hazel and Frank – and the fact that he might never see Piper again after tomorrow. The joke sort of died in his throat. 'Yeah, well ... thanks, Beauty Queen.'

Below them, the last stone ring turned and settled with a deep pneumatic hiss. The entire fifty-foot pedestal telescoped downward into a spiral staircase.

Hazel exhaled. 'Leo, even from up here, I'm sensing bad stuff at the bottom of those stairs. Something ... large and dangerous. You sure you don't want me to come along?'

'Thanks, Hazel, but we'll be good.' He patted Piper on the back. 'Me and Piper and Jason – we're old pros at large and dangerous.'

Frank held out the vial of Pylosian mint. 'Don't break it.'

Leo nodded gravely. 'Don't break the vial of deadly poison. Man, I'm glad you said that. *Never* would have occurred to me.'

'Shut up, Valdez.' Frank gave him a bear hug. 'And be careful.'

‘Ribs,’ Leo squeaked.

‘Sorry.’

Annabeth and Percy wished them good luck. Then Percy excused himself to go throw up.

Jason summoned the winds and whisked Piper and Leo down to the surface.

The stairs spiralled downward about sixty feet before opening into a chamber as large as Bunker Nine – which is to say, *ginormous*.

The polished white tiles on the walls and floor reflected the light of Jason’s sword so well that Leo didn’t need to make a fire. Rows of long stone benches filled the entire chamber, reminding Leo of one of those mega-churches they always advertised back in Houston. At the far end of the room, where the altar would have been, stood a ten-foot-tall statue of pure white alabaster – a young woman in a white robe, a serene smile on her face. In one hand she raised a cup, while a golden serpent coiled around her arm, its head poised over the brim as if ready to drink.

‘Large and dangerous,’ Jason guessed.

Piper scanned the room. ‘This must have been the sleeping area.’ Her voice echoed a little too loudly for Leo’s comfort. ‘The patients stayed here overnight. The god Asclepius was supposed to send them a dream, telling them what cure to ask for.’

‘How do you know that?’ Leo asked. ‘Annabeth told you?’

Piper looked offended. ‘I know stuff. That statue over there is [Hygeia](#), the daughter of Asclepius. She’s the goddess of good health. That’s where we get the word *hygiene*.’

Jason studied the statue warily. ‘What’s with the snake and the cup?’

‘Uh, not sure,’ Piper admitted. ‘But back in the day this place – the [Asclepeion](#) – was a medical school as well as a hospital. All the best doctor-priests trained here. They would’ve worshipped both Asclepius and Hygeia.’

Leo wanted to say, *Okay, good tour. Let’s leave.*

The silence, the gleaming white tiles, the creepy smile on Hygeia’s face ... it all made him want to crawl out of his skin. But Jason and Piper headed down the centre aisle towards the statue, so Leo figured he’d better follow.

Strewn across the benches were old magazines: *Highlights for Children*, *Autumn*, *20 B.C.E.*; *Hephaestus-TV Weekly – Aphrodite’s Latest Baby Bump*; *A: The Magazine of Asclepius – Ten Simple Tips to Get the Most out of Your Leeching!*

‘It’s a reception area,’ Leo muttered. ‘I *hate* reception areas.’

Here and there, piles of dust and scattered bones lay on the floor, which did not say encouraging things about the average wait time.

‘Check it out.’ Jason pointed. ‘Were those signs here when we walked in? And that door?’

Leo didn’t think so. On the wall to the right of the statue, above a closed metal door, were two electronic signboards. The top one read:

THE DOCTOR IS:
INCARCERATED.

The sign below that read:

NOW SERVING NUMBER: 0000000

Jason squinted. ‘I can’t read it that far away. *The doctor is ...*’

‘Incarcerated,’ Leo said. ‘Apollo warned me that Asclepius was being held under guard. Zeus didn’t want him sharing his medical secrets or something.’

‘Twenty bucks and a box of Froot Loops that statue is the guardian,’ Piper said.

‘I’m not taking that bet.’ Leo glanced at the nearest pile of waiting-room dust. ‘Well ... I guess we take a number.’

The giant statue had other ideas.

When they got within five feet, she turned her head and looked at them. Her expression remained frozen. Her mouth didn’t move. But a voice issued from somewhere above, echoing through the room.

‘Do you have an appointment?’

Piper didn’t miss a beat. ‘Hello, Hygeia! Apollo sent us. We need to see Asclepius.’

The alabaster statue stepped off her dais. She might have been mechanical, but Leo couldn’t hear any moving parts. To be certain, he’d actually have to touch her, and he didn’t want to get that close.

‘I see.’ The statue kept smiling, though she didn’t sound pleased. ‘May I make a copy of your insurance cards?’

‘Ah, well ...’ Piper faltered. ‘We don’t have them on us, but –’

‘*No insurance cards?*’ The statue shook her head. An exasperated sigh echoed through the chamber. ‘I suppose you haven’t prepared for your visit, either. Have you washed your hands thoroughly?’

‘Uh ... yes?’ Piper said.

Leo looked at his hands, which, as usual, were streaked with grease and grime. He hid them behind his back.

‘Are you wearing clean underwear?’ the statue asked.

‘Hey, lady,’ Leo said, ‘that’s getting personal.’

‘You should always wear clean underwear to the doctor’s office,’ chided Hygeia. ‘I’m afraid you are a health hazard. You will have to be sanitized before we can proceed.’

The golden snake uncurled and dropped from her arm. It reared its head and hissed, flashing sabre-like fangs.

‘Uh, you know,’ Jason said, ‘getting sanitized by large snakes isn’t covered by our medical plan. Darn it.’

‘Oh, that doesn’t matter,’ Hygeia assured him. ‘Sanitizing is a community service. It’s complimentary!’

The snake lunged.

Leo had had a lot of practice dodging mechanical monsters, which was good, because the golden serpent was fast. Leo leaped to one side and the snake missed his head by an inch. He rolled and came up, hands blazing. As the snake attacked, Leo blasted it in the eyes, causing it to veer left and smash into the bench.

Piper and Jason went to work on Hygeia. They slashed through the statue’s knees, felling her like an alabaster Christmas tree. Her head hit a bench. Her chalice splashed steaming acid all over the floor. Jason and Piper moved in for the kill, but, before they could strike, Hygeia’s legs popped back on like they were magnetic. The goddess rose, still smiling.

‘Unacceptable,’ she said. ‘The doctor will not see you until you are properly sanitized.’

She slobbered her cup towards Piper, who jumped out of the way as more acid splashed across the nearest benches, dissolving the stone in a hissing cloud of steam.

The snake, meanwhile, recovered its senses. Its melted metal eyes somehow repaired themselves. Its face popped back into shape like a dent-resistant car hood.

It struck at Leo, who ducked and tried to grapple its neck, but it was like trying to grab sandpaper going sixty miles an hour. The serpent shot past, its rough metal skin leaving Leo's hands scraped and bleeding.

The momentary contact did give Leo some insight, however. The snake *was* a machine. He sensed its inner workings and, if the statue of Hygeia operated on a similar schematic, Leo might have a chance ...

Across the room, Jason soared into the air and lopped the goddess's head off. Sadly, the head flew right back into place.

'Unacceptable,' Hygeia said calmly. 'Decapitation is not a healthy lifestyle choice.'

'Jason, get over here!' Leo yelled. 'Piper, buy us some time!'

Piper glanced over, like *Easier said than done*.

'Hygeia!' she yelled. 'I have insurance!'

That got the statue's attention. Even the golden snake turned towards her, as if insurance was some sort of tasty rodent.

'Insurance?' the statue said eagerly. 'Who is your provider?'

'Um ... Blue Lightning,' Piper said. 'I have the card right here. Just a second.'

She made a big show of patting down her pockets. The snake slithered over to watch.

Jason ran to Leo's side, gasping. 'What's the plan?'

'We can't destroy these things,' Leo said. 'They're designed for self-healing. They're immune to pretty much every kind of damage.'

'Great,' Jason said. 'So ... ?'

'You remember Chiron's old gaming system?' Leo asked.

Jason's eyes widened. 'Leo ... this isn't Mario Party Six.'

'Same principle, though.'

'Idiot mode?'

Leo grinned. 'I'll need you and Piper to run interference. I'll reprogram the snake, then Big Bertha.'

'Hygeia.'

'Whatever. Ready?'

'No.'

Leo and Jason ran for the snake.

Hygeia was assailing Piper with health-care questions. 'Is Blue Lightning an HMO? What is your deductible? Who is your primary care deity?'

As Piper ad-libbed answers, Leo jumped on the serpent's back. This time he knew what he was looking for, and for a moment the serpent didn't even seem to notice him. Leo prised open a service panel near the snake's head. He held on with his legs, trying to ignore the pain and sticky blood on his hands as he redid the serpent's wiring.

Jason stood by, ready to attack, but the snake seemed transfixed by Piper's problems with Blue Lightning's coverage.

'Then the advice nurse said I had to call a service centre,' Piper reported. 'And the medications weren't covered by my plan! And —'

The snake lurched as Leo connected the last two wires. Leo jumped off and the golden serpent began shaking uncontrollably.

Hygeia whirled to face them. 'What have you done? My snake requires medical assistance!'

'Does it have insurance?' Piper asked.

'WHAT?' The statue turned back to her, and Leo jumped. Jason summoned a gust of wind, which boosted Leo onto the statue's shoulders like a little kid at a parade. He popped open the back of the statue's head as she staggered around, sloshing acid.

'Get off!' she yelled. 'This is not hygienic!'

'Hey!' Jason yelled, flying circles around her. 'I have a question about my deductibles!'

'*What?*' the statue cried.

'Hygeia!' Piper shouted. 'I need an invoice submitted to Medicare!'

'No, please!'

Leo found the statue's regulator chip. He clicked a few dials and pulled some wires, trying to pretend that Hygeia was just one large, dangerous Nintendo

game system.

He reconnected her circuits and Hygeia began to spin, hollering and flailing her arms. Leo jumped away, barely avoiding an acid bath.

He and his friends backed up while Hygeia and her snake underwent a violent religious experience.

‘What did you do?’ Piper demanded.

‘Idiot mode,’ Leo said.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Back at camp,’ Jason explained, ‘Chiron had this ancient gaming system in the rec room. Leo and I used to play it sometimes. You’d compete against, like, computer-controlled opponents, coms –’

‘– and they had three difficulty options,’ Leo said. ‘*Easy, medium and hard.*’

‘I’ve played video games before,’ Piper said. ‘So what did you do?’

‘Well ... I got bored with those settings.’ Leo shrugged. ‘So I invented a fourth difficulty level: *idiot mode*. It makes the coms so stupid it’s funny. They always choose exactly the wrong thing to do.’

Piper stared at the statue and snake, both of which were writhing and starting to smoke. ‘Are you sure you set them to *idiot mode*?’

‘We’ll know in a minute.’

‘What if you set them to *extreme* difficulty?’

‘Then we’ll know that, too.’

The snake stopped shuddering. It coiled up and looked around as if bewildered.

Hygeia froze. A puff of smoke drifted from her right ear. She looked down at Leo. ‘You must die! Hello! You must die!’

She raised her cup and poured acid over her face. Then she turned and marched face-first into the nearest wall. The snake reared up and slammed its head repeatedly into the floor.

‘Okay,’ Jason said. ‘I think we have achieved *idiot mode*.’

‘Hello! Die!’ Hygeia backed away from the wall and face-slammed it again.

‘Let’s go.’ Leo ran for the metal door next to the dais. He grabbed the handle. It was still locked, but Leo sensed the mechanisms inside – wires running up the frame, connected to ...

He stared at the two blinking signs above the door.

‘Jason,’ he said, ‘give me a boost.’

Another gust of wind levitated him upward. Leo went to work with his pliers, reprogramming the signs until the top one flashed:

THE DOCTOR IS:
IN DA HOUSE.

The bottom sign changed to read:

NOW SERVING:
ALL DA LADIES LUV LEO!

The metal door swung open, and Leo settled to the floor.

‘See, the wait wasn’t so bad!’ Leo grinned at his friends. ‘The doctor will see us now.’



XXXVI

Leo

AT THE END OF THE HALL stood a walnut door with a bronze plaque:

ASCLEPIUS

MD, DMD, DME, DC, DVS, FAAN, OMG, EMT, TTYL, FRCP, ME, IOU, OD, OT, PHARMD,
BAMF, RN, PHD, INC., SMH

There may have been more acronyms in the list, but by that point Leo's brain had exploded.

Piper knocked. 'Dr Asclepius?'

The door flew open. The man inside had a kindly smile, crinkles around his eyes, short salt-and-pepper hair and a well-trimmed beard. He wore a white lab coat over a business suit and a stethoscope around his neck – your stereotypical doctor outfit, except for one thing: Asclepius held a polished black staff with a live green python coiled around it.

Leo wasn't happy to see another snake. The python regarded him with pale yellow eyes, and Leo had a feeling it was *not* set to *idiot mode*.

'Hello!' said Asclepius.

'Doctor.' Piper's smile was so warm it would've melted a Boread. 'We'd be so *grateful* for your help. We need the physician's cure.'

Leo wasn't even her target, but Piper's charmspeak washed over him irresistibly. He would've done anything to help her get that cure. He would've gone to medical school, got twelve doctorate degrees and bought a large green python on a stick.

Asclepius put his hand over his heart. 'Oh, my dear, I would be delighted to help.'

Piper's smile wavered. 'You would? I mean, of course you would.'

'Come in! Come in!' Asclepius ushered them into his office.

The guy was so nice that Leo figured his office would be full of torture devices, but it looked like ... well, a doctor's office: a big maple desk, bookshelves stuffed with medical books, and some of those plastic organ models Leo loved to play with as a kid. He remembered getting in trouble one time because he had turned a cross-section kidney and some skeleton legs into a kidney monster and scared the nurse.

Life was simpler back then.

Asclepius took the big comfy doctor's chair and laid his staff and serpent across his desk. 'Please, sit!'

Jason and Piper took the two chairs on the patients' side. Leo had to remain standing, which was fine with him. He didn't want to be eye-level with the snake.

'So.' Asclepius leaned back. 'I can't tell you how nice it is to actually talk with patients. The last few thousand years, the paperwork has got out of control. Rush, rush, rush. Fill in forms. Deal with red tape. Not to mention the giant alabaster guardian who kills everyone in the waiting room. It takes all the fun out of medicine!'

'Yeah,' Leo said. 'Hygeia is kind of a downer.'

Asclepius grinned. 'My *real* daughter Hygeia isn't like that, I assure you. She's quite nice. At any rate, you did well reprogramming the statue. You have a surgeon's hands.'

Jason shuddered. 'Leo with a scalpel? Don't encourage him.'

The doctor god chuckled. 'Now, what seems to be the trouble?' He sat forward and peered at Jason. 'Hmm ... Imperial gold sword wound, but that's healed nicely. No cancer, no heart problems. Watch that mole on your left foot, but I'm sure it's benign.'

Jason blanched. 'How did you -'

'Oh, of course!' Asclepius said. 'You're a bit short-sighted! Simple fix.'

He opened his drawer, whipped out a prescription pad and an eyeglasses case. He scribbled something on the pad, then handed the glasses and the scrip to Jason. 'Keep the prescription for future reference, but these lenses should work. Try them on.'

'Wait,' Leo said. 'Jason is short-sighted?'

Jason opened the case. 'I – I *have* had a little trouble seeing stuff from a distance lately,' he admitted. 'I thought I was just tired.' He tried on the glasses, which had thin frames of Imperial gold. 'Wow. Yeah. That's better.'

Piper smiled. 'You look very distinguished.'

'I don't know, man,' Leo said. 'I'd go for contacts – glowing orange ones with cat's-eye pupils. Those would be cool.'

'Glasses are fine,' Jason decided. 'Thanks, uh, Dr Asclepius, but that's not why we came.'

'No?' Asclepius steepled his fingers. 'Well, let's see then ...' He turned to Piper. 'You seem fine, my dear. Broken arm when you were six. Fell off a horse?'

Piper's jaw dropped. 'How could you possibly know that?'

'Vegetarian diet,' he continued. 'No problem, just make sure you're getting enough iron and protein. Hmm ... a little weak in the left shoulder. I assume you got hit with something heavy about a month ago?'

'A sandbag in Rome,' Piper said. 'That's amazing.'

'Alternate ice and a hot pack if it bothers you,' Asclepius advised. 'And you ...' He faced Leo.

'Oh, my.' The doctor's expression turned grim. The friendly twinkle disappeared from his eyes. 'Oh, I see ...'

The doctor's expression said, *I am so, so sorry*.

Leo's heart filled with cement. If he'd harboured any last hopes of avoiding what was to come, they now sank.

'What?' Jason's new glasses flashed. 'What's wrong with Leo?'

'Hey, doc.' Leo shot him a *drop it* look. Hopefully they knew about patient confidentiality in Ancient Greece. 'We came for the physician's cure. Can you help us? I've got some Pylosian mint here and a very nice yellow daisy.' He set the ingredients on the desk, carefully avoiding the snake's mouth.

'Hold it,' Piper said. 'Is there something wrong with Leo or not?'

Asclepius cleared his throat. 'I ... never mind. Forget I said anything. Now, you want the physician's cure.'

Piper frowned. 'But –'

'Seriously, guys,' Leo said, 'I'm fine, except for the fact that Gaia's destroying the world tomorrow. Let's focus.'

They didn't look happy about it, but Asclepius forged ahead. 'So this daisy was picked by my father, Apollo?'

'Yep,' Leo said. 'He sends hugs and kisses.'

Asclepius picked up the flower and sniffed it. 'I do hope Dad comes through this war all right. Zeus can be ... quite unreasonable. Now, the only missing ingredient is the heartbeat of the chained god.'

'I have it,' Piper said. 'At least ... I can summon the *makhai*.'

'Excellent. Just a moment, dear.' He looked at his python. 'Spike, are you ready?'

Leo stifled a laugh. 'Your snake's name is Spike?'

Spike looked at him balefully. He hissed, revealing a crown of spikes around his neck like a basilisk's.

Leo's laugh crawled back down his throat to die. 'My bad,' he said. 'Of course your name is Spike.'

'He's a little grumpy,' Asclepius said. 'People are always confusing *my* staff with the staff of Hermes, which has two snakes, obviously. Over the centuries, people have called Hermes's staff the symbol of medicine, when of course it should be *my* staff. Spike feels slighted. George and Martha get all the attention. Anyway ...'

Asclepius set the daisy and poison in front of Spike. 'Pylosian mint – certainty of death. The curse of Delos – anchoring that which cannot be anchored. Now the final ingredient: the heartbeat of the chained god – chaos, violence and fear of mortality.' He turned to Piper. 'My dear, you may release the *makhai*.'

Piper closed her eyes.

Wind swirled through the room. Angry voices wailed. Leo felt a strange desire to smack Spike with a hammer. He wanted to strangle the good doctor with his bare hands.

Then Spike unhinged his jaw and swallowed the angry wind. His neck ballooned as the spirits of battle went down his throat. He snapped up the daisy and the vial of Pylosian mint for dessert.

'Won't the poison hurt him?' Jason asked.

'No, no,' Asclepius said. 'Wait and see.'

A moment later Spike belched out a new vial – a stoppered glass tube no bigger than Leo's finger. Dark red liquid glowed inside.

‘The physician’s cure.’ Asclepius picked up the vial and turned it in the light. His expression became serious, then bewildered. ‘Wait ... why did I agree to make this?’

Piper placed her hand palm up on the desk. ‘Because we need it to save the world. It’s very important. You’re the only one who can help us.’

Her charmspeak was so potent even Spike the snake relaxed. He curled around his staff and went to sleep. Asclepius’s expression softened, like he was easing himself into a hot bath.

‘Of course,’ the god said. ‘I forgot. But you must be careful. Hades hates it when I raise people from the dead. The last time I gave someone this potion, the Lord of the Underworld complained to Zeus, and I was killed by a lightning bolt. BOOM!’

Leo flinched. ‘You look pretty good for a dead guy.’

‘Oh, I got better. That was part of the compromise. You see, when Zeus killed me, my father Apollo got very upset. He couldn’t take out his anger on Zeus directly; the king of the gods was much too powerful. So Apollo took revenge on the makers of lightning bolts instead. He killed some of the Elder Cyclopes. For that, Zeus punished Apollo ... quite severely. Finally, to make peace, Zeus agreed to make me a god of medicine, with the understanding that I wouldn’t bring anyone else back to life.’ Asclepius’s eyes filled with uncertainty. ‘And yet here I am ... giving you the cure.’

‘Because you realize how important this is,’ Piper said, ‘you’re willing to make an exception.’

‘Yes ...’ Reluctantly, Asclepius handed Piper the vial. ‘At any rate, the potion must be administered as soon as possible after death. It can be injected or poured into the mouth. And there is only enough for one person. Do you understand me?’ He looked directly at Leo.

‘We understand,’ Piper promised. ‘Are you sure you don’t want to come with us, Asclepius? Your guardian is out of commission. You’d be really helpful aboard the *Argo II*.’

Asclepius smiled wistfully. ‘The *Argo* ... back when I was a demigod, I sailed on the original ship, you know. Ah, to be a carefree adventurer again!’

‘Yeah ...’ Jason muttered. ‘Carefree.’

‘But, alas, I cannot. Zeus will already be quite angry with me for helping you. Besides, the guardian will reprogram itself soon. You should leave.’ Asclepius rose. ‘Best wishes, demigods. And, if you see my father again, please ... give him my regrets.’

Leo wasn’t sure what that meant, but they took their leave.

As they passed through the waiting room, the statue of Hygeia was sitting on a bench, pouring acid on her face and singing ‘Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star’, while her golden snake gnawed at her foot. The peaceful scene was almost enough to lift Leo’s spirits.

Back on the *Argo II*, they gathered in the mess hall and filled in the rest of the crew.

‘I don’t like it,’ Jason said. ‘The way Asclepius looked at Leo –’

‘Aw, he just sensed my heartsickness.’ Leo tried for a smile. ‘You know, I’m dying to see Calypso.’

‘That is so sweet,’ Piper said. ‘But I’m not sure that’s it.’

Percy frowned at the glowing red vial that sat in the middle of the table. ‘Any of us might die, right? So we just need to keep the potion handy.’

‘Assuming only *one* of us *dies*,’ Jason pointed out. ‘There’s only one dose.’

Hazel and Frank stared at Leo.

He gave them a look, like *Knock it off*.

The others didn’t see the full picture. *To storm or fire the world must fall* – Jason or Leo. In Olympia, Nike had warned that one of the four demigods present would die: Percy, Hazel, Frank or Leo. Only one name overlapped those two lists: Leo. And, if Leo’s plan was going to work, he couldn’t have anybody else close by when he pulled the trigger.

His friends would never accept his decision. They would argue. They would try to save him. They would insist on finding another way.

But this time, Leo was convinced, there *was* no other way. Like Annabeth always told them, fighting against a prophecy never worked. It just created more trouble. He had to make sure this war ended, once and for all.

‘We have to keep our options open,’ Piper suggested. ‘We need, like, a designated medic to carry the potion – somebody who can react quickly and heal whoever gets killed.’

‘Good idea, Beauty Queen,’ Leo lied. ‘I nominate you.’

Piper blinked. ‘But ... Annabeth is wiser. Hazel can move faster on Arion. Frank can turn into animals –’

‘But you’ve got heart.’ Annabeth squeezed her friend’s hand. ‘Leo’s right. When the time comes, you’ll know what to do.’

‘Yeah,’ Jason agreed. ‘I have a feeling you’re the best choice, Pipes. You’re going to be there with us at the end, whatever happens, storm or fire.’

Leo picked up the vial. ‘Is everyone in agreement?’

No one objected.

Leo locked eyes with Hazel. *You know what needs to happen.*

He pulled a chamois cloth from his tool belt and made a big show of wrapping up the physician’s cure. Then he presented the package to Piper.

‘Okay, then,’ he said. ‘Athens tomorrow morning, gang. Be ready to fight some giants.’

‘Yeah ...’ Frank murmured. ‘I know *I’ll* sleep well.’

After dinner broke up, Jason and Piper tried to waylay Leo. They wanted to talk about what had happened with Asclepius, but Leo evaded them.

‘I’ve got to work on the engine,’ he said, which was true.

Once in the engine room, with only Buford the Wonder Table for company, Leo took a deep breath. He reached into his tool belt and pulled out the actual vial of physician’s cure – not the trick-of-the-Mist version he’d handed to Piper.

Buford blew steam at him.

‘Hey, man, I had to,’ Leo said.

Buford activated his holographic Hedge. ‘PUT SOME CLOTHES ON!’

‘Look, it’s got to be this way. Otherwise we’ll *all* die.’

Buford made a plaintive squeal, then clattered into the corner in a sulk.

Leo stared at the engine. He’d spent so much time putting it together. He’d sacrificed months of sweat and pain and loneliness.

Now the *Argo II* was approaching the end of its voyage. Leo’s whole life – his childhood with Tía Callida; his mother’s death in that warehouse fire; his years as a foster kid; his months at Camp Half-Blood with Jason and Piper – all of it would culminate tomorrow morning in one final battle.

He opened the access panel.

Festus’s voice creaked over the intercom.

‘Yeah, buddy,’ Leo agreed. ‘It’s time.’

More creaking.

‘I know,’ Leo said. ‘Together till the end?’

Festus squeaked affirmatively.

Leo checked the ancient bronze astrolabe, which was now fitted with the crystal from Ogygia. Leo could only hope it would work.

‘I will get back to you, Calypso,’ he muttered. ‘I promised on the River Styx.’

He flipped a switch and brought the navigation device online. He set the timer for twenty-four hours.

Finally he opened the engine’s ventilator line and pushed inside the vial of physician’s cure. It disappeared into the veins of the ship with a decisive *thunk*.

‘Too late to turn back now,’ Leo said.

He curled on the floor and closed his eyes, determined to enjoy the familiar hum of the engine for one last night.



XXXVII

Reyna

‘TURN BACK!’

Reyna wasn’t keen to give orders to Pegasus, the Lord of Flying Horses, but she was even *less* keen to get shot out of the sky.

As they approached Camp Half-Blood in the predawn hours of 1 August, she spotted six Roman onagers. Even in the dark, their Imperial gold plating glinted. Their massive throwing arms bent back like ship masts listing in a storm. Crews of artillerists scurried around the machines, loading the slings, checking the torsion of the ropes.

‘What are those?’ Nico called.

He flew about twenty feet to her left on the dark pegasus Blackjack.

‘Siege weapons,’ Reyna said. ‘If we get any closer, they can shoot us out of the sky.’

‘From this high up?’

On her right, Coach Hedge shouted from the back of his steed, Guido, ‘Those are onagers, kid! Those things can kick higher than Bruce Lee!’

‘Lord Pegasus,’ Reyna said, resting her hand on the stallion’s neck, ‘we need a safe place to land.’

Pegasus seemed to understand. He wheeled to the left. The other flying horses followed – Blackjack, Guido and six others who were towing the Athena Parthenos beneath them on cables.

As they skirted the western edge of the camp, Reyna took in the scene. The legion lined the base of the eastern hills, ready for a dawn attack. The onagers were arrayed behind them in a loose semicircle at three-hundred-yard intervals. Judging from the size of the weapons, Reyna calculated that Octavian had enough firepower to destroy every living thing in the valley.

But that was only part of the threat. Encamped along the legion's flanks were hundreds of *auxilia* forces. Reyna couldn't see well in the dark, but she spotted at least one tribe of wild centaurs and an army of *cynocephali*, the dog-headed men who'd made an uneasy truce with the legion centuries ago. The Romans were badly outnumbered, surrounded by a sea of unreliable allies.

'There.' Nico pointed towards Long Island Sound, where the lights of a large yacht gleamed a quarter of a mile offshore. 'We could land on the deck of that ship. The Greeks control the sea.'

Reyna wasn't sure the Greeks would be any friendlier than the Romans, but Pegasus seemed to like the idea. He banked towards the dark waters of the Sound.

The ship was a white pleasure craft a hundred feet long, with sleek lines and dark tinted portals. Painted on the bow in red letters was the name *MI AMOR*. On the forward deck was a helipad big enough for the Athena Parthenos.

Reyna saw no crew. She guessed the ship was a regular mortal vessel anchored for the night, but if she was wrong and the ship was a trap ...

'It's our best shot,' Nico said. 'The horses are tired. We need to set down.'

She nodded reluctantly. 'Let's do it.'

Pegasus landed on the forward deck with Guido and Blackjack. The six other horses gently set the Athena Parthenos on the helipad and then settled around it. With their cables and harnesses, they looked like carousel animals.

Reyna dismounted. As she had two days ago, when she first met Pegasus, she knelt before the horse.

'Thank you, great one.'

Pegasus spread his wings and inclined his head.

Even now, after flying halfway up the East Coast together, Reyna could scarcely believe the immortal horse had allowed her to ride.

Reyna had always pictured him as solid white with dove-like wings, but Pegasus's coat was rich brown, mottled with red and gold around the muzzle – which Hedge claimed were the marks where the stallion had emerged from the blood and ichor of his beheaded mother, *Medusa*. Pegasus's wings were the colours of an eagle's – gold, white, brown and rust – which made him look much more handsome and regal than plain white. He was the colour of *all* horses, representing all his offspring.

Lord Pegasus nickered.

Hedge trotted over to translate. 'Pegasus says he should leave before the shooting starts. His life force connects *all* pegasi, see, so if he gets injured *all* winged horses feel his pain. That's why he doesn't get out much. *He's* immortal, but his offspring aren't. He doesn't want them to suffer on his account. He's asked the other horses to stay with us, to help us complete our mission.'

'I understand,' Reyna said. 'Thank you.'

Pegasus whinnied.

Hedge's eyes widened. He choked back a sob, then fished a handkerchief out of his backpack and dabbed his eyes.

'Coach?' Nico frowned with concern. 'What did Pegasus say?'

'He – he says he didn't come to us in person because of my message.' Hedge turned to Reyna. 'He did it because of *you*. He experiences the feelings of all winged horses. He followed your friendship with Scipio. Pegasus says he's never been more touched by a demigod's compassion for a winged horse. He gives you the title Horse Friend. This is a great honour.'

Reyna's eyes stung. She bowed her head. 'Thank you, lord.'

Pegasus pawed the deck. The other winged horses whinnied in salute. Then their sire launched himself upward and spiralled into the night.

Hedge stared at the clouds in amazement. 'Pegasus hasn't shown himself in hundreds of years.' He patted Reyna on the back. 'You did good, Roman.'

Reyna didn't feel like she deserved credit for putting Scipio through so much suffering, but she forced down her feelings of guilt.

'Nico, we should check the ship,' she said. 'If there's anyone aboard –'

'Way ahead of you.' He stroked Blackjack's muzzle. 'I sense two mortals asleep in the main cabin. Nobody else. I'm no child of Hypnos, but I've sent some deep dreams their way. Should be enough to keep them snoozing until well after sunrise.'

Reyna tried not to stare at him. In the last few days he'd become so much stronger. Hedge's nature magic had brought him back from the brink. She'd seen Nico do some impressive things, but manipulating dreams ... had he always been able to do that?

Coach Hedge rubbed his hands eagerly. 'So when can we go ashore? My wife is waiting!'

Reyna scanned the horizon. A Greek trireme patrolled just offshore, but it didn't seem to have noticed their arrival. No alarms sounded. No signs of movement along the beach.

She caught a glimpse of silver wake in the moonlight, half a mile to the west. A black motorboat was speeding towards them with no running lights. Reyna hoped it was a mortal vessel. Then it got closer, and Reyna's hand tightened on the hilt of her sword. Glinting on the boat's prow was a laurel wreath design with the letters SPQR.

'The legion has sent a welcoming committee.'

Nico followed her gaze. 'I thought the Romans didn't have a navy.'

'We didn't,' she said. 'Apparently Octavian has been busier than I realized.'

'So we attack!' Hedge said. 'Cause nobody's standing in my way when I'm this close.'

Reyna counted three people in the speedboat. The two in the back wore helmets, but Reyna recognized the driver's wedge-shaped face and stocky shoulders: Michael Kahale.

'We'll try to parlay,' Reyna decided. 'That's one of Octavian's right-hand men, but he's a good legionnaire. I may be able to reason with him.'

The wind swept Nico's dark hair across his face. 'But if you're wrong ...'

The black boat slowed and pulled alongside. Michael called up: 'Reyna! I've got orders to arrest you and confiscate that statue. I'm coming aboard with two other centurions. I'd prefer to do this without bloodshed.'

Reyna tried to control her trembling legs. 'Come aboard, Michael!'

She turned to Nico and Coach Hedge. 'If I'm wrong, be ready. Michael Kahale won't be easy to fight.'

Michael wasn't dressed for combat. He wore only his purple camp shirt, jeans and running shoes. He carried no visible weapon, but that didn't make Reyna feel any better. His arms were as thick as bridge cables, his expression as welcoming as a brick wall. The dove tattoo on his forearm looked more like a bird of prey.

His eyes glittered darkly as he took in the scene – the Athena Parthenos harnessed to its team of pegasi, Nico with his Stygian sword drawn, Coach Hedge with his baseball bat.

Michael's backup centurions were Leila from the Fourth Cohort and Dakota from the Fifth. Strange choices ... Leila, daughter of [Ceres](#), wasn't known for her aggressiveness. She was usually quite levelheaded. And Dakota ... Reyna couldn't believe the son of Bacchus, the most good-natured of officers, would side with Octavian.

'Reyna Ramírez-Arellano,' Michael said, like he was reading a scroll, 'former praetor –'

'I *am* praetor,' Reyna corrected. 'Unless I have been removed by a vote of the full senate. Is that the case?'

Michael sighed heavily. His heart didn't seem to be in his task. 'I have orders to arrest you and hold you for trial.'

'On whose authority?'

'You know whose –'

'On what charges?'

'Listen, Reyna –' Michael rubbed his palm across his forehead, like it might wipe away his headache – 'I don't like this any more than you do. But I have my orders.'

'Illegal orders.'

'It's too late for argument. Octavian has assumed emergency powers. The legion is behind him.'

'Is that true?' She looked pointedly at Dakota and Leila.

Leila wouldn't meet her eyes. Dakota winked like he was trying to convey a message, but it was hard to tell with him. He might've been twitching simply from too much sugary Kool-Aid.

'We're at war,' Michael said. 'We have to pull together. Dakota and Leila have not been the most enthusiastic supporters. Octavian gave them this one last chance to prove themselves. If they help me bring you in – preferably alive, but dead if necessary – then they keep their rank and prove their loyalty.'

'To Octavian,' Reyna noted. 'Not the legion.'

Michael spread his hands, which were only slightly smaller than baseball mitts. 'You can't blame the officers for falling into line. Octavian has a plan to win, and it's a good plan. At dawn those onagers will destroy the Greek camp without a single loss of Roman life. The gods should be healed.'

Nico stepped in. ‘You’d wipe out half the demigods in the world, half the gods’ legacy, to *heal* them? You’ll tear apart Olympus before Gaia even wakes up. And she *is* waking, Centurion.’

Michael scowled. ‘Ambassador of Pluto, son of Hades ... whatever you call yourself, you’ve been named an enemy spy. I’ve got orders to take you in for execution.’

‘You can try,’ Nico said coldly.

The face-off was so absurd it should have been humorous. Nico was several years younger, half a foot shorter and fifty pounds lighter. But Michael didn’t make a move. The veins in his neck pulsed.

Dakota coughed. ‘Um, Reyna ... just come with us peacefully. Please. We can work this out.’ He was definitely winking at her.

‘All right, enough talk.’ Coach Hedge sized up Michael Kahale. ‘Let me take this joker down. I’ve handled bigger.’

Michael smirked at that. ‘I’m sure you’re a brave faun, but –’

‘Satyr!’

Coach Hedge leaped at the centurion. He brought his baseball bat down with full force, but Michael simply caught it and yanked it away from the coach. Michael broke the bat over his knee. Then he pushed the coach back, though Reyna could tell Michael wasn’t trying to hurt him.

‘That’s it!’ Hedge growled. ‘Now I’m really mad!’

‘Coach,’ Reyna warned, ‘Michael is *very* strong. You’d need to be an ogre or a –’

From somewhere off the port side, down at the waterline, a voice yelled, ‘Kahale! What’s taking so long?’

Michael flinched. ‘Octavian?’

‘Of course it’s me!’ yelled the voice from the dark. ‘I got tired of waiting for you to carry out my orders! I’m coming aboard. Everyone on both sides, drop your weapons!’

Michael frowned. ‘Uh ... sir? Everyone? Even us?’

‘You don’t solve every problem with a sword or a fist, you big dolt! I can handle these *Graecus* scum!’

Michael looked unsure about that, but he motioned to Leila and Dakota, who set their swords on the deck.

Reyna glanced at Nico. Obviously, something was wrong. She couldn't think of any reason Octavian would be here, putting himself in harm's way. He definitely wouldn't order his own officers to get rid of their weapons. But Reyna's instincts told her to play along. She dropped her blade. Nico did the same.

'Everyone is disarmed, sir,' Michael called.

'Good!' yelled Octavian.

A dark silhouette appeared at the top of the ladder, but he was much too big to be Octavian. A smaller shape with wings fluttered up behind him – a harpy? By the time Reyna realized what was happening, the Cyclops had crossed the deck in two large strides. He bopped Michael Kahale on the head. The centurion fell like a sack of rocks. Dakota and Leila backed away in alarm.

The harpy fluttered to the deckhouse roof. In the moonlight, her feathers were the colour of dried blood.

'Strong,' said Ella, preening her wings. 'Ella's boyfriend is stronger than Romans.'

'Friends!' boomed Tyson the Cyclops. He scooped up Reyna in one arm and Hedge and Nico in the other. 'We have come to save you. Hooray for us!'



XXXVIII

Reyna

REYNA HAD NEVER BEEN SO GLAD to see a Cyclops, at least until Tyson set them down and wheeled on Leila and Dakota. ‘Bad Romans!’

‘Tyson, wait!’ Reyna said. ‘Don’t hurt them!’

Tyson frowned. He was small for a Cyclops, still a child, really – a little over six feet tall, his messy brown hair crusted with salt water, his big single eye the colour of maple syrup. He wore only a swimsuit and a flannel pyjama shirt, like he couldn’t decide whether to go swimming or go to sleep. He exuded a strong smell of peanut butter.

‘They are not bad?’ he asked.

‘No,’ Reyna said. ‘They were following bad orders. I think they’re sorry for that. *Aren’t* you, Dakota?’

Dakota put his arms up so fast he looked like Superman about to take off. ‘Reyna, I was trying to clue you in! Leila and I planned to switch sides and help you take down Michael.’

‘That’s right!’ Leila almost fell backwards over the railing. ‘But, before we could, the Cyclops did it for us!’

Coach Hedge snorted. ‘A likely story!’

Tyson sneezed. ‘Sorry. Goat fur. Itchy nose. Do we trust Romans?’

‘I do,’ Reyna said. ‘Dakota, Leila, you understand what our mission is?’

Leila nodded. ‘You want to return that statue to the Greeks as a peace offering. Let us help.’

‘Yeah.’ Dakota nodded vigorously. ‘The legion’s not nearly as united as Michael claimed. We don’t trust all the *auxilia* forces Octavian has gathered.’

Nico laughed bitterly. ‘A little late for doubts. You’re surrounded. As soon as Camp Half-Blood is destroyed, those *allies* will turn on you.’

‘So what do we do?’ asked Dakota. ‘We have an hour at most until sunrise.’

‘Five fifty-two a.m.,’ said Ella, still perched on the boathouse. ‘Sunrise, Eastern seaboard, August first. *Timetables for Naval Meteorology*. One hour and twelve minutes is more than one hour.’

Dakota’s eye ticked. ‘I stand corrected.’

Coach Hedge looked at Tyson. ‘Can we get into Camp Half-Blood safely? Is Mellie all right?’

Tyson scratched his chin thoughtfully. ‘She is very round.’

‘But she’s okay?’ Hedge persisted. ‘She hasn’t given birth yet?’

‘“Delivery occurs at the end of the third trimester”,’ Ella advised. ‘Page forty-three, *The New Mother’s Guide to –*’

‘I gotta get over there!’ Hedge looked like he was ready to jump overboard and swim.

Reyna put her hand on his shoulder. ‘Coach, we’ll get you to your wife, but let’s do it right. Tyson, how did you and Ella get out to this ship?’

‘Rainbow!’

‘You ... took a rainbow?’

‘He is my fish pony friend.’

‘A hippocampus,’ Nico advised.

‘I see.’ Reyna thought for a moment. ‘Could you and Ella escort the coach back to Camp Half-Blood safely?’

‘Yes!’ Tyson said. ‘We can do that!’

‘Good. Coach, go see your wife. Tell the campers I plan to fly the Athena Parthenos to Half-Blood Hill at sunrise. It’s a gift from Rome to Greece, to heal our divisions. If they could refrain from shooting me out of the sky, I’d be grateful.’

‘You got it,’ Hedge said. ‘But what about the Roman legion?’

‘That’s a problem,’ Leila said gravely. ‘Those onagers *will* blast you out of the sky.’

‘We’ll need a distraction,’ Reyna said. ‘Something to delay the attack on Camp Half-Blood and preferably put those weapons out of commission. Dakota, Leila, will your cohorts follow you?’

‘I – I think so, yes,’ Dakota said. ‘But if we ask them to commit treason –’

‘It isn’t treason,’ Leila said. ‘Not if we’re acting on direct orders from our praetor. And Reyna is still praetor.’

Reyna turned to Nico. ‘I need you to go with Dakota and Leila. While they’re stirring trouble in the ranks, trying to delay the attack, you have to find a way to sabotage those onagers.’

Nico’s smile made Reyna glad he was on *her* side. ‘My pleasure. We’ll buy you time to deliver the Athena Parthenos.’

‘Um ...’ Dakota shuffled his feet. ‘Even if you get the statue to the hill, what’s to stop Octavian from destroying it once it’s in place? He’s got lots of firepower, even without the onagers.’

Reyna peered up at the ivory face of Athena, veiled beneath camouflage netting. ‘Once the statue is returned to the Greeks ... I think it will be difficult to destroy. It has great magic. It has simply chosen not to use it yet.’

Leila bent down slowly and retrieved her sword, keeping her eyes on the Athena Parthenos. ‘I’ll take your word for it. What do we do with Michael?’

Reyna regarded the snoring mountain of Hawaiian demigod. ‘Put him in your boat. Don’t hurt him or bind him. I have a feeling Michael’s heart is in the right place. He just had the bad luck of being sponsored by the wrong person.’

Nico sheathed his black sword. ‘You sure about this, Reyna? I don’t like leaving you alone.’

Blackjack whinnied and licked the side of Nico’s face.

‘Gah! Okay, I’m sorry.’ Nico wiped off the horse spit. ‘Reyna’s not alone. She’s got a herd of excellent pegasi.’

Reyna couldn’t help but smile. ‘I’ll be fine. With luck, we’ll all meet again soon enough. We’ll fight side by side against Gaia’s forces. Be careful, and *Ave Romae!*’

Dakota and Leila repeated the cheer.

Tyson furrowed his single eyebrow. ‘Who is Ave?’

‘It means *Go, Romans.*’ Reyna clapped the Cyclops’s forearm. ‘But, by all means, *Go, Greeks*, too.’ The words sounded strange in her mouth.

She faced Nico. She wanted to hug him but wasn’t sure the gesture would be welcome. She extended her hand. ‘It’s been an honour questing with you, son of Hades.’

Nico's grip was strong. 'You're the most courageous demigod I've ever met, Reyna. I –' He faltered, perhaps realizing he had a large audience. 'I won't let you down. See you on Half-Blood Hill.'

The sky began to lighten in the east as the group dispersed. Soon Reyna stood on the deck of the *Mi Amor* ... alone except for eight pegasi and a forty-foot-tall Athena.

She tried to steady her nerves. Until Nico, Dakota and Leila had time to disrupt the legion's attack, she couldn't do anything, but she hated standing around and waiting.

Just over that dark line of hills, her comrades in the Twelfth Legion were preparing for a needless attack. If Reyna had stayed with them, she could've guided them better. She could've kept Octavian in check. Perhaps the giant Orion was correct: she'd failed in her duties.

She remembered the ghosts on the balcony in San Juan – pointing at her, whispering accusations: *Murderer. Traitor.* She remembered the feel of the golden sabre in her hand as she slashed down her father's spectre – his face full of outrage and betrayal.

You are a Ramírez-Arellano! her father used to rant. *Never abandon your post. Never let anyone in. Above all, never betray your own!*

By helping the Greeks, Reyna had done all of those things. A Roman was supposed to destroy her enemies. Instead, Reyna had joined forces with them. She'd left her legion in the hands of a madman.

What would her mother say? Bellona, the war goddess ...

Blackjack must have sensed her agitation. He clopped over and nuzzled her.

She stroked his muzzle. 'I don't have any treats for you, boy.'

He bumped her affectionately. Nico had told her that Blackjack was Percy's usual ride, but he seemed friendly to everyone. He'd carried the son of Hades without protest. Now he was comforting a Roman.

She wrapped her arms around his powerful neck. His coat smelled just like Scipio's – a mixture of fresh-cut grass and warm bread. She let loose a sob that had been building in her chest. As praetor, she couldn't show weakness or fear to her comrades. She had to stay strong. But the horse didn't seem to mind.

He nickered gently. Reyna couldn't understand Horse, but he seemed to say, *It's all right. You've done well.*

She looked up at the fading stars.

‘Mother,’ she said, ‘I haven’t prayed to you enough. I’ve never met you. I’ve never asked for your help. But please ... this morning, give me the strength to do what is right.’

As if on cue, something flashed on the eastern horizon – a light across the Sound, approaching fast like another speedboat.

For one elated moment, Reyna thought it was a sign from Bellona.

The dark shape got closer. Reyna’s hope turned to dread. She waited too long, paralysed with disbelief, as the figure resolved into a large humanoid, running towards her across the surface of the water.

The first arrow struck Blackjack’s flank. The horse collapsed with a shriek of pain.

Reyna screamed, but, before she could move, a second arrow hit the deck between her feet. Attached to its shaft was a glowing LED read-out the size of a wristwatch, counting down from 5:00.

4:59.

4:58.



XXXIX

Reyna

‘I WOULDN’T MOVE, PRAETOR!’

Orion stood on the surface of the water, fifty feet to starboard, an arrow nocked in his bow.

Through Reyna’s haze of rage and grief, she noticed the giant’s new scars. His fight with the Hunters had left him with mottled grey and pink scar tissue on his arms and face, so he looked like a bruised peach in the process of rotting. The mechanical eye on his left side was dark. His hair had burned away, leaving only ragged patches. His nose was swollen and red from the bowstring that Nico had snapped in his face. All of this gave Reyna a twinge of dark satisfaction.

Regrettably, the giant still had his smug smile.

At Reyna’s feet, the timer on the arrow read: 4:42.

‘Explosive arrows are *very* touchy,’ said Orion. ‘Once they’re embedded, even the slightest motion can set them off. I wouldn’t want you to miss the last four minutes of your life.’

Reyna’s senses sharpened. The pegasi clopped nervously around the Athena Parthenos. Dawn began to break. The wind from the shore brought a faint scent of strawberries. Lying next to her on the deck, Blackjack wheezed and shuddered – still alive, but badly wounded.

Her heart pounded so hard she thought her eardrums might burst. She extended her strength to Blackjack, trying to keep him alive. She would *not* see him die.

She wanted to shout insults at the giant, but her first words were surprisingly calm. ‘What of my sister?’

Orion’s white teeth flashed in his ruined face. ‘I would love to tell you she is dead. I would love to see the pain on your face. Alas, as far as I know, your

sister still lives. So do Thalia Grace and her annoying Hunters. They surprised me, I'll admit. I was forced into the sea to escape them. For the past few days I have been wounded and in pain, healing slowly, building a new bow. But don't worry, Praetor. You will die first. Your precious statue will be burned in a great conflagration. After Gaia has risen, when the mortal world is ending, I will find your sister. I will tell her you died painfully. Then I will kill her.' He grinned. 'So all is well!'

4:04.

Hylla was alive. Thalia and the Hunters were still out there somewhere. But none of that would matter if Reyna's mission failed. The sun was rising on the last day of the world ...

Blackjack's breathing became more laboured.

Reyna mustered her courage. The winged horse needed her. Lord Pegasus had named her Horse Friend, and she would not let him down. She couldn't think about the entire world right now. She had to concentrate on what was right next to her.

3:54.

'So.' She glared at Orion. 'You're damaged and ugly, but not dead. I suppose that means I'll need the help of a god to kill you.'

Orion chuckled. 'Sadly, you Romans have never been very good at summoning gods to your aid. I guess they don't think much of you, eh?'

Reyna was tempted to agree. She had prayed to her mother ... and been blessed with the arrival of a homicidal giant. Not exactly a ringing endorsement. And yet ...

Reyna laughed. 'Ah, Orion.'

The giant's smile wavered. 'You have a strange sense of humour, girl. What are you laughing about?'

'Bellona *has* answered my prayer. She doesn't fight my battles for me. She doesn't guarantee me easy victory. She grants me opportunities to prove myself. She gives me strong enemies and potential allies.'

Orion's left eye sparked. 'You speak nonsense. A column of fire is about to destroy you and your precious Greek statue. No ally can help you. Your mother has abandoned you as you abandoned your legion.'

‘But she hasn’t,’ Reyna said. ‘Bellona wasn’t just a war goddess. She wasn’t like the Greek *Enyo*, who was simply an embodiment of carnage. Bellona’s Temple was where Romans greeted foreign ambassadors. Wars were declared there, but *peace* treaties were also negotiated – lasting peace, based on strength.’

3:01.

Reyna drew her knife. ‘Bellona gave me the chance to make peace with the Greeks and increase the strength of Rome. I took it. If I die, I will die defending that cause. So I say my mother *is* with me today. She will add her strength to mine. Shoot your arrow, Orion. It won’t matter. When I throw this blade and pierce your heart, you *will* die.’

Orion stood motionless on the waves. His face was a mask of concentration. His one good eye blinked amber.

‘A bluff,’ he growled. ‘I’ve killed hundreds like you: girls playing at war, pretending they are the equal to giants! I will not grant you a quick death, Praetor. I will watch you burn, the way the Hunters burned me.’

2:31.

Blackjack wheezed, kicking his legs against the deck. The sky was turning pink. A wind from the shore caught the camouflage netting on the Athena Parthenos and stripped it away, sending the silvery cloth rippling across the Sound. The Athena Parthenos gleamed in the early light, and Reyna thought how beautiful the goddess would look on the hill above the Greek camp.

It must happen, she thought, hoping the pegasi could sense her intentions. You must complete the journey without me.

She inclined her head to the Athena Parthenos. ‘My lady, it has been my honour to escort you.’

Orion scoffed. ‘Talking to enemy statues now? Futile. You have roughly two minutes of life.’

‘Oh, but I don’t abide by *your* time frame, giant,’ Reyna said. ‘A Roman does not wait for death. She seeks it out and meets it on her own terms.’

She threw her knife. It hit true – right in the middle of the giant’s chest.

Orion bellowed in agony, and Reyna thought what a pleasing last sound that was to hear.

She flung her cloak in front of her and fell on the explosive arrow, determined to shield Blackjack and the other pegasi and hopefully protect the mortals

sleeping belowdecks. She had no idea whether her body would contain the explosion, whether her cloak could smother the flames, but it was her best chance to save her friends and her mission.

She tensed, waiting to die. She felt the pressure as the arrow detonated ... but it wasn't what she expected. Against her ribs, the explosion made only the smallest *pop*, like an overinflated balloon. Her cloak became uncomfortably warm. No flames burst forth.

Why was she still alive?

Rise, said a voice in her head.

In a trance, Reyna got to her feet. Smoke curled from the edges of her cloak. She realized something was different about the purple fabric. It glittered as if woven through with filaments of Imperial gold. At her feet, a section of the deck had been reduced to a circle of charcoal, but her cloak wasn't even singed.

Accept my aegis, Reyna Ramírez-Arellano, said the voice. *For today, you have proven yourself a hero of Olympus.*

Reyna stared in amazement at the Athena Parthenos, glowing with a faint golden aura.

The *aegis* ... From Reyna's years of study, she recalled that the term *aegis* didn't apply only to Athena's shield. It also meant the goddess's cloak. According to legend, Athena sometimes cut pieces off her mantle and draped them over statues in her temples, or over her chosen heroes, to shield them.

Reyna's cloak, which she'd worn for years, had suddenly changed. It had absorbed the explosion.

She tried to say something, to thank the goddess, but her voice wouldn't work. The statue's glowing aura faded. The ringing in Reyna's ears cleared. She became aware of Orion, still roaring in pain as he staggered across the surface of the water.

'You have failed!' He clawed her knife from his chest and tossed it into the waves. 'I still live!'

He drew his bow and fired, but it seemed to happen in slow motion. Reyna swept her cloak in front of her. The arrow shattered against the cloth. She charged to the railing and leaped at the giant.

The jump should have been impossibly far, but Reyna felt a surge of power in her limbs, as if her mother, Bellona, was lending her strength – a return for all

the strength Reyna had lent others over the years.

Reyna grabbed the giant's bow and swung around on it like a gymnast, landing on the giant's back. She locked her legs around his waist, then twisted her cloak into a rope and pulled it across Orion's neck with all her might.

He instinctively dropped his bow. He clutched at the glimmering fabric, but his fingers steamed and blistered when he touched it. Sour, acrid smoke rose from his neck.

Reyna pulled tighter.

'This is for Phoebe,' she snarled in his ear. 'For Kinzie. For all those you killed. You will die at the hands of a *girl*.'

Orion thrashed and fought, but Reyna's will was unshakable. The power of Athena infused her cloak. Bellona blessed her with strength and resolve. Not one but *two* powerful goddesses aided her, yet the kill was for Reyna to complete.

Complete it she did.

The giant crumpled to his knees and sank in the water. Reyna didn't let go until he ceased to thrash and his body dissolved into sea foam. His mechanical eye disappeared beneath the waves. His bow began to sink.

Reyna let it. She had no interest in spoils of war – no desire to let any part of the giant survive. Like her father's *mania* – and all the other angry ghosts of her past – Orion could teach her nothing. He deserved to be forgotten.

Besides, dawn was breaking.

Reyna swam for the yacht.



XL

Reyna

NO TIME FOR ENJOYING HER VICTORY OVER ORION.

Blackjack's muzzle was foaming. His legs spasmed. Blood trickled from the arrow wound in his flank.

Reyna ripped through the supply bag that Phoebe had given her. She swabbed the wound with healing potion. She poured unicorn draught over the blade of her silver pocketknife.

'Please, please,' she murmured to herself.

In truth, she had no idea what she was doing, but she cleaned the wound as best she could and gripped the shaft of the arrow. If it had a barbed tip, pulling it out might cause more damage. But, if it was poisoned, she couldn't leave it in. Nor could she push it through, since it was embedded in the middle of his body. She would have to choose the lesser evil.

'This will hurt, my friend,' she told Blackjack.

He huffed, as if to say, *Tell me something I don't know.*

With her knife, she cut a slit on either side of the wound. She pulled out the arrow. Blackjack shrieked, but the arrow came out cleanly. The point wasn't barbed. It could have been poisoned, but there was no way to be sure. One problem at a time.

Reyna poured more healing potion over the wound and bandaged it. She applied pressure, counting under her breath. The oozing seemed to lessen.

She trickled unicorn draught into Blackjack's mouth.

She lost track of time. The horse's pulse became stronger and steadier. His eyes cleared of pain. His breathing eased.

By the time Reyna stood up, she was shaking with fear and exhaustion, but Blackjack was still alive.

‘You’re going to be fine,’ she promised. ‘I’ll get you help from Camp Half-Blood.’

Blackjack made a grumbling sound. Reyna could’ve sworn he tried to say *doughnuts*. She must have been going delirious.

Belatedly, she realized how much the sky had lightened. The Athena Parthenos gleamed in the sun. Guido and the other winged horses pawed the deck impatiently.

‘The battle ...’ Reyna turned towards the shore but saw no signs of combat. A Greek trireme bobbed lazily in the morning tide. The hills looked green and peaceful.

For a moment, she wondered if the Romans had decided not to attack.

Perhaps Octavian had come to his senses. Perhaps Nico and the others had managed to win over the legion.

Then an orange glow illuminated the hilltops. Multiple streaks of fire climbed skyward like burning fingers.

The onagers had shot their first volley.



XLI

Piper

PIPER WASN'T SURPRISED when the snake people arrived.

All week, she'd been thinking about her encounter with Sciron the bandit, when she'd stood on the deck of the *Argo II* after escaping a gigantic Destructo-Turtle and made the mistake of saying, 'We're safe.'

Instantly an arrow had hit the mainmast, an inch in front of her nose.

Piper learned a valuable lesson from that: never assume you're safe, and never, ever tempt the Fates by *announcing* that you think you're safe.

So when the ship docked at the harbour in Piraeus, on the outskirts of Athens, Piper resisted the urge to breathe a sigh of relief. Sure, they had finally reached their destination. Somewhere nearby – past those rows of cruise ships, past those hills crowded with buildings – they would find the Acropolis. Today, one way or another, their journey would end.

But that didn't mean she could relax. Any moment, a nasty surprise might come flying out of nowhere.

As it turned out, the surprise was three dudes with snake tails instead of legs.

Piper was on watch while her friends geared up for combat – checking their weapons and armour, loading the ballistae and catapults. She spotted the snake guys slithering along the docks, winding through crowds of mortal tourists who paid them no attention.

'Um ... Annabeth?' Piper called.

Annabeth and Percy came to her side.

'Oh, great,' Percy said. '*Dracaenae*.'

Annabeth narrowed her eyes. 'I don't think so. At least not like any *I've* seen. *Dracaenae* have two serpent trunks for legs. These guys just have one.'

‘You’re right,’ Percy said. ‘These look more human on top, too. Not all scaly and green and stuff. So do we talk or fight?’

Piper was tempted to say *fight*. She couldn’t help thinking of the story she’d told Jason – about the Cherokee hunter who had broken his taboo and turned into a snake. These three looked like they’d been eating a lot of squirrel meat.

Weirdly, the one in the lead reminded Piper of her dad when he’d grown a beard for his role in *King of Sparta*. The snake man held his head high. His face was chiselled and bronze, his eyes black as basalt, his curly dark hair glistening with oil. His upper body rippled with muscles, covered only by a Greek *chlamys* – a white wool cloak loosely wrapped and pinned at the shoulder. From the waist down, his body was one giant serpent trunk – about eight feet of green tail undulating behind him as he moved.

In one hand he carried a staff topped with a glowing green jewel. In his other, he carried a platter covered with a silver dome, like a main course for a fancy dinner.

The two guys behind him appeared to be guards. They wore bronze breastplates and elaborate helmets topped with horsehair bristles. Their spears were tipped with green stone points. Their oval shields were emblazoned with a large Greek letter K – *kappa*.

They stopped a few yards from the *Argo II*. The leader looked up and studied the demigods. His expression was intense but inscrutable. He might have been angry or worried or terribly in need of a restroom.

‘Permission to come aboard.’ His rasping voice made Piper think of a straight razor being wiped across a strop – like in her grandfather’s barbershop back in Oklahoma.

‘Who are you?’ she asked.

He fixed his dark eyes on her. ‘I am *Kekrops*, the first and eternal king of Athens. I would welcome you to my city.’ He held up the covered platter. ‘Also, I brought a Bundt cake.’

Piper glanced at her friends. ‘A trick?’

‘Probably,’ Annabeth said.

‘At least he brought dessert.’ Percy smiled down at the snake guys. ‘Welcome aboard!’

Kekrops agreed to leave his guards above deck with Buford the table, who ordered them to drop and give him twenty push-ups. The guards seemed to take this as a challenge.

Meanwhile, the king of Athens was invited to the mess hall for a ‘get to know you’ meeting.

‘Please take a seat,’ Jason offered.

Kekrops wrinkled his nose. ‘Snake people do not sit.’

‘Please remain standing,’ Leo said. He cut the cake and stuffed a piece in his mouth before Piper could warn him it might be poisoned, or inedible for mortals, or just plain bad.

‘Dang!’ He grinned. ‘Snake people know how to make Bundt cake. Kind of orangey, with a hint of honey. Needs a glass of milk.’

‘Snake people do not drink milk,’ Kekrops said. ‘We are lactose-intolerant reptiles.’

‘Me, too!’ Frank said. ‘I mean ... lactose intolerant. Not a reptile. Though I *can* be a reptile sometimes –’

‘Anyway,’ Hazel interrupted, ‘King Kekrops, what brings you here? How did you know we’d arrived?’

‘I know everything that happens in Athens,’ Kekrops said. ‘I was the city’s founder, its first king, born of the earth. I am the one who judged the dispute between Athena and Poseidon, and chose Athena to be the patron of the city.’

‘No hard feelings, though,’ Percy muttered.

Annabeth elbowed him. ‘I’ve heard of you, Kekrops. You were the first to offer sacrifices to Athena. You built her first shrine on the Acropolis.’

‘Correct.’ Kekrops sounded bitter, like he regretted his decision. ‘My people were the *original* Athenians – the *gemini*.’

‘Like your zodiac sign?’ Percy asked. ‘I’m a Leo.’

‘No, stupid,’ Leo said. ‘I’m a Leo. You’re a Percy.’

‘Will you two stop it?’ Hazel chided. ‘I think he means *gemini* like *doubled* – half man, half snake. That’s what his people are called. He’s a *geminus*, singular.’

‘Yes ...’ Kekrops leaned away from Hazel as if she somehow offended him. ‘Millennia ago, we were driven underground by the two-legged humans, but I

know the ways of the city better than any. I came to warn you. If you try to approach the Acropolis aboveground, you will be destroyed.'

Jason stopped nibbling his cake. 'You mean ... by you?'

'By Porphyrion's armies,' said the snake king. 'The Acropolis is ringed with great siege weapons – onagers.'

'More onagers?' Frank protested. 'Did they have a sale on them or something?'

'The Cyclopes,' Hazel guessed. 'They're supplying both Octavian and the giants.'

Percy grunted. 'Like we needed more proof that Octavian is on the wrong side.'

'That is not the only threat,' Kekrops warned. 'The air is filled with storm spirits and gryphons. All roads to the Acropolis are patrolled by the Earthborn.'

Frank drummed his fingers on the Bundt cake cover. 'So, what, we should just give up? We've come too far for that.'

'I offer you an alternative,' said Kekrops. 'Underground passage to the Acropolis. For the sake of Athena, for the sake of the gods, I will help you.'

The back of Piper's neck tingled. She remembered what the giantess Periboia had said in her dream: that the demigods would find friends in Athens as well as enemies. Perhaps the giantess had meant Kekrops and his snake people. But there was something in Kekrops's voice that Piper didn't like – that razor-against-strop tone, as if he were preparing to make a sharp cut.

'What's the catch?' she asked.

Kekrops turned those inscrutable dark eyes on her. 'Only a small party of demigods – no more than three – could pass undetected by the giants. Otherwise your scent would give you away. But our underground passages could lead you straight into the ruins of the Acropolis. Once there, you could disable the siege weapons by stealth and allow the rest of your crew to approach. With luck, you could take the giants by surprise. You might be able to disrupt their ceremony.'

'Ceremony?' Leo asked. 'Oh ... like, to wake Gaia.'

'Even now it has begun,' Kekrops warned. 'Can you not feel the earth trembling? We, the *gemini*, are your best chance.'

Piper heard eagerness in his voice – almost hunger.

Percy looked around the table. 'Any objections?'

‘Just a few,’ Jason said. ‘We’re on the enemy’s doorstep. We’re being asked to split up. Isn’t that how people get killed in horror movies?’

‘Also,’ Percy said, ‘Gaia *wants* us to reach the Parthenon. She wants our blood to water the stones and all that other psycho garbage. Won’t we be playing right into her hands?’

Annabeth caught Piper’s eye. She asked a silent question: *What’s your feeling?*

Piper still wasn’t used to that – the way Annabeth looked to her for advice now. Ever since Sparta, they’d learned that they could tackle problems together from two different sides. Annabeth saw the logical thing, the tactical move. Piper had gut reactions that were anything but logical. Together, they either solved the problem twice as fast, or they hopelessly confused each other.

Kekrops’s offer made sense. At least, it sounded like the least suicidal option. But Piper was certain the snake king was hiding his true intentions. She just didn’t know how to prove it ...

Then she remembered something her father had told her years ago: *You were named Piper because Grandpa Tom thought you would have a powerful voice. You would learn all the Cherokee songs, even the song of the snakes.*

A myth from a totally different culture, yet here she was, facing the king of the snake people.

She began to sing: ‘Summertime’, one of her dad’s favourites.

Kekrops stared at her in wonder. He began to sway.

At first Piper was self-conscious, singing in front of all her friends and a snake guy. Her dad had always told her she had a good voice, but she didn’t like to draw attention to herself. She didn’t even like to participate at campfire sing-alongs. Now her words filled the mess hall. Everyone listened, transfixed.

She finished the first verse. No one spoke for a count of five.

‘Pipes,’ Jason said, ‘I had no idea.’

‘That was beautiful,’ Leo agreed. ‘Maybe not ... you know, *Calypso* beautiful, but still ...’

Piper kept the snake king’s gaze. ‘What are your real intentions?’

‘To deceive you,’ he said in a trance, still swaying. ‘We hope to lead you into the tunnels and destroy you.’

‘Why?’ Piper asked.

‘The Earth Mother has promised us great rewards. If we spill your blood under the Parthenon, that will be sufficient to complete her awakening.’

‘But you serve Athena,’ Piper said. ‘You founded her city.’

Kekrops made a low hiss. ‘And in return the goddess abandoned me. Athena replaced me with a two-legged *human* king. She drove my daughters mad. They leaped to their deaths from the cliffs of the Acropolis. The original Athenians, the *gemini*, were driven underground and forgotten. Athena, the goddess of wisdom, turned her back on us, but wisdom comes from the earth as well. We are, first and last, the children of Gaia. The Earth Mother has promised us a place in the sun of the upper world.’

‘Gaia is lying,’ Piper said. ‘She intends to destroy the upper world, not *give* it to anyone.’

Kekrops bared his fangs. ‘Then we will be no worse off than we were under the treacherous gods!’

He raised his staff, but Piper launched into another verse of ‘Summertime’.

The snake king’s arms went limp. His eyes glassed over.

Piper sang a few more lines, then she risked another question: ‘The giants’ defences, the underground passage to the Acropolis – how much of what you told us is true?’

‘All of it,’ Kekrops said. ‘The Acropolis *is* heavily defended, just as I described. Any approach aboveground would be impossible.’

‘So you *could* guide us through your tunnels,’ Piper said. ‘That’s also true?’

Kekrops frowned. ‘Yes ...’

‘And if you ordered your people *not* to attack us,’ she said, ‘they would obey?’

‘Yes, but ...’ Kekrops shuddered. ‘Yes, they would obey. Three of you at most could go without attracting the attention of the giants.’

Annabeth’s eyes darkened. ‘Piper, we’d be crazy to try it. He’ll kill us at the first opportunity.’

‘Yes,’ the snake king agreed. ‘Only this girl’s music controls me. I hate it. Please, sing some more.’

Piper gave him another verse.

Leo got into the act. He picked up a couple of spoons and made them do high kicks on the tabletop until Hazel slapped his arm.

‘I should go,’ Hazel said, ‘if it’s underground.’

‘Never,’ Kekrops said. ‘A child of the Underworld? My people would find your presence revolting. No charming music would keep them from slaying you.’

Hazel swallowed. ‘Or I could stay here.’

‘Me and Percy,’ Annabeth suggested.

‘Um ...’ Percy raised his hand. ‘Just gonna throw this out here again. That’s exactly what Gaia wants – you and me, our blood watering the stones, et cetera.’

‘I know.’ Annabeth’s expression was grim. ‘But it’s the most logical choice. The oldest shrines on the Acropolis are dedicated to Poseidon and Athena. Kekrops, wouldn’t that mask our approach?’

‘Yes,’ the snake king admitted. ‘Your ... your scent would be difficult to discern. The ruins always radiate the power of those two gods.’

‘And me,’ Piper said at the end of her song. ‘You’ll need me to keep our friend here in line.’

Jason squeezed her hand. ‘I still hate the idea of splitting up.’

‘But it’s our best shot,’ Frank said. ‘The three of them sneak in and disable the onagers, cause a distraction. Then the rest of us fly in with ballistae blazing.’

‘Yes,’ Kekrops said, ‘that plan could work. If I do not kill you first.’

‘I’ve got an idea,’ Annabeth said. ‘Frank, Hazel, Leo ... let’s talk. Piper, can you keep our friend musically incapacitated?’

Piper started a different song: ‘Happy Trails’, a silly tune her dad used to sing to her whenever they left Oklahoma to return to L.A. Annabeth, Leo, Frank and Hazel left to talk strategy.

‘Well.’ Percy rose and offered his hand to Jason. ‘Until we meet again at the Acropolis, bro. I’ll be the one killing giants.’



XLII

Piper

PIPER'S DAD USED TO SAY that being in the airport didn't count as visiting a city. Piper felt the same way about sewers.

From the port to the Acropolis, she didn't see anything of Athens except dark, putrid tunnels. The snake men led them through an iron storm grate at the docks, straight into their underground lair, which smelled of rotting fish, mould and snakeskin.

The atmosphere made it hard to sing about summertime and cotton and easy living, but Piper kept it up. If she stopped for longer than a minute or two, Kekrops and his guards started hissing and looking angry.

'I don't like this place,' Annabeth murmured. 'Reminds me of when I was underneath Rome.'

Kekrops hissed with laughter. 'Our domain is much older. *Much*, much older.'

Annabeth slipped her hand into Percy's, which made Piper feel downhearted. She wished Jason were with her. Heck, she'd even settle for Leo ... though maybe she wouldn't have held his hand. Leo's hands tended to burst into flames when he was nervous.

Piper's voice echoed through the tunnels. As they travelled further into the lair, more snake people gathered to hear her. Soon they had a procession following behind them – dozens of *gemi* all swaying and slithering.

Piper had lived up to her granddad's prediction. She had learned the song of the snakes – which turned out to be a George Gershwin number from 1935. So far she had even kept the snake king from biting, just like in the old Cherokee story. The only problem with that legend: the warrior who learned the snake song had to sacrifice his wife for the power. Piper didn't want to sacrifice anyone.

The vial of physician's cure was still wrapped in its chamois cloth, tucked in her belt pouch. She hadn't had time to consult with Jason and Leo before she left. She just had to hope they would all be reunited on the hilltop before anyone needed the cure. If one of them died and she couldn't reach them ...

Just keep singing, she told herself.

They passed through crude stone chambers littered with bones. They climbed slopes so steep and slippery it was nearly impossible to keep their footing. At one point, they passed a warm cave the size of a gymnasium filled with snake eggs, their tops covered with a layer of silver filaments like slimy Christmas tinsel.

More and more snake people joined their procession. Slithering behind her, they sounded like an army of football players shuffling with sandpaper on their cleats.

Piper wondered how many *gemini* lived down here. Hundreds, maybe thousands.

She thought she heard her own heartbeat echoing through the corridors, getting louder and louder the deeper they went. Then she realized the persistent *boom ba-boom* was all around them, resonating through the stone and the air.

I wake. A woman's voice, as clear as Piper's singing.

Annabeth froze. 'Oh, that's not good.'

'It's like Tartarus,' Percy said, his voice edgy. 'You remember ... his heartbeat. When he appeared –'

'Don't,' Annabeth said. 'Just don't.'

'Sorry.' In the light of his sword, Percy's face was like a large firefly – a hovering, momentary smudge of brightness in the dark.

The voice of Gaia spoke again, louder: *At last.*

Piper's singing wavered.

Fear washed over her, as it had in the Spartan temple. But the gods Phobos and Deimos were old friends to her now. She let the fear burn inside her like fuel, making her voice even stronger. She sang for the snake people, for her friends' safety. Why not for Gaia, too?

Finally they reached the top of a steep slope, where the path ended in a curtain of green goo.

Kekrops faced the demigods. ‘Beyond this camouflage is the Acropolis. You must remain here. I will check that your way is clear.’

‘Wait.’ Piper turned to address the crowd of *gemini*. ‘There is only death above. You will be safer in the tunnels. Hurry back. Forget you saw us. Protect yourselves.’

The fear in her voice channelled perfectly with the charmspeak. The snake people, even the guards, turned and slithered into the darkness, leaving only the king.

‘Kekrops,’ Piper said, ‘you’re planning to betray us as soon as you step through that goo.’

‘Yes,’ he agreed. ‘I will alert the giants. They will destroy you.’ Then he hissed. ‘Why did I tell you that?’

‘Listen to the heartbeat of Gaia,’ Piper urged. ‘You can sense her rage, can’t you?’

Kekrops wavered. The end of his staff glowed dimly. ‘I can, yes. She is angry.’

‘She’ll destroy everything,’ Piper said. ‘She’ll reduce the Acropolis to a smoking crater. Athens – your city – will be utterly destroyed, your people along with it. You believe me, don’t you?’

‘I – I do.’

‘Whatever hatred you have for humans, for demigods, for Athena, we are the only chance to stop Gaia. So you will *not* betray us. For your own sake, and your people, you will scout the territory and make sure the way is clear. You will say nothing to the giants. Then you will return.’

‘That is ... what I’ll do.’ Kekrops disappeared through the membrane of goo.

Annabeth shook her head in amazement. ‘Piper, that was incredible.’

‘We’ll see if it works.’ Piper sat down on the cool stone floor. She figured she might as well rest while she could.

The others squatted next to her. Percy handed her a canteen of water.

Until she took a drink, Piper hadn’t realized how dry her throat was. ‘Thanks.’ Percy nodded. ‘You think the charm will last?’

‘I’m not sure,’ she admitted. ‘If Kekrops comes back in two minutes with an army of giants, then no.’

The heartbeat of Gaia echoed through the floor. Strangely, it made Piper think of the sea – how the waves boomed along the cliffs of Santa Monica back home.

She wondered what her father was doing right now. It would be the middle of the night in California. Maybe he was asleep, or doing a late-night TV interview. Piper hoped he was in his favourite spot: the porch off the living room, watching the moon over the Pacific, enjoying some quiet time. Piper wanted to think he was happy and content right now ... in case they failed.

She thought about her friends in the Aphrodite cabin at Camp Half-Blood. She thought about her cousins in Oklahoma, which was odd, since she'd never spent much time with them. She didn't even know them very well. Now she was sorry about that.

She wished she'd taken more advantage of her life, appreciated things more. She would always be grateful for her family aboard the *Argo II* – but she had so many other friends and relatives she wished she could see one last time.

'Do you guys ever think about your families?' she asked.

It was a silly question, especially on the cusp of a battle. Piper should have been focused on their quest, not distracting her friends.

But they didn't chide her.

Percy's gaze became unfocused. His lower lip quivered. 'My mom ... I – I haven't even *seen* her since Hera made me disappear. I called her from Alaska. I gave Coach Hedge some letters to deliver to her. I ...' His voice broke. 'She's all I've got. Her and my stepdad, Paul.'

'And Tyson,' Annabeth reminded him. 'And Grover. And –'

'Yeah, of course,' Percy said. 'Thanks. I feel much better.'

Piper probably shouldn't have laughed, but she was too full of nervousness and melancholy to hold it in. 'What about you, Annabeth?'

'My dad ... my stepmom and stepbrothers.' She turned the drakon-bone blade in her lap. 'After all I've been through in the past year, it seems stupid that I resented them for so long. And my dad's relatives ... I haven't thought about them in years. I have an uncle and cousin in Boston.'

Percy looked shocked. 'You, with the Yankees cap? You've got family in Red Sox country?'

Annabeth smiled weakly. 'I never see them. My dad and my uncle don't get along. Some old rivalry. I don't know. It's stupid what keeps people apart.'

Piper nodded. She wished she had the healing powers of Asclepius. She wished she could look at people and see what was hurting them, then whip out her prescription pad and make everything better. But she guessed there was a reason Zeus kept Asclepius locked away in his underground temple.

Some pain shouldn't be wished away so easily. It had to be dealt with, even embraced. Without the agony of the last few months, Piper never would have found her best friends, Hazel and Annabeth. She never would've discovered her own courage. She certainly wouldn't have had the guts to sing show tunes to the snake people under Athens.

At the top of the tunnel, the green membrane rippled.

Piper grabbed her sword and rose, prepared for a flood of monsters.

But Kekrops emerged alone.

'The way is clear,' he said. 'But hurry. The ceremony is almost complete.'

Pushing through a curtain of mucus was almost as fun as Piper imagined.

She emerged feeling like she'd just rolled through a giant's nostril.

Fortunately, none of the gunk stuck to her, but still her skin tingled with revulsion.

Percy, Annabeth and she found themselves in a cool, damp pit that seemed to be the basement level of a temple. All around them, uneven ground stretched into darkness under a low ceiling of stone. Directly above their heads, a rectangular gap was open to the sky. Piper could see the edges of walls and the tops of columns, but no monsters ... yet.

The camouflage membrane had closed behind them and blended into the ground. Piper pressed her hand against it. The area seemed to be solid rock. They wouldn't be leaving the way they'd come.

Annabeth ran her hand along some marks on the ground – a jagged crow's-foot shape as long as a human body. The area was lumpy and white, like stone scar tissue. 'This is the place,' she said. 'Percy, these are the trident marks of Poseidon.'

Hesitantly, Percy touched the scars. 'He must've been using his extra-extra-large trident.'

'This is where he struck the earth,' Annabeth said, 'where he made a saltwater spring appear when he had the contest with my mom to sponsor Athens.'

‘So this is where the rivalry started,’ Percy said.

‘Yeah.’

Percy pulled Annabeth close and kissed her ... long enough for it to get really awkward for Piper, though she said nothing. She thought about the old rule of Aphrodite’s cabin: that to be recognized as a daughter of the love goddess, you had to break someone’s heart. Piper had long ago decided to change that rule. Percy and Annabeth were a perfect example of why. You should have to make someone’s heart *whole*; that was a much better test.

When Percy pulled away, Annabeth looked like a fish gasping for air.

‘The rivalry ends here,’ Percy said. ‘I love you, Wise Girl.’

Annabeth made a little sigh, like something in her ribcage had melted.

Percy glanced at Piper. ‘Sorry, I had to do that.’

Piper grinned. ‘How could a daughter of Aphrodite not approve? You’re a great boyfriend.’

Annabeth made another grunt-whimper. ‘Uh ... anyway. We’re beneath the [Erechtheion](#). It’s a temple to both Athena and Poseidon. The Parthenon should be diagonally to the southeast of here. We’ll need to sneak around the perimeter and disable as many siege weapons as we can, make an approach path for the *Argo II*.’

‘It’s broad daylight,’ Piper said. ‘How will we go unnoticed?’

Annabeth scanned the sky. ‘That’s why I made a plan with Frank and Hazel. Hopefully ... ah. Look.’

A bee zipped overhead. Dozens more followed. They swarmed around a column, then hovered over the opening of the pit.

‘Say hi to Frank, everybody,’ Annabeth said.

Piper waved. The cloud of bees zipped away.

‘How does that even work?’ Percy said. ‘Like ... one bee is a finger? Two bees are his eyes?’

‘I don’t know,’ Annabeth admitted. ‘But he’s our go-between. As soon as he gives Hazel the word, she will –’

‘Gah!’ Percy yelped.

Annabeth clamped her hand over his mouth.

Which looked strange, because suddenly each of them had turned into a hulking, six-armed Earthborn.

‘Hazel’s Mist.’ Piper’s voice sounded deep and gravelly. She looked down and realized that she, too, now had a lovely Neanderthal body – belly hair, loincloth, stubby legs and oversized feet. If she concentrated, she could see her normal arms, but when she moved them they rippled like mirages, separating into three different sets of muscular Earthborn arms.

Percy grimaced, which looked even worse on his newly uglified face. ‘Wow, Annabeth ... I’m really glad I kissed you *before* you changed.’

‘Thanks a lot,’ she said. ‘We should get going. I’ll move clockwise around the perimeter. Piper, you move counterclockwise. Percy, you scout the middle –’

‘Wait,’ Percy said. ‘We’re walking right into the whole blood-spilling sacrifice trap we’ve been warned about, and you want to split up *even more*?’

‘We’ll cover more ground that way,’ Annabeth said. ‘We have to hurry. That chanting ...’

Piper hadn’t noticed it until then, but now she heard it: an ominous drone in the distance, like a hundred forklifts idling. She looked at the ground and noticed bits of gravel trembling, skittering southeast, as if pulled towards the Parthenon.

‘Right,’ Piper said. ‘We’ll meet up at the giant’s throne.’

At first it was easy.

Monsters were everywhere – hundreds of ogres, Earthborn and Cyclopes milling through the ruins – but most of them were gathered at the Parthenon, watching the ceremony in progress. Piper strolled along the cliffs of the Acropolis unchallenged.

Near the first onager, three Earthborn were sunning themselves on the rocks. Piper walked right up to them and smiled. ‘Hello.’

Before they could make a sound, she cut them down with her sword. All three melted into slag heaps. She slashed the onager’s spring cord to disable the weapon, then kept moving.

She was committed now. She had to do as much damage as possible before the sabotage was discovered.

She skirted a patrol of Cyclopes. The second onager was surrounded by an encampment of tattooed Laistrygonian ogres, but Piper managed to get to the machine without raising suspicion. She dropped a vial of Greek fire in the sling.

With luck, as soon as they tried to load the catapult, it would explode in their faces.

She kept moving. Gryphons roosted on the colonnade of an old temple. A group of *empousai* had retreated into a shadowy archway and appeared to be slumbering, their fiery hair flickering dimly, their brass legs glinting. Hopefully the sunlight would make them sluggish if they had to fight.

Whenever she could, Piper slew isolated monsters. She walked past larger groups. Meanwhile the crowd at the Parthenon grew larger. The chanting got louder. Piper couldn't see what was happening inside the ruins – just the heads of twenty or thirty giants standing in a circle, mumbling and swaying, maybe doing the evil monster version of 'Kumbayah'.

She disabled a third siege weapon by sawing through the torsion ropes, which should give the *Argo II* a clear approach from the north.

She hoped Frank was watching her progress. She wondered how long it would take for the ship to arrive.

Suddenly, the chanting stopped. A *BOOM* echoed across the hillside. In the Parthenon, the giants roared in triumph. All around Piper, monsters surged towards the sound of celebration.

That couldn't be good. Piper blended into a crowd of sour-smelling Earthborn. She bounded up the main steps of the temple, then climbed a section of metal scaffolding so she could see above the heads of the ogres and Cyclopes.

The scene in the ruins almost made her cry aloud.

Before Porphyrión's throne, dozens of giants stood in a loose ring, hollering and shaking their weapons as two of their number paraded around the circle, showing off their prizes. The princess Periboia held Annabeth by the neck like a feral cat. The giant Enceladus had Percy wrapped in his massive fist.

Annabeth and Percy both struggled helplessly. Their captors displayed them to the cheering horde of monsters, then turned to face King Porphyrión, who sat in his makeshift throne, his white eyes gleaming with malice.

'Right on time!' the giant king bellowed. 'The blood of Olympus to raise the Earth Mother!'



XLIII

Piper

PIPER WATCHED IN HORROR as the giant king rose to his full height – almost as tall as the temple columns. His face looked just as Piper remembered – green as bile, with a twisted sneer, his seaweed-coloured hair braided with swords and axes taken from dead demigods.

He loomed over the captives, watching them wriggle. ‘They arrived just as you foresaw, Enceladus! Well done!’

Piper’s old enemy bowed his head, braided bones clattering in his dreadlocks. ‘It was simple, my king.’

The flame designs gleamed on his armour. His spear burned with purplish fire. He only needed one hand to hold his captive. Despite all of Percy Jackson’s power, despite everything he had survived, in the end he was helpless against the sheer strength of the giant – and the inevitability of the prophecy.

‘I knew these two would lead the assault,’ Enceladus continued. ‘I understand how they think. Athena and Poseidon ... they were just like these children! They both came here thinking to claim this city. Their arrogance has undone them!’

Over the roar of the crowd, Piper could barely hear herself think, but she replayed Enceladus’s words: *these two would lead the assault*. Her heart raced.

The giants had expected Percy and Annabeth. They didn’t expect *her*.

For once, being Piper McLean, the daughter of Aphrodite, the one nobody took seriously, might play to her advantage.

Annabeth tried to say something, but the giantess Periboia shook her by the neck. ‘Shut up! None of your silver-tongued trickery!’

The princess drew a hunting knife as long as Piper’s sword. ‘Let me do the honours, Father!’

‘Wait, Daughter.’ The king stepped back. ‘The sacrifice must be done properly. Thoon, destroyer of the Fates, come forward!’

The wizened grey giant shuffled into sight, holding an oversized meat cleaver. He fixed his milky eyes on Annabeth.

Percy shouted. At the other end of the Acropolis, a hundred yards away, a geyser of water shot into the sky.

King Porphyrion laughed. ‘You’ll have to do better than that, son of Poseidon. The earth is too powerful here. Even your father wouldn’t be able to summon more than a salty spring. But never fear. The only liquid we require from you is your blood!’

Piper scanned the sky desperately. Where was the *Argo II*?

Thoon knelt and touched the blade of his cleaver reverently against the earth.

‘Mother Gaia ...’ His voice was impossibly deep, shaking the ruins, making the metal scaffold resonate under Piper’s feet. ‘In ancient times, blood mixed with your soil to create life. Now, let the blood of these demigods return the favour. We bring you to full wakefulness. We greet you as our eternal mistress!’

Without thinking, Piper leaped from the scaffolding. She sailed over the heads of the Cyclopes and ogres, landed in the centre of the courtyard and pushed her way into the circle of giants. As Thoon rose to use his cleaver, Piper slashed upward with her sword. She took off Thoon’s hand at the wrist.

The old giant wailed. The cleaver and severed hand lay in the dust at Piper’s feet. She felt her Mist disguise burn away until she was just Piper again – one girl in the midst of an army of giants, her jagged bronze blade like a toothpick compared to their massive weapons.

‘WHAT IS THIS?’ Porphyrion thundered. ‘How dare this weak, useless creature interrupt?’

Piper followed her gut. She attacked.

Piper’s advantages: she was small, she was quick, and she was absolutely insane. She drew her knife Katoptris and threw it at Enceladus, hoping she wouldn’t hit Percy by accident. She veered aside without witnessing the results, but, judging from the giant’s painful howl, she’d aimed well.

Several giants ran at her at once. Piper dodged between their legs and let them bash their heads together.

She wove through the crowd, jabbing her sword into dragon-scale feet at every opportunity and yelling, 'RUN! RUN AWAY!' to sow confusion.

'NO! STOP HER!' Porphyron shouted. 'KILL HER!'

A spear almost impaled her. Piper swerved and kept running. *It's just like capture the flag*, she told herself. *Only the enemy team is all thirty feet tall.*

A huge sword sliced across her path. Compared to her sparring practice with Hazel, the strike was ridiculously slow. Piper leaped over the blade and zigzagged towards Annabeth, who was still kicking and writhing in Periboia's grip. Piper *had* to free her friend.

Unfortunately, the giantess seemed to anticipate her plan.

'I think not, demigod!' Periboia yelled. 'This one bleeds!'

The giantess raised her knife.

Piper screamed in charmspeak: 'MISS!'

At the same time, Annabeth kicked up with her legs to make herself a smaller target.

Periboia's knife passed beneath Annabeth's legs and stabbed the giantess's own palm.

'OWWW!'

Periboia dropped Annabeth – alive, but not unscathed. The dagger had sliced a nasty gash across the back of her thigh. As Annabeth rolled away, her blood soaked into the earth.

The blood of Olympus, Piper thought with dread.

But she couldn't do anything about that. She had to help Annabeth.

Piper lunged at the giantess. Her jagged blade suddenly felt ice cold in her hands. The surprised giantess glanced down as the sword of the Boread pierced her gut. Frost spread across her bronze breastplate.

Piper yanked out her sword. The giantess toppled backwards – steaming white and frozen solid. Periboia hit the ground with a thud.

'My daughter!' King Porphyron levelled his spear and charged.

But Percy had other ideas.

Enceladus had dropped him ... probably because the giant was busy staggering around with Piper's knife embedded in his forehead, ichor streaming into his eyes.

Percy had no weapon – perhaps his sword had been confiscated or lost in the fighting – but he didn't let that stop him. As the giant king ran towards Piper, Percy grabbed the tip of Porphyrion's spear and forced it down into the ground. The giant's own momentum lifted him off his feet in an unintentional pole-vault manoeuvre and he flipped over onto his back.

Meanwhile Annabeth dragged herself across the ground. Piper ran to her side. She stood over her friend, sweeping her blade back and forth to keep the giants at bay. Cold blue steam now wreathed her blade.

'Who wants to be the next Popsicle?' she yelled, channelling anger into her charmspeak. 'Who wants to go back to Tartarus?'

That seemed to hit a nerve. The giants shuffled uneasily, glancing at the frozen body of Periboia.

And why shouldn't Piper intimidate them? Aphrodite was the most ancient Olympian, born of the sea and the blood of Ouranos. She was older than Poseidon or Athena or even Zeus. And Piper was her daughter.

More than that, she was a McLean. Her father had come from nothing. Now he was known all over the world. The McLeans didn't retreat. Like all Cherokee, they knew how to endure suffering, keep their pride and, when necessary, fight back. This was the time to fight back.

Forty feet away, Percy bent over the giant king, trying to yank a sword from the braids of his hair. But Porphyrion wasn't as stunned as he let on.

'Fools!' Porphyrion backhanded Percy like a pesky fly. The son of Poseidon flew into a column with a sickening *crunch*.

Porphyrion rose. 'These demigods *cannot* kill us! They do not have the help of the gods. Remember who you are!'

The giants closed in. A dozen spears were pointed at Piper's chest.

Annabeth struggled to her feet. She retrieved Periboia's hunting knife, but she could barely stand upright, much less fight. Each time a drop of her blood hit the ground it bubbled, turning from red to gold.

Percy tried to stand, but he was obviously dazed. He wouldn't be able to defend himself.

Piper's only choice was to keep the giants focused on her.

'Come on, then!' she yelled. 'I'll destroy you all myself if I have to!'

A metallic smell of storm filled the air. All the hairs on Piper's arms stood up.

‘The thing is,’ said a voice from above, ‘you don’t have to.’

Piper’s heart could’ve floated out of her body. At the top of the nearest colonnade stood Jason, his sword gleaming gold in the sun. Frank stood at his side, his bow ready. Hazel sat astride Arion, who reared and whinnied in challenge.

With a deafening blast, a white-hot bolt arced from the sky, straight through Jason’s body as he leaped, wreathed in lightning, at the giant king.



XLIV

Piper

FOR THE NEXT THREE MINUTES, LIFE WAS GREAT.

So much happened at once that only an ADHD demigod could have kept track.

Jason fell on King Porphyron with such force that the giant crumpled to his knees – blasted with lightning and stabbed in the neck with a golden *gladius*.

Frank unleashed a hail of arrows, driving back the giants nearest to Percy.

The *Argo II* rose above the ruins and all the ballistae and catapults fired simultaneously. Leo must have programmed the weapons with surgical precision. A wall of Greek fire roared upward all around the Parthenon. It didn't touch the interior, but in a flash most of the smaller monsters around it were incinerated.

Leo's voice boomed over the loudspeaker: **'SURRENDER! YOU ARE SURROUNDED BY ONE SPANKING HOT WAR MACHINE!'**

The giant Enceladus howled in outrage. 'Valdez!'

'WHAT'S UP, ENCHILADAS?' Leo's voice roared back. **'NICE DAGGER IN YOUR FOREHEAD.'**

'GAH!' The giant pulled Katoptris out of his head. 'Monsters: destroy that ship!'

The remaining forces tried their best. A flock of gryphons rose to attack. Festus the figurehead blew flames and chargrilled them out of the sky. A few Earthborn launched a volley of rocks, but from the sides of the hull a dozen Archimedes spheres sprayed out, intercepting the boulders and blasting them to dust.

'PUT SOME CLOTHES ON!' Buford ordered.

Hazel spurred Arion off the colonnade and they leaped into battle. The forty-foot fall would have broken any other horse's legs, but Arion hit the ground running. Hazel zipped from giant to giant, stinging them with the blade of her *spatha*.

With extremely bad timing, Kekrops and his snake people chose that moment to join the fight. In four or five places around the ruins, the ground turned to green goo and armed *gemini* burst forth, Kekrops himself in the lead.

'Kill the demigods!' he hissed. 'Kill the tricksters!'

Before many of his warriors could follow, Hazel pointed her blade at the nearest tunnel. The ground rumbled. All the gooey membranes popped and the tunnels collapsed, billowing plumes of dust. Kekrops looked around at his army, now reduced to six guys.

'SLITHER AWAY!' he ordered.

Frank's arrows cut them down as they tried to retreat.

The giantess Periboia had thawed with alarming speed. She tried to grab Annabeth, but, despite her bad leg, Annabeth was holding her own. She stabbed at the giantess with her own hunting knife and led her in a deadly game of tag around the throne.

Percy was back on his feet, Riptide once again in his hands. He still looked dazed. His nose was bleeding. But he seemed to be standing his ground against the old giant Thoon, who had somehow reattached his hand and found his meat cleaver.

Piper stood back to back with Jason, fighting every giant who dared to come close. For a moment she felt elated. They were actually winning!

But too soon their element of surprise faded. The giants overcame their confusion.

Frank ran out of arrows. He changed into a rhinoceros and leaped into battle, but as fast as he could knock down the giants they got up again. Their wounds seemed to be healing faster.

Annabeth lost ground against Periboia. Hazel was knocked out of her saddle at sixty miles an hour. Jason summoned another lightning strike, but this time Porphyron simply deflected it off the tip of his spear.

The giants were bigger, stronger and more numerous. They couldn't be killed without the help of the gods. And they didn't seem to be tiring.

The six demigods were forced into a defensive ring.

Another volley of Earthborn rocks hit the *Argo II*. This time Leo couldn't return fire fast enough. Rows of oars were sheared off. The ship shuddered and tilted in the sky.

Then Enceladus threw his fiery spear. It pierced the ship's hull and exploded inside, sending spouts of fire through the oar openings. An ominous black cloud billowed from the deck. The *Argo II* began to sink.

'Leo!' Jason cried.

Porphyrion laughed. 'You demigods have learned nothing. There are no gods to aid you. We need only one more thing from you to make our victory complete.'

The giant king smiled expectantly. He seemed to be looking at Percy Jackson.

Piper glanced over. Percy's nose was still bleeding. He seemed unaware that a trickle of blood had made its way down his face to the end of his chin.

'Percy, look out ...' Piper tried to say, but for once her voice failed her.

A single drop of blood fell from his chin. It hit the ground between his feet and sizzled like water on a frying pan.

The blood of Olympus watered the ancient stones.

The Acropolis groaned and shifted as the Earth Mother woke.



XLV

Nico

ABOUT FIVE MILES EAST OF CAMP, a black SUV was parked on the beach.

They tied up the boat at a private dock. Nico helped Dakota and Leila haul Michael Kahale ashore. The big guy was still only half-conscious, mumbling what Nico assumed were football calls: ‘Red twelve. Right thirty-one. Hike.’ Then he giggled uncontrollably.

‘We’ll leave him here,’ Leila said. ‘Just don’t bind him. Poor guy ...’

‘What about the car?’ Dakota asked. ‘The keys are in the glove compartment, but, uh, can you drive?’

Leila frowned. ‘I thought *you* could drive. Aren’t you seventeen?’

‘I never learned!’ Dakota said. ‘I was busy.’

‘I’ve got it covered,’ Nico promised.

They both looked at him.

‘You’re, like, fourteen,’ Leila said.

Nico enjoyed how nervous the Romans acted around him, even though they were older and bigger and more experienced fighters. ‘I didn’t say I would be behind the wheel.’

He knelt and placed his hand on the ground. He felt the nearest graves, the bones of forgotten humans buried and scattered. He searched deeper, extending his senses into the Underworld. ‘Jules-Albert. Let’s go.’

The ground split. A zombie in a ragged nineteenth-century motoring outfit clawed his way to the surface. Leila stepped back. Dakota screamed like a kindergartner.

‘What is *that*, man?’ Dakota protested.

‘This is my driver,’ Nico said. ‘Jules-Albert finished first in the Paris–Rouen motorcar race back in 1895, but he wasn’t awarded the prize because his steam

car used a stoker.'

Leila stared at him. 'What are you even talking about?'

'He's a restless soul, always looking for another chance to drive,' Nico said. 'The last few years, he's been my driver whenever I need one.'

'You have a zombie chauffeur,' Leila said.

'I call shotgun.' Nico got in on the passenger's side. Reluctantly, the Romans climbed in the back.

One thing about Jules-Albert: he never got emotional. He could sit in crosstown traffic all day without losing his patience. He was immune to road rage. He could even drive straight up to an encampment of wild centaurs and navigate through them without getting nervous.

The centaurs were like nothing Nico had ever seen. They had back ends like palominos, tattoos all over their hairy arms and chests, and bullish horns protruding from their foreheads. Nico doubted they could blend in with humans as easily as Chiron did.

At least two hundred were sparring restlessly with swords and spears, or roasting animal carcasses over open fires (carnivorous centaurs ... the idea made Nico shudder). Their camp spilled across the farm road that meandered around Camp Half-Blood's southeast perimeter.

The SUV nudged its way through, honking when necessary. Occasionally a centaur glared through the driver's side window, saw the zombie driver and backed away in shock.

'Pluto's pauldrons,' Dakota muttered. 'Even more centaurs arrived overnight.'

'Don't make eye contact,' Leila warned. 'They take that as a challenge for a duel to the death.'

Nico stared straight ahead as the SUV pushed through. His heart was pounding, but he wasn't scared. He was angry. Octavian had surrounded Camp Half-Blood with monsters.

Sure, Nico had mixed emotions about the camp. He'd felt rejected there, out of place, unwanted and unloved ... but now that it was on the verge of destruction, he realized how much it meant to him. This was the last place Bianca and he had shared as a home – the only place they'd ever felt safe, even if only temporarily.

They rounded a bend in the road and Nico's fists clenched. More monsters ... *hundreds* more. Dog-headed men prowled in packs, their poleaxes gleaming in the light of campfires. Beyond that milled a tribe of two-headed men dressed in rags and blankets like homeless guys, armed with a haphazard collection of slings, clubs and metal pipes.

'Octavian is an idiot,' Nico hissed. 'He thinks he can control these creatures?'

'They just kept showing up,' Leila said. 'Before we knew it ... well, look.'

The legion was arrayed at the base of Half-Blood Hill, its five cohorts in perfect order, its standards bright and proud. Giant eagles circled overhead. The siege weapons – six golden onagers the size of houses – were arrayed behind in a loose semicircle, three on each flank. But, for all its impressive discipline, the Twelfth Legion looked pitifully small, a splotch of demigod valour in a sea of ravenous monsters.

Nico wished he still had the sceptre of Diocletian, but he doubted a legion of dead warriors would make a dent in this army. Even the *Argo II* couldn't do much against this kind of strength.

'I have to disable the onagers,' Nico said. 'We don't have much time.'

'You'll never get close to them,' Leila warned. 'Even if we get the entire Fourth and Fifth Cohorts to follow us, the other cohorts will try to stop us. And those siege weapons are manned by Octavian's most loyal followers.'

'We won't get close by force,' Nico agreed. 'But alone I can do it. Dakota, Leila – Jules-Albert will drive you to the legion lines. Get out, talk to your troops, convince them to follow your lead. I'll need a distraction.'

Dakota frowned. 'All right, but I'm not hurting any of my fellow legionnaires.'

'No one's asking you to,' Nico growled. 'But if we don't stop this war the *entire* legion will be wiped out. You said the monster tribes take insult easily?'

'Yes,' Dakota said. 'I mean, for instance, you make *any* comment to those two-headed guys about the way they smell and ... oh.' He grinned. 'If we started a brawl, by accident of course ...'

'I'll be counting on you,' Nico said.

Leila frowned. 'But how will you –'

'I'm going dark,' Nico said. And he faded into the shadows.

He thought he was prepared.

He wasn't.

Even after three days of rest and the wondrous healing properties of Coach Hedge's gooey brown gunk, Nico started to dissolve the moment he shadow-jumped.

His limbs turned to vapour. Cold seeped into his chest. Voices of spirits whispered in his ears: *Help us. Remember us. Join us.*

He hadn't realized how much he had relied on Reyna. Without her strength, he felt as weak as a newborn colt, wobbling dangerously, ready to fall at every step.

No, he told himself. I am Nico di Angelo, son of Hades. I control the shadows. They do not control me.

He stumbled back into the mortal world at the crest of Half-Blood Hill.

He fell to his knees, hugging Thalia's pine tree for support. The Golden Fleece was no longer in its branches. The guardian dragon was gone. Perhaps they'd been moved to a safer spot with the battle so close. Nico wasn't sure. But, looking down at the Roman forces arrayed outside the valley, his spirits wavered.

The nearest onager was a hundred yards downhill, encircled in spiked trenches and guarded by a dozen demigods. The machine was primed, ready to fire. Its huge sling cupped a projectile the size of a Honda Civic, glowing with flecks of gold.

With icy certainty, Nico realized what Octavian was up to. The projectile was a mixture of incendiaries and Imperial gold. Even a small amount of Imperial gold could be incredibly volatile. Exposed to too much heat or pressure, the stuff would explode with devastating impact, and of course it was deadly to demigods as well as monsters. If that onager scored a hit on Camp Half-Blood, anything in the blast zone would be annihilated – vaporized by the heat, or disintegrated by the shrapnel. And the Romans had six onagers, all stocked with piles of ammunition.

'Evil,' Nico said. 'This is evil.'

He tried to think. Dawn was breaking. He couldn't possibly take down all six weapons before the attack began, even if he found the strength to shadow-travel that many times. If he managed it once more, it would be a miracle.

He spotted the Roman command tent – behind and to the left of the legion. Octavian would probably be there, enjoying breakfast at a safe distance from the fighting. He wouldn't lead his troops into battle. The little scumbag would hope to destroy the Greek camp from a distance, wait for the flames to die down, then march in unopposed.

Nico's throat constricted with hate. He concentrated on that tent, envisioning his next jump. If he could assassinate Octavian, that might solve the problem. The order to attack might never be given. Nico was about to attempt it when a voice behind him said, 'Nico?'

He spun, his sword instantly in his hand, and almost decapitated Will Solace.

'Put that down!' Will hissed. 'What are you *doing* here?'

Nico was dumbstruck. Will and two other campers were crouched in the grass, binoculars around their necks and daggers at their side. They wore black jeans and T-shirts, with black grease paint on their faces like commandos.

'*Me?*' Nico asked. 'What are *you* doing? Getting yourselves killed?'

Will scowled. 'Hey, we're scouting the enemy. We took precautions.'

'You dressed in black,' Nico noted, 'with the sun coming up. You painted your face but didn't cover that mop of blond hair. You might as well be waving a yellow flag.'

Will's ears reddened. 'Lou Ellen wrapped some Mist around us, too.'

'Hi.' The girl next to him wriggled her fingers. She looked a little flustered. 'You're Nico, right? I've heard a lot about you. And this is Cecil from Hermes cabin.'

Nico knelt next to them. 'Did Coach Hedge make it to camp?'

Lou Ellen giggled nervously. 'Did he *ever*.'

Will elbowed her. 'Yeah. Hedge is fine. He made it just in time for the baby's birth.'

'The baby!' Nico grinned, which hurt his face muscles. He wasn't used to making that expression. 'Mellie and the kid are all right?'

'Fine. A very cute little satyr boy.' Will shuddered. 'But I delivered it. Have you ever delivered a baby?'

'Um, no.'

'I had to get some fresh air. That's why I volunteered for this mission. Gods of Olympus, my hands are still shaking. See?'

He took Nico's hand, which sent an electric current down Nico's spine. He quickly withdrew. 'Whatever,' he snapped. 'We don't have time for chitchat. The Romans are attacking at dawn and I've got to –'

'We know,' Will said. 'But, if you're planning to shadow-travel to that command tent, forget it.'

Nico glared at him. 'Excuse me?'

He expected Will to flinch or look away. Most people did. But Will's blue eyes stayed fixed on his – annoyingly determined. 'Coach Hedge told me all about your shadow-travel. You *can't* try that again.'

'I just *did* try it again, Solace. I'm fine.'

'No, you're not. I'm a healer. I could feel the darkness in your hand as soon as I touched it. Even if you made it to that tent, you'd be in no shape to fight. But you *wouldn't* make it. One more slip, and you won't come back. You are *not* shadow-travelling. Doctor's orders.'

'The camp is about to be destroyed –'

'And we'll stop the Romans,' Will said. 'But we'll do it our way. Lou Ellen will control the Mist. We'll sneak around, do as much damage as we can to those onagers. But *no* shadow-travel.'

'But –'

'No.'

Lou Ellen's and Cecil's heads swivelled back and forth like they were watching a really intense tennis match.

Nico sighed in exasperation. He hated working with other people. They were always cramping his style, making him uncomfortable. And Will Solace ... Nico revised his impression of the son of Apollo. He'd always thought of Will as easygoing and laid back. Apparently he could also be stubborn and aggravating.

Nico gazed down at Camp Half-Blood, where the rest of the Greeks were preparing for war. Past the troops and ballistae, the canoe lake glittered pink in the first light of dawn. Nico remembered the first time he'd arrived at Camp Half-Blood, crash-landing in Apollo's sun car, which had been converted into a fiery school bus.

He remembered Apollo, smiling and tanned and completely cool in his shades.

Thalia had said, *He's hot.*

He's the sun god, Percy replied.

That's not what I meant.

Why was Nico thinking about that now? The random memory irritated him, made him feel jittery.

He had arrived at Camp Half-Blood thanks to Apollo. Now, on what would likely be his last day at camp, he was stuck with a son of Apollo.

'Whatever,' Nico said. 'But we have to hurry. And you'll follow *my* lead.'

'Fine,' Will said. 'Just don't ask me to deliver any more satyr babies and we'll get along great.'



XLVI

Nico

THEY MADE IT TO THE FIRST ONAGER just as chaos broke loose in the legion.

On the far end of the line, cries went up from the Fifth Cohort. Legionnaires scattered and dropped their *pila*. A dozen centaurs barrelled through the ranks, yelling and waving their clubs, followed by a horde of two-headed men banging on trash-can lids.

‘What’s going on down there?’ Lou Ellen asked.

‘That’s my distraction,’ Nico said. ‘Come on.’

All the guards had clustered on the right side of the onager, trying to see what was going on down the ranks, which gave Nico and his comrades a clear shot to the left. They passed within a few feet of the nearest Roman, but the legionnaire didn’t notice them. Lou Ellen’s Mist magic seemed to be working.

They jumped the spiked trench and reached the machine.

‘I brought some Greek fire,’ Cecil whispered.

‘No,’ Nico said. ‘If we make the damage too obvious, we’ll never get to the other ones in time. Can you recalibrate the aim – like, towards the other onagers’ firing lines?’

Cecil grinned. ‘Oh, I like the way you think. They sent me because I excel at messing things up.’

He went to work while Nico and the others stood guard.

Meanwhile the Fifth Cohort was brawling with the two-headed men. The Fourth Cohort moved in to help. The other three cohorts held their positions, but the officers were having trouble keeping order.

‘All right,’ Cecil announced. ‘Let’s move.’

They shuffled across the hillside towards the next onager.

This time the Mist didn't work so well. One of the onager guards yelled, 'Hey!'

'Got this.' Will sprinted off – which was possibly the stupidest diversion Nico could imagine – and six of the guards chased after him.

The other Romans advanced on Nico, but Lou Ellen appeared out of the Mist and yelled, 'Hey, catch!'

She lobbed a white ball the size of an apple. The Roman in the middle caught it instinctively. A twenty-foot sphere of powder exploded outwards. When the dust settled, all six Romans were squealing pink piglets.

'Nice work,' Nico said.

Lou Ellen blushed. 'Well, it's the only pig ball I have. So don't ask for an encore.'

'And, uh –' Cecil pointed – 'somebody better help Will.'

Even in their armour, the Romans were starting to gain on Solace. Nico cursed and raced after them.

He didn't want to kill other demigods if he could avoid it. Fortunately, he didn't need to. He tripped the Roman in the back and the others turned. Nico jumped into the crowd, kicking groins, smacking faces with the flat of his blade, bashing helmets with his pommel. In ten seconds, the Romans all lay groaning and dazed on the ground.

Will punched his shoulder. 'Thanks for the assist. Six at once isn't bad.'

'*Not bad?*' Nico glared at him. 'Next time I'll just let them run you down, Solace.'

'Ah, they'd never catch me.'

Cecil waved at them from the onager, signalling that his job was done.

They all moved towards the third siege machine.

In the legion ranks, everything was still in chaos, but the officers were starting to reassert control. The Fifth and Fourth Cohorts regrouped while the Second and Third acted as riot police, shoving centaurs and *cynocephali* and two-headed men back into their respective camps. The First Cohort stood closest to the onager – a little *too* close for Nico's comfort – but they seemed occupied by a couple of officers parading in front of them, shouting orders.

Nico hoped they could sneak up on the third siege machine. One more onager redirected and they might stand a chance.

Unfortunately, the guards spotted them from twenty yards away. One yelled, 'There!'

Lou Ellen cursed. 'They're *expecting* an attack now. The Mist doesn't work well against alert enemies. Do we run?'

'No,' Nico said. 'Let's give them what they expect.'

He spread his hands. In front of the Romans, the ground erupted. Five skeletons clawed out of the earth. Cecil and Lou Ellen charged in to help. Nico tried to follow, but he would've fallen on his face if Will hadn't caught him.

'You idiot.' Will put an arm around him. 'I told you no more of that Underworld magic.'

'I'm fine.'

'Shut up. You're not.' From his pocket, Will dug out a pack of gum.

Nico wanted to pull away. He hated physical contact. But Will was a lot stronger than he looked. Nico found himself leaning against him, relying on his support.

'Take this,' Will said.

'You want me to chew gum?'

'It's medicinal. Should keep you alive and alert for a few more hours.'

Nico shoved a stick of gum into his mouth. 'Tastes like tar and mud.'

'Stop complaining.'

'Hey.' Cecil limped over, looking like he'd pulled a muscle. 'You guys kind of missed the fight.'

Lou Ellen followed, grinning. Behind them, all the Roman guards were tangled in a weird assortment of ropes and bones.

'Thanks for the skeletons,' she said. 'Great trick.'

'Which he *won't* be doing again,' Will said.

Nico realized he was still leaning against Will. He pushed him away and stood on his own two feet. 'I'll do what I need to.'

Will rolled his eyes. 'Fine, Death Boy. If you want to get yourself killed –'

'Do *not* call me *Death Boy*!'

Lou Ellen cleared her throat. 'Um, guys –'

'DROP YOUR WEAPONS!'

Nico turned. The fight at the third onager had not gone unnoticed.

The entire First Cohort was advancing on them, spears levelled, shields locked. In front of them marched Octavian, purple robes over his armour, Imperial gold jewellery glittering on his neck and arms, and a crown of laurels on his head as if he'd already won the battle. Next to him was the legion's standard-bearer, Jacob, holding the golden eagle, and six huge *cynocephali*, their canine teeth bared, their swords glowing red.

'Well,' Octavian snarled, '*Graecus* saboteurs.' He turned to his dog-headed warriors. 'Tear them apart.'



XLVII

Nico

NICO WASN'T SURE whether to kick himself or Will Solace.

If he hadn't been so distracted bickering with the son of Apollo, he would never have allowed the enemy to get so close.

As the dog-headed men barrelled forward, Nico raised his sword. He doubted he had the strength left to win, but, before he could attack them, Will let out a piercing taxicab whistle.

All six dog-men dropped their weapons, grabbed their ears and fell down in agony.

'Dude.' Cecil opened his mouth to pop his ears. 'What the actual Hades? A little warning next time.'

'It's even worse for the dogs.' Will shrugged. 'One of my few musical talents. I do a really *awful* ultrasonic whistle.'

Nico didn't complain. He waded through the dog-men, jabbing them with his sword. They dissolved into shadows.

Octavian and the other Romans seemed too stunned to react.

'My – my elite guard!' Octavian looked around for sympathy. 'Did you *see* what he did to my elite guard?'

'Some dogs need to be put down.' Nico took a step forward. 'Like you.'

For one beautiful moment, the entire First Cohort wavered. Then they remembered themselves and levelled their *pila*.

'You will be destroyed!' Octavian shrieked. 'You *Graeci* sneak around, sabotaging our weapons, attacking our men –'

'You mean the weapons you were about to fire at us?' Cecil asked.

'And the men who were about to burn our camp to ashes?' added Lou Ellen.

‘Just like a Greek!’ Octavian yelled. ‘Trying to twist things around! Well, it won’t work!’ He pointed to the nearest legionnaires. ‘You, you, you and you. Check all the onagers. Make sure they’re operational. I want them fired simultaneously as soon as possible. Go!’

The four Romans ran.

Nico tried to keep his expression neutral.

Please don’t check the firing trajectory, he thought.

He hoped Cecil had done his work well. It was one thing to screw up a huge weapon. It was another thing to screw it up so subtly that no one noticed until it was too late. But if anyone had that skill it would be a child of Hermes, god of trickery.

Octavian marched up to Nico. To his credit, the augur didn’t seem afraid, though his only weapon was a dagger. He stopped so close that Nico could see the bloodshot veins in his pale watery eyes. His face was gaunt. His hair was the colour of overcooked spaghetti.

Nico knew Octavian was a legacy – a descendant of Apollo many generations removed. Now, he couldn’t help thinking that Octavian looked like a watered-down, unhealthy version of Will Solace – like a photo that had been copied too many times. Whatever made a child of Apollo special, Octavian didn’t have it.

‘Tell me, son of Pluto,’ the augur hissed, ‘why are you helping the Greeks? What have they ever done for you?’

Nico was itching to stab Octavian in the chest. He’d been dreaming of that ever since Bryce Lawrence had attacked them in South Carolina. But, now that they were face to face, Nico hesitated. He had no doubt he could kill Octavian before the First Cohort intervened. Nor did Nico particularly care if he died for his actions. The trade-off would be worth it.

But, after what happened with Bryce, the idea of cutting down another demigod in cold blood – even Octavian – didn’t sit well. Nor did it seem right to sentence Cecil, Lou Ellen and Will to die with him.

It doesn’t seem *right*? Another part of him wondered, *Since when do I worry about what’s right?*

‘I’m helping the Greeks *and* the Romans,’ Nico said.

Octavian laughed. ‘Don’t try to con me. What have they offered you – a place in their camp? They won’t honour their agreement.’

‘I don’t *want* a place in their camp,’ Nico snarled. ‘Or in yours. When this war is over, I’m leaving both camps for good.’

Will Solace made a sound like he’d been punched. ‘Why would you do that?’

Nico scowled. ‘It’s none of your business, but I don’t belong. That’s obvious. No one wants me. I’m a child of –’

‘Oh, please.’ Will sounded unusually angry. ‘Nobody at Camp Half-Blood ever pushed you away. You have friends – or at least people who would *like* to be your friend. You pushed yourself away. If you’d get your head out of that brooding cloud of yours for once –’

‘Enough!’ Octavian snapped. ‘Di Angelo, I can beat any offer the Greeks could make. I always thought you would make a powerful ally. I see the ruthlessness in you, and I appreciate that. I can assure you a place in New Rome. All you have to do is step aside and allow the Romans to win. The god Apollo has shown me the future –’

‘No!’ Will Solace shoved Nico out of the way and got in Octavian’s face. ‘I am a son of Apollo, you anaemic loser. My father hasn’t shown anyone the future, because the power of prophecy isn’t working. But this –’ He waved loosely at the assembled legion, the hordes of monstrous armies spread across the hillside. ‘This is *not* what Apollo would want!’

Octavian’s lip curled. ‘You lie. The god told me *personally* that I would be remembered as the saviour of Rome. I will lead the legion to victory, and I will start by –’

Nico felt the sound before he heard it – *thunk-thunk-thunk* reverberating through the earth, like the massive gears of a drawbridge. All the onagers fired at once, and six golden comets billowed into the sky.

‘By destroying the Greeks!’ Octavian cried with glee. ‘The days of Camp Half-Blood are over!’

Nico couldn’t think of anything more beautiful than an off-course projectile. At least, not today. From the three sabotaged machines, the payloads veered sideways, arcing towards the barrage from the other three onagers.

The fireballs didn’t collide directly. They didn’t need to. As soon as the missiles got close to one another, all six warheads detonated in midair, spraying a dome of gold and fire that sucked the oxygen right out of the sky.

The heat stung Nico's face. The grass hissed. The tops of the trees steamed. But, when the fireworks faded, no serious damage had been done.

Octavian reacted first. He stomped his feet and yelled, 'NO! NO, NO! RELOAD!'

No one in the First Cohort moved. Nico heard the tromping of boots to his right. The Fifth Cohort was marching towards them double-time, Dakota in the lead.

Further downhill, the rest of the legion was trying to form up, but the Second, Third and Fourth Cohorts were now surrounded by a sea of ill-tempered monstrous allies. The *auxilia* forces didn't look happy about the explosion overhead. No doubt they'd been waiting for Camp Half-Blood to go up in flames so they'd get chargrilled demigod for breakfast.

'Octavian!' Dakota called. 'We have new orders.'

Octavian's left eye twitched so violently it looked like it might explode. 'Orders? From whom? Not from me!'

'From Reyna,' Dakota said, loud enough to make sure everyone in the First Cohort could hear. 'She's ordered us to stand down.'

'Reyna?' Octavian laughed, though no one seemed to get the joke. 'You mean the outlaw I sent you to arrest? The *ex-praetor* who conspired to betray her own people with this *Graecus*?' He jabbed his finger in Nico's chest. 'You're taking orders from her?'

The Fifth Cohort formed up behind their centurion, uneasily facing their comrades in the First.

Dakota crossed his arms stubbornly. 'Reyna is the praetor until voted otherwise by the Senate.'

'This is war!' Octavian yelled. 'I've brought you to the brink of ultimate victory and you want to give up? First Cohort: arrest Centurion Dakota and any who stand with him. Fifth Cohort: remember your vows to Rome and the legion. You will obey *me*!'

Will Solace shook his head. 'Don't do this, Octavian. Don't force your people to choose. This is your last chance.'

'My last chance?' Octavian grinned, madness glinting in his eyes. 'I will SAVE ROME! Now, Romans, follow my orders! Arrest Dakota. Destroy these *Graecus* scum. And reload those onagers!'

What the Romans would have done left to their own devices, Nico didn't know.

But he hadn't counted on the Greeks.

At that moment, the entire army of Camp Half-Blood appeared on the crest of Half-Blood Hill. Clarisse La Rue rode in the lead, on a red war chariot pulled by metal horses. A hundred demigods fanned out around her, with twice that many satyrs and nature spirits led by Grover Underwood. Tyson lumbered forward with six other Cyclopes. Chiron stood in full white stallion mode, his bow drawn.

It was an impressive sight, but all Nico could think was: *No. Not now.*

Clarisse yelled, 'Romans, you have fired on our camp! Withdraw or be destroyed!'

Octavian wheeled on his troops. 'You see? It was a trick! They divided us so they could launch a surprise attack. Legion, *cuneum formate!* CHARGE!'



XLVIII

Nico

NICO WANTED TO YELL: *Time out! Hold it! Freeze!*

But he knew it wouldn't do any good. After weeks of waiting, agonizing and steaming, the Greeks and Romans wanted blood. Trying to stop the battle now would be like trying to push back a flood after the dam broke.

Will Solace saved the day.

He put his fingers in his mouth and did a taxicab whistle even more horrible than the last. Several Greeks dropped their swords. A ripple went through the Roman line like the entire First Cohort was shuddering.

'DON'T BE STUPID!' Will yelled. 'LOOK!'

He pointed to the north, and Nico grinned from ear to ear. He decided there *was* something more beautiful than an off-course projectile: the Athena Parthenos gleaming in the sunrise, flying in from the coast, suspended from the tethers of six winged horses. Roman eagles circled but did not attack. A few of them even swooped in, grabbed the cables and helped carry the statue.

Nico didn't see Blackjack, which worried him, but Reyna Ramírez-Arellano rode on Guido's back. Her sword was held high. Her purple cloak glittered strangely, catching the sunlight.

Both armies stared, dumbfounded, as the forty-foot-tall gold and ivory statue came in for a landing.

'GREEK DEMIGODS!' Reyna's voice boomed as if projected from the statue itself, like the Athena Parthenos had become a stack of concert speakers.

'Behold your most sacred statue, the Athena Parthenos, wrongly taken by the Romans. I return it to you now as a gesture of peace!'

The statue settled on the crest of the hill, about twenty feet away from Thalia's pine tree. Instantly gold light rippled across the ground, into the valley

of Camp Half-Blood and down the opposite side through the Roman ranks. Warmth seeped into Nico's bones – a comforting, peaceful sensation he hadn't had since ... he couldn't even remember. A voice inside him seemed to whisper: *You are not alone. You are part of the Olympian family. The gods have not abandoned you.*

'Romans!' Reyna yelled. 'I do this for the good of the legion, for the good of Rome. We must stand together with our Greek brethren!'

'Listen to her!' Nico marched forward.

He wasn't even sure why he did it. Why would either side listen to him? He was the worst speaker, the worst ambassador ever.

Yet he strode between the battle lines, his black sword in his hand. 'Reyna risked her life for all of you! We brought this statue halfway across the world, Roman and Greek working together, because we *must* join forces. Gaia is rising. If we don't work together –'

YOU WILL DIE.

The voice shook the earth. Nico's feeling of peace and safety instantly vanished. Wind swept across the hillside. The ground itself became fluid and sticky, the grass pulling at Nico's boots.

A FUTILE GESTURE.

Nico felt as if he was standing on the goddess's throat – as if the entire length of Long Island resonated with her vocal cords.

BUT, IF IT MAKES YOU HAPPY, YOU MAY DIE TOGETHER.

'No ...' Octavian scrambled backwards. 'No, no ...' He broke and ran, pushing through his own troops.

'CLOSE RANKS!' Reyna yelled.

The Greeks and Romans moved together, standing shoulder to shoulder as all around them the earth shook.

Octavian's *auxilia* troops surged forward, surrounding the demigods. Both camps put together were a minuscule dot in a sea of enemies. They would make their final stand on Half-Blood Hill, with the Athena Parthenos as their rallying point.

But even here they stood on enemy ground. Because Gaia *was* the earth, and the earth was awake.



XLIX

Jason

JASON HAD HEARD OF someone's life flashing before his eyes.

But he didn't think it would be like this.

Standing with his friends in a defensive ring, surrounded by giants, then looking up at an impossible vision in the sky – Jason could very clearly picture himself fifty years in the future.

He was sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch of a house on the California coast. Piper was serving lemonade. Her hair was grey. Deep lines etched the corners of her eyes, but she was still as beautiful as ever. Jason's grandchildren sat around his feet, and he was trying to explain to them what had happened on this day in Athens.

No, I'm serious, he said. Just six demigods on the ground and one more in a burning ship above the Acropolis. We were surrounded by thirty-foot-tall giants who were about to kill us. Then the sky opened up and the gods descended!

Granddad, the kids said, you are full of schist.

I'm not kidding! he protested. *The Olympian gods came charging out of the heavens on their war chariots, trumpets blaring, swords flaming. And your great-grandfather, the king of the gods, led the charge, a javelin of pure electricity crackling in his hand!*

His grandkids laughed at him. And Piper glanced over, smiling, like *Would you believe it, if you hadn't been there?*

But Jason was there. He looked up as the clouds parted over the Acropolis, and he almost doubted the new prescription lenses Asclepius had given him. Instead of blue skies, he saw black space spangled with stars, the palaces of Mount Olympus gleaming silver and gold in the background. And an army of gods charged down from on high.

It was too much to process. And it was probably better for his health that he didn't see it all. Only later would Jason be able to remember bits and pieces.

There was supersized Jupiter – no, this was *Zeus*, his original form – riding into battle in a golden chariot, a lightning bolt the size of a telephone pole crackling in one hand. Pulling his chariot were four horses made of wind, each constantly shifting from equine to human form, trying to break free. For a split second, one took on the icy visage of *Boreas*. Another wore Notus's swirling crown of fire and steam. A third flashed the smug lazy smile of *Zephyrus*. Zeus had bound and harnessed the four wind gods themselves.

On the underbelly of the *Argo II*, the glass bay doors split open. The goddess Nike tumbled out, free from her golden net. She spread her glittering wings and soared to Zeus's side, taking her rightful place as his charioteer.

'MY MIND IS RESTORED!' she roared. 'VICTORY TO THE GODS!'

At Zeus's left flank rode Hera, her chariot pulled by enormous peacocks, their rainbow-coloured plumage so bright it gave Jason the spins.

Ares bellowed with glee as he thundered down on the back of a fire-breathing horse. His spear glistened red.

In the last second, before the gods reached the Parthenon, they seemed to displace themselves, like they'd jumped through hyperspace. The chariots disappeared. Suddenly Jason and his friends were surrounded by the Olympians, now human-sized, tiny next to the giants, but glowing with power.

Jason shouted and charged Porphyrion.

His friends joined in the carnage.

The fighting ranged all over the Parthenon and spilled across the Acropolis. Out of the corner of his eye, Jason saw Annabeth fighting Enceladus. At her side stood a woman with long dark hair and golden armour over her white robes. The goddess thrust her spear at the giant, then brandished her shield with the fearsome bronzed visage of Medusa. Together, Athena and Annabeth drove Enceladus back into the nearest wall of metal scaffolding, which collapsed on top of him.

On the opposite side of the temple, Frank Zhang and the god Ares smashed through an entire phalanx of giants – Ares with his spear and shield, Frank (as an African elephant) with his trunk and feet. The war god laughed and stabbed and disembowelled like a kid destroying piñatas.

Hazel raced through the battle on Arion's back, disappearing in the Mist whenever a giant came close, then appearing behind him and stabbing him in the back. The goddess Hecate danced in her wake, setting fire to their enemies with two blazing torches. Jason didn't see Hades, but whenever a giant stumbled and fell the ground broke open and the giant was snapped up and swallowed.

Percy battled the giant twins, Otis and Ephialtes, while at his side fought a bearded man with a trident and a loud Hawaiian shirt. The twin giants stumbled. Poseidon's trident morphed into a fire hose, and the god sprayed the giants out of the Parthenon with a high-powered blast in the shape of wild horses.

Piper was maybe the most impressive. She fenced with the giantess Periboia, sword against sword. Despite the fact that her opponent was five times larger, Piper seemed to be holding her own. The goddess Aphrodite floated around them on a small white cloud, strewing rose petals in the giantess's eyes and calling encouragement to Piper. 'Lovely, my dear. Yes, good. Hit her again!'

Whenever Periboia tried to strike, doves rose up from nowhere and fluttered in the giantess's face.

As for Leo, he was racing across the deck of the *Argo II*, shooting ballistae, dropping hammers on the giants' heads and blowtorching their loincloths. Behind him at the helm, a burly bearded guy in a mechanic's uniform was tinkering with the controls, furiously trying to keep the ship aloft.

The strangest sight was the old giant Thoon, who was getting bludgeoned to death by three old ladies with brass clubs – the Fates, armed for war. Jason decided there was nothing in the world scarier than a gang of bat-wielding grannies.

He noticed all of these things, and a dozen other melees in progress, but most of his attention was fixed on the enemy before him – Porphyrion, the giant king – and on the god who fought by Jason's side: Zeus.

My father, Jason thought in disbelief.

Porphyrion didn't give him much chance to savour the moment. The giant used his spear in a whirlwind of swipes, jabs and slashes. It was all Jason could do to stay alive.

Still ... Zeus's presence felt reassuringly familiar. Even though Jason had never met his father, he was reminded of all his happiest moments – his birthday picnic with Piper in Rome; the day Lupa showed him Camp Jupiter for the first

time; his games of hide-and-seek with Thalia in their apartment when he was tiny; an afternoon on the beach when his mother had picked him up, kissed him and showed him an oncoming storm. *Never be afraid of a thunderstorm, Jason. That is your father, letting you know he loves you.*

Zeus smelled of rain and clean wind. He made the air burn with energy. Up close, his lightning bolt appeared as a bronze rod a metre long, pointed on both ends, with blades of energy extending from both sides to form a javelin of white electricity. He slashed across the giant's path and Porphyrion collapsed into his makeshift throne, which crumbled under the giant's weight.

'No throne for you,' Zeus growled. 'Not here. Not *ever*.'

'You *cannot* stop us!' the giant yelled. 'It is *done*! The Earth Mother is awake!'

In answer, Zeus blasted the throne to rubble. The giant king flew backwards out of the temple and Jason ran after him, his father at his heels.

They backed Porphyrion to the edge of the cliffs, the whole of modern Athens spread out below. Lightning had melted all the weapons in the giant's hair. Molten Celestial bronze dripped through his dreadlocks like caramel. His skin steamed and blistered.

Porphyrion snarled and raised his spear. 'Your cause is lost, Zeus. Even if you defeat me, the Earth Mother shall simply raise me again!'

'Then perhaps,' Zeus said, 'you should not die in the embrace of Gaia. Jason, my son ...'

Jason had never felt so good, so *recognized*, as when he father said his name. It was like last winter at Camp Half-Blood, when his erased memories had finally returned. Jason suddenly understood another layer of his existence – a part of his identity that had been cloudy before.

Now he had no doubt: he was the son of Jupiter, god of the sky. He was his father's child.

Jason advanced.

Porphyrion lashed out wildly with his spear, but Jason cut it in half with his *gladius*. He charged in, jabbing his sword through the giant's breastplate, then summoned the winds and blasted Porphyrion off the edge of the cliff.

As the giant fell, screaming, Zeus pointed his lightning bolt. An arc of pure white heat vaporized Porphyrion in midair. His ashes drifted down in a gentle

cloud, dusting the tops of the olive trees on the slopes of the Acropolis.

Zeus turned to Jason. His lightning bolt flickered off, and Zeus clipped the Celestial bronze rod to his belt. The god's eyes were stormy grey. His salt-and-pepper hair and his beard looked like stratus clouds. Jason found it strange that the lord of the universe, king of Olympus, was only a few inches taller than he was.

'My son.' Zeus clasped Jason's shoulder. 'There is so much I would like to tell you ...'

The god took a heavy breath, making the air crackle and Jason's new glasses fog up. 'Alas, as king of the gods, I must not show favouritism to my children. When we return to the other Olympians, I will not be able to praise you as much as I would like, or give you as much credit as you deserve.'

'I don't want praise.' Jason's voice quavered. 'Just a little time together would be nice. I mean, I don't even know you.'

Zeus's gaze was as far away as the ozone layer. 'I am always with you, Jason. I have watched your progress with pride, but it will never be possible for us to be ...'

He curled his fingers, as if trying to pluck the right words out of the air. *Close. Normal. A true father and son.* 'From birth, you were destined to be Hera's – to appease her wrath. Even your name, Jason, was her choice. You did not ask for this. I did not want it. But when I gave you over to her ... I had no idea what a good man you would become. Your journey has shaped you, made you both kind and great. Whatever happens when we return to the Parthenon, know that I do *not* hold you accountable. You have proven yourself a true hero.'

Jason's emotions were a jumble in his chest. 'What do you mean ... *whatever happens?*'

'The worst is not over,' Zeus warned. 'And someone must take the blame for what has happened. Come.'



L

Jason

NOTHING WAS LEFT OF THE GIANTS except heaps of ash, a few spears and some burning dreadlocks.

The *Argo II* was still aloft, barely, moored to the top of the Parthenon. Half the ship's oars were broken off or tangled. Smoke streamed from several large splits in the hull. The sails were peppered with burning holes.

Leo looked almost as bad. He stood in the midst of the temple with the other crewmembers, his face covered in soot, his clothes smouldering.

The gods fanned out in a semicircle as Zeus approached. None of them seemed particularly joyful about their victory.

Apollo and Artemis stood together in the shadow of a column, as if trying to hide. Hera and Poseidon were having an intense discussion with another goddess in green and gold robes – perhaps Demeter. Nike tried to put a golden laurel wreath on Hecate's head, but the goddess of magic swatted it away. Hermes sneaked close to Athena, attempting to put his arm around her. Athena turned her *aegis* shield his way and Hermes scuffled off.

The only Olympian who seemed in a good mood was Ares. He laughed and pantomimed gutting an enemy while Frank listened, his expression polite but queasy.

'Brethren,' Zeus said, 'we are healed, thanks to the work of these demigods. The Athena Parthenos, which once stood in this temple, now stands at Camp Half-Blood. It has united our offspring, and thus our own essences.'

'Lord Zeus,' Piper spoke up, 'is Reyna okay? Nico and Coach Hedge?'

Jason couldn't quite believe Piper was asking after Reyna's health, but it made him glad.

Zeus knitted his cloud-coloured eyebrows. ‘They succeeded in their mission. As of this moment they are alive. Whether or not they are *okay* –’

‘There is still work to be done,’ Queen Hera interrupted. She spread her arms like she wanted a group hug. ‘But my heroes ... you have triumphed over the giants as I knew you would. My plan succeeded beautifully.’

Zeus turned on his wife. Thunder shook the Acropolis. ‘Hera, do not *dare* take credit! You have caused *at least* as many problems as you’ve fixed!’

The queen of heaven blanched. ‘Husband, surely you see now – this was the only way.’

‘There is never only *one* way!’ Zeus bellowed. ‘That is why there are *three* Fates, not one. Is this not so?’

By the ruins of the giant king’s throne, the three old ladies silently bowed their heads in recognition. Jason noticed that the other gods stayed well away from the Fates and their gleaming brass clubs.

‘Please, husband.’ Hera tried for a smile, but she was so clearly frightened that Jason almost felt sorry for her. ‘I only did what I –’

‘Silence!’ Zeus snapped. ‘You disobeyed my orders. Nevertheless ... I recognize that you acted with honest intentions. The valour of these seven heroes has proven that you were not entirely without wisdom.’

Hera looked like she wanted to argue, but she kept her mouth shut.

‘Apollo, however ...’ Zeus glared into the shadows where the twins were standing. ‘My son, come here.’

Apollo inched forward like he was walking the plank. He looked so much like a teenage demigod it was unnerving – no more than seventeen, wearing jeans and a Camp Half-Blood T-shirt, with a bow over his shoulder and a sword at his belt. With his tousled blond hair and blue eyes, he might’ve been Jason’s brother on the mortal side as well as the godly side.

Jason wondered if Apollo had assumed this form to be inconspicuous, or to look pitiable to his father. The fear in Apollo’s face certainly looked real, and also very human.

The Three Fates gathered around the god, circling him, their withered hands raised.

‘Twice you have defied me,’ Zeus said.

Apollo moistened his lips. ‘My – my lord –’

‘You neglected your duties. You succumbed to flattery and vanity. You encouraged your descendant Octavian to follow his dangerous path, and you prematurely revealed a prophecy that may *yet* destroy us all.’

‘But –’

‘Enough!’ Zeus boomed. ‘We will speak of your punishment later. For now, you will wait on Olympus.’

Zeus flicked his hand, and Apollo turned into a cloud of glitter. The Fates swirled around him, dissolving into air, and the glittery whirlwind shot into the sky.

‘What will happen to him?’ Jason asked.

The gods stared at him, but Jason didn’t care. Having actually met Zeus, he had a newfound sympathy for Apollo.

‘It is not your concern,’ Zeus said. ‘We have other problems to address.’

An uncomfortable silence settled over the Parthenon.

It didn’t feel right to let the matter go. Jason didn’t see how Apollo deserved to be singled out for punishment.

Someone must take the blame, Zeus had said.

But why?

‘Father,’ Jason said, ‘I made a vow to honour all the gods. I promised Kymopoleia that once this war is over none of the gods would be without shrines at the camps.’

Zeus scowled. ‘That’s fine. But ... Kym who?’

Poseidon coughed into his fist. ‘She’s one of mine.’

‘My point,’ Jason said, ‘is that blaming each other isn’t going solve anything. That’s how the Romans and Greeks got divided in the first place.’

The air became dangerously ionized. Jason’s scalp tingled.

He realized he was risking his father’s wrath. He might get turned into glitter or blasted off the Acropolis. He’d known his dad for five minutes and made a good impression. Now he was throwing it away.

A good Roman wouldn’t keep talking.

Jason kept talking. ‘Apollo wasn’t the problem. To punish him for Gaia waking is –’ he wanted to say *stupid*, but he caught himself – ‘unwise.’

‘Unwise.’ Zeus’s voice was almost a whisper. ‘Before the assembled gods, you would call me *unwise*.’

Jason's friends watched on full alert. Percy looked like he was ready to jump in and fight at his side.

Then Artemis stepped out of the shadows. 'Father, this hero has fought long and hard for our cause. His nerves are frayed. We should take that into account.'

Jason started to protest, but Artemis stopped him with a glance. Her expression sent a message so clear she might have been speaking in his mind: *Thank you, demigod. But do not press this. I will reason with Zeus when he is calmer.*

'Surely, Father,' the goddess continued, 'we should attend to our more pressing problems, as you pointed out.'

'Gaia,' Annabeth chimed in, clearly anxious to change the topic. 'She's awake, isn't she?'

Zeus turned towards her. Around Jason, the air molecules stopped humming. His skull felt like it had just come out of the microwave.

'That is correct,' Zeus said. 'The blood of Olympus was spilled. She is fully conscious.'

'Oh, come on!' Percy complained. 'I get a little nosebleed and I wake up the entire earth? That's not fair!'

Athena shouldered her *aegis*. 'Complaining of unfairness is like assigning blame, Percy Jackson. It does no one any good.' She gave Jason an approving glance. 'Now you must move quickly. Gaia rises to destroy your camp.'

Poseidon leaned on his trident. 'For once, Athena is right.'

'*For once?*' Athena protested.

'Why would Gaia be back at camp?' Leo asked. 'Percy's nosebleed was here.'

'Dude,' Percy said, 'first off, you heard Athena – don't blame my nose. Second, Gaia's the *earth*. She can pop up anywhere she wants. Besides, she *told* us she was going to do this. She said the first thing on her to-do list was destroying our camp. Question is: how do we stop her?'

Frank looked at Zeus. 'Um, sir, Your Majesty, can't you gods just pop over there with us? You've got the chariots and the magic powers and whatnot.'

'Yes!' Hazel said. 'We defeated the giants together in two seconds. Let's all go –'

'No,' Zeus said flatly.

'No?' Jason asked. 'But, Father –'

Zeus's eyes sparked with power, and Jason realized he'd pushed his dad as far as he could for today ... and maybe for the next few centuries.

'That's the problem with prophecies,' Zeus growled. 'When Apollo allowed the Prophecy of Seven to be spoken, and when Hera took it upon herself to interpret the words, the Fates wove the future in such a way that it had only so many possible outcomes, so many solutions. You seven, the demigods, are destined to defeat Gaia. We, the gods, *cannot*.'

'I don't get it,' Piper said. 'What's the point of being gods if you have to rely on puny mortals to do your bidding?'

All the gods exchanged dark looks. Aphrodite, however, laughed gently and kissed her daughter. 'My dear Piper, don't you think we've been asking *ourselves* that question for thousands of years? But it is what binds us together, keeps us eternal. We need you mortals as much as you need us. Annoying as that may be, it's the truth.'

Frank shuffled uncomfortably, like he missed being an elephant. 'So how can we possibly get to Camp Half-Blood in time to save it? It took us months to reach Greece.'

'The winds,' Jason said. 'Father, can't you unleash the winds to send our ship back?'

Zeus glowered. 'I could slap you back to Long Island.'

'Um, was that a joke, or a threat, or —'

'No,' Zeus said, 'I mean it quite literally. I could *slap* your ship back to Camp Half-Blood, but the force involved ...'

Over by the ruined giant throne, the grungy god in the mechanic's uniform shook his head. 'My boy Leo built a good ship, but it won't sustain that kind of stress. It would break apart as soon as it arrived, maybe sooner.'

Leo straightened his tool belt. 'The *Argo II* can make it. It only has to stay in one piece long enough to get us back home. Once there, we can abandon ship.'

'Dangerous,' warned Hephaestus. 'Perhaps fatal.'

The goddess Nike twirled a laurel wreath on her finger. 'Victory is always dangerous. And it often requires sacrifice. Leo Valdez and I have discussed this.' She stared pointedly at Leo.

Jason didn't like that at all. He remembered Asclepius's grim expression when the doctor had examined Leo. *Oh, my. Oh, I see ...* Jason knew what they had to

do to defeat Gaia. He knew the risks. But he wanted to take those risks himself, not put them on Leo.

Piper will have the physician's cure, he told himself. She'll keep us both covered.

'Leo,' Annabeth said, 'what is Nike talking about?'

Leo waved off the question. 'The usual. Victory. Sacrifice. Blah, blah, blah. Doesn't matter. We can do this, guys. We *have* to do this.'

A feeling of dread settled over Jason. Zeus was correct about one thing: the worst was yet to come.

When the choice comes, Notus the South Wind had told him, storm or fire, do not despair.

Jason made the choice. 'Leo's right. All aboard for one last trip.'



LI

Jason

SO MUCH FOR A TENDER FAREWELL.

The last Jason saw of his dad, Zeus was a hundred feet tall, holding the *Argo II* by its prow. He boomed, ‘*HOLD ON!*’

Then he tossed the ship up and spiked it overhand like a volleyball.

If Jason hadn’t been strapped to the mast with one of Leo’s twenty-point safety harnesses, he would have disintegrated. As it was, his stomach tried to stay behind in Greece and all the air was sucked out of his lungs.

The sky turned black. The ship rattled and creaked. The deck cracked like thin ice under Jason’s legs and, with a sonic boom, the *Argo II* hurtled out of the clouds.

‘Jason!’ Leo shouted. ‘Hurry!’

His fingers felt like melted plastic, but Jason managed to undo the straps.

Leo was lashed to the control console, desperately trying to right the ship as they spiralled downward in free fall. The sails were on fire. Festus creaked in alarm. A catapult peeled away and lifted into the air. Centrifugal force sent the shields flying off the railings like metal Frisbees.

Wider cracks opened in the deck as Jason staggered towards the hold, using the winds to keep himself anchored.

If he couldn’t make it to the others ...

Then the hatch burst open. Frank and Hazel stumbled through, pulling on the guide rope they’d attached to the mast. Piper, Annabeth and Percy followed, all of them looking disoriented.

‘Go!’ Leo yelled. ‘Go, go, go!’

For once, Leo’s tone was deadly serious.

They'd talked through their evacuation plan, but that slap across the world had made Jason's mind sluggish. Judging from the others' expressions, they weren't in much better shape.

Buford the table saved them. He clattered across the deck with his holographic Hedge blaring, 'LET'S GO! MOVE IT! CUT THAT OUT!'

Then his tabletop split into helicopter blades and Buford buzzed away.

Frank changed form. Instead of a dazed demigod, he was now a dazed grey dragon. Hazel climbed onto his neck. Frank grabbed Percy and Annabeth in his front claws, then spread his wings and soared away.

Jason held Piper by the waist, ready to fly, but he made the mistake of glancing down. The view was a spinning kaleidoscope of sky, earth, sky, earth. The ground was getting awfully close.

'Leo, you won't make it!' Jason shouted. 'Come with us!'

'No! Get out of here!'

'Leo!' Piper tried. 'Please –'

'Save your charmspeak, Pipes! I told you, I've got a plan. Now shoo!'

Jason took a last look at the splintering ship.

The *Argo II* had been their home for so long. Now they were abandoning it for good – and leaving Leo behind.

Jason hated it, but he saw the determination in Leo's eyes. Just like the visit with his father, Zeus, there was no time for a proper goodbye.

Jason harnessed the winds, and he and Piper shot into the sky.

The ground wasn't much less chaotic.

As they plummeted, Jason saw a vast army of monsters spread across the hills – *cynocephali*, two-headed men, wild centaurs, ogres and others he couldn't even name – surrounding two tiny islands of demigods. At the crest of Half-Blood Hill, gathered at the feet of the Athena Parthenos, was the main force of Camp Half-Blood along with the First and Fifth Cohorts, rallied around the golden eagle of the legion. The other three Roman cohorts were in a defensive formation several hundred yards away and seemed to be taking the brunt of the attack.

Giant eagles circled Jason, screeching urgently, as if looking for orders.

Frank the grey dragon flew alongside with his passengers.

‘Hazel!’ Jason yelled. ‘Those three cohorts are in trouble! If they don’t merge with the rest of the demigods –’

‘On it!’ Hazel said. ‘Go, Frank!’

Dragon Frank veered to the left with Annabeth in one claw yelling, ‘Let’s get ’em!’ and Percy in the other claw screaming, ‘I hate flying!’

Piper and Jason veered right towards the summit of Half-Blood Hill.

Jason’s heart lifted when he saw Nico di Angelo on the front lines with the Greeks, slashing his way through a crowd of two-headed men. A few feet away, Reyna sat astride a new pegasus, her sword drawn. She shouted orders at the legion, and the Romans obeyed without question, as if she’d never been away.

Jason didn’t see Octavian anywhere. Good. Neither did he see a colossal earth goddess laying waste to the world. Very good. Perhaps Gaia had risen, taken one look at the modern world and decided to go back to sleep. Jason wished they could be that lucky, but he doubted it.

He and Piper landed on the hill, their swords drawn, and a cheer went up from the Greeks and the Romans.

‘About time!’ Reyna called. ‘Glad you could join us!’

With a start, Jason realized she was addressing Piper, not him.

Piper grinned. ‘We had some giants to kill!’

‘Excellent!’ Reyna returned the smile. ‘Help yourself to some barbarians.’

‘Why, thank you!’

The two girls launched into battle side by side.

Nico nodded to Jason as if they’d just seen each other five minutes ago, then went back to turning two-headed men into no-headed corpses. ‘Good timing. Where’s the ship?’

Jason pointed. The *Argo II* streaked across the sky in a ball of fire, shedding burning chunks of mast, hull and armament. Jason didn’t see how even fireproof Leo could survive in that inferno, but he had to hope.

‘Gods,’ Nico said. ‘Is everyone okay?’

‘Leo ...’ Jason’s voice broke. ‘He said he had a plan.’

The comet disappeared behind the western hills. Jason waited with dread for the sound of an explosion, but he heard nothing over the roar of battle.

Nico met his eyes. ‘He’ll be fine.’

‘Sure.’

‘But just in case ... For Leo.’

‘For Leo,’ Jason agreed. They charged into the fight.

Jason’s anger gave him renewed strength. The Greeks and Romans slowly pushed back the enemies. Wild centaurs toppled. Wolf-headed men howled as they were cut to ashes.

More monsters kept appearing – *karpoi* grain spirits swirling out of the grass, gryphons diving from the sky, lumpy clay humanoids that made Jason think of evil Play-Doh men.

‘They’re ghosts with earthen shells!’ Nico warned. ‘Don’t let them hit you!’

Obviously Gaia had kept some surprises in reserve.

At one point, Will Solace, the lead camper for Apollo, ran up to Nico and said something in his ear. Over the yelling and clashing of blades, Jason couldn’t hear the words.

‘Jason, I have to go!’ Nico said.

Jason didn’t really understand, but he nodded, and Will and Nico dashed off into the fray.

A moment later, a squad of Hermes campers gathered around Jason for no apparent reason.

Connor Stoll grinned. ‘What’s up, Grace?’

‘I’m good,’ Jason said. ‘You?’

Connor dodged an ogre club and stabbed a grain spirit, which exploded in a cloud of wheat. ‘Yeah, can’t complain. Nice day for it.’

Reyna yelled, ‘*Eiaculare flammis!*’ and a wave of flaming arrows arced over the legion’s shield wall, destroying a platoon of ogres. The Roman ranks moved forward, impaling centaurs and trampling wounded ogres under their bronze-tipped boots.

Somewhere downhill, Jason heard Frank Zhang yell in Latin: ‘*Repellere equites!*’

A massive herd of centaurs parted in a panic as the legion’s other three cohorts ploughed through in perfect formation, their spears bright with monster blood. Frank marched before them. On the left flank, riding Arion, Hazel beamed with pride.

‘Ave, Praetor Zhang!’ Reyna called.

‘Ave, Praetor Ramírez-Arellano!’ Frank said. ‘Let’s do this. Legion, CLOSE RANKS!’

A cheer went up among the Romans as the five cohorts melded into one massive killing machine. Frank pointed his sword forward and, from the golden eagle standard, tendrils of lightning swept across the enemy, turning several hundred monsters to toast.

‘Legion, *cuneum formate!*’ Reyna yelled. ‘Advance!’

Another cheer on Jason’s right as Percy and Annabeth reunited with the forces of Camp Half-Blood.

‘Greeks!’ Percy yelled. ‘Let’s, um, fight stuff!’

They yelled like banshees and charged.

Jason grinned. He loved the Greeks. They had no organization whatsoever, but they made up for it with enthusiasm.

Jason was feeling good about the battle, except for two big questions: Where was Leo? And where was Gaia?

Unfortunately, he got the second answer first.

Under his feet, the earth rippled as if Half-Blood Hill had become a giant water mattress. Demigods fell. Ogres slipped. Centaurs charged face-first into the grass.

AWAKE, a voice boomed all around them.

A hundred yards away, at the crest of the next hill, the grass and soil swirled upward like the point of a massive drill. The column of earth thickened into the twenty-foot-tall figure of a woman – her dress woven from blades of grass, her skin as white as quartz, her hair brown and tangled like tree roots.

‘*Little fools.*’ Gaia the Earth Mother opened her pure green eyes. ‘*The paltry magic of your statue cannot contain me.*’

As she said it, Jason realized why Gaia hadn’t appeared until now. The Athena Parthenos had been protecting the demigods, holding back the wrath of the earth, but even Athena’s might could only last so long against a primordial goddess.

Fear as palpable as a cold front washed over the demigod army.

‘Stand fast!’ Piper shouted, her charmspeak clear and loud. ‘Greeks and Romans, we can fight her together!’

Gaia laughed. She spread her arms and the earth bent towards her – trees tilting, bedrock groaning, soil rippling in waves. Jason rose on the wind, but all around him monsters and demigods alike started to sink into the ground. One of Octavian’s onagers capsized and disappeared into the side of the hill.

‘The whole earth is my body,’ Gaia boomed. *‘How would you fight the goddess of –’*

FOOOOMP!

In a flash of bronze, Gaia was swept off the hillside, snarled in the claws of a fifty-ton metal dragon.

Festus, reborn, rose into the sky on gleaming wings, spewing fire from his maw triumphantly. As he ascended, the rider on his back got smaller and more difficult to discern, but Leo’s grin was unmistakable.

‘Pipes! Jason!’ he shouted down. ‘You coming? The fight is up here!’



LII

Jason

AS SOON AS GAIA ACHIEVED LIFTOFF, the ground solidified.

Demigods stopped sinking, though many were still buried up to their waists. Sadly, the monsters seemed to be digging themselves out more quickly. They charged the Greek and Roman ranks, taking advantage of the demigods' disorganization.

Jason put his arms around Piper's waist. He was about to take off when Percy yelled, 'Wait! Frank can fly the rest of us up there! We can all –'

'No, man,' Jason said. 'They need you here. There's still an army to defeat. Besides, the prophecy –'

'He's right.' Frank gripped Percy's arm. 'You have to let them do this, Percy. It's like Annabeth's quest in Rome. Or Hazel at the Doors of Death. This part can only be them.'

Percy obviously didn't like it, but at that moment a flood of monsters swept over the Greek forces. Annabeth called to him, 'Hey! Problem over here!' Percy ran to join her.

Frank and Hazel turned to Jason. They raised their arms in the Roman salute, then ran off to regroup the legion.

Jason and Piper spiralled upward on the wind.

'I've got the cure,' Piper murmured like a chant. 'It'll be fine. I've got the cure.'

Jason realized she'd lost her sword somehow during the battle, but he doubted it would matter. Against Gaia, a sword would do no good. This was about storm and fire ... and a third power, Piper's charmspeak, which would hold them together. Last winter, Piper had slowed the power of Gaia at the Wolf House,

helping to free Hera from a cage of earth. Now she would have an even bigger job.

As they ascended, Jason gathered the wind and clouds around him. The sky responded with frightening speed. Soon they were in the eye of a maelstrom. Lightning burned his eyes. Thunder made his teeth vibrate.

Directly above them, Festus grappled with the earth goddess. Gaia kept disintegrating, trying to trickle back to the ground, but the winds kept her aloft. Festus sprayed her with flames, which seemed to force her into solid form. Meanwhile, from Festus's back, Leo blasted the goddess with flames of his own and hurled insults. 'Potty Sludge! Dirt Face! THIS IS FOR MY MOTHER, ESPERANZA VALDEZ!'

His whole body was wreathed in fire. Rain hung in the stormy air, but it only sizzled and steamed around him.

Jason zoomed towards them.

Gaia turned into loose white sand, but Jason summoned a squadron of *venti* who churned around her, constraining her in a cocoon of wind.

Gaia fought back. When she wasn't disintegrating, she lashed out with shrapnel blasts of stone and soil that Jason barely deflected. Stoking the storm, containing Gaia, keeping himself and Piper aloft ... Jason had never done anything so difficult. He felt like he was covered in lead weights, trying to swim with only his legs while holding a car over his head. But he *had* to keep Gaia off the ground.

That was the secret Kym had hinted at when they spoke at the bottom of the sea.

Long ago, Ouranos the sky god had been tricked down to the earth by Gaia and the Titans. They'd held him on the ground so he couldn't escape and, with his powers weakened from being so far from his home territory, they'd been able to cut him apart.

Now Jason, Leo and Piper had to reverse that scenario. They had to keep Gaia away from her source of power – the earth – and weaken her until she could be defeated.

Together they rose. Festus creaked and groaned with the effort, but he continued to gain altitude. Jason still didn't understand how Leo had managed to remake the dragon. Then he recalled all the hours Leo had spent working inside

the hull over the last few weeks. Leo must have been planning this all along and building a new body for Festus within the framework of the ship.

He must have known in his gut that the *Argo II* would eventually fall apart. A ship turning into a dragon ... Jason supposed it was no more amazing than the dragon turning into a suitcase back in Quebec.

However it had happened, Jason was elated to see their old friend in action once more.

'YOU CANNOT DEFEAT ME!' Gaia crumbled to sand, only to get blasted by more flames. Her body melted into a lump of glass, shattered, then re-formed again as human. *'I AM ETERNAL!'*

'Eternally annoying!' Leo yelled, and he urged Festus higher.

Jason and Piper rose with them.

'Get me closer,' Piper urged. 'I need to be next to her.'

'Piper, the flames and the shrapnel –'

'I know.'

Jason moved in until they were right next to Gaia. The winds encased the goddess, keeping her solid, but it was all Jason could do to contain her blasts of sand and soil. Her eyes were solid green, like all nature had been condensed into a few spoonfuls of organic matter.

'FOOLISH CHILDREN!' Her face contorted with miniature earthquakes and mudslides.

'You are so weary,' Piper told the goddess, her voice radiating kindness and sympathy. 'Aeons of pain and disappointment weigh on you.'

'SILENCE!'

The force of Gaia's anger was so great that Jason momentarily lost control of the wind. He would've dropped into free fall, but Festus caught him and Piper in his other huge claw.

Amazingly, Piper kept her focus. 'Millennia of sorrow,' she told Gaia. 'Your husband Ouranos was abusive. Your grandchildren the gods overthrew your beloved children the Titans. Your other children, the Cyclopes and the [Hundred-Handed Ones](#), were thrown into Tartarus. You are so tired of heartache.'

'LIES!' Gaia crumbled into a tornado of soil and grass, but her essence seemed to churn more sluggishly.

If they gained any more altitude, the air would be too thin to breathe. Jason would be too weak to control it. Piper's talk of exhaustion affected him, too, sapping his strength, making his body feel heavy.

'What you want,' Piper continued, 'more than victory, more than revenge ... you want *rest*. You are so weary, so incomprehensibly tired of the ungrateful mortals and immortals.'

'I – YOU DO NOT SPEAK FOR ME – YOU CANNOT –'

'You want one thing,' Piper said soothingly, her voice resonating through Jason's bones. 'One word. You want permission to close your eyes and forget your troubles. You – want – SLEEP.'

Gaia solidified into human form. Her head lolled, her eyes closed, and she went limp in Festus's claw.

Unfortunately, Jason started to black out, too.

The wind was dying. The storm dissipated. Dark spots danced in his eyes.

'Leo!' Piper gasped for breath. 'We only have a few seconds. My charmspeak won't –'

'I know!' Leo looked like he was *made* of fire. Flames rippled beneath his skin, illuminating his skull. Festus steamed and glowed, his claws burning through Jason's shirt. 'I can't contain the fire much longer. I'll vaporize her. Don't worry. But you guys need to leave.'

'No!' Jason said. 'We have to stay with you. Piper's got the cure. Leo, you can't –'

'Hey.' Leo grinned, which was unnerving in the flames, his teeth like molten silver ingots. 'I told you I had a plan. When are you going to trust me? And by the way – I love you guys.'

Festus's claw opened, and Jason and Piper fell.

Jason had no strength to stop it. He held on to Piper as she cried Leo's name, and they plummeted earthwards.

Festus became an indistinct ball of fire in the sky – a second sun – growing smaller and hotter. Then, in the corner of Jason's eye, a blazing comet streaked upward from the ground with a high-pitched, almost human scream. Just before Jason blacked out, the comet intercepted the ball of fire above them.

The explosion turned the entire sky gold.



LIII

Nico

NICO HAD WITNESSED MANY FORMS OF DEATH. He didn't think anything could surprise him any more.

He was wrong.

In the middle of the battle, Will Solace ran up to him and said one word in his ear: 'Octavian.'

That got Nico's full attention. He had hesitated when he'd had the chance to kill Octavian, but there was no way Nico would let that scumbag augur escape justice. 'Where?'

'Come on,' Will said. 'Hurry.'

Nico turned to Jason, who was fighting next to him. 'Jason, I have to go.'

Then he plunged into the chaos, following Will. They passed Tyson and his Cyclopes, who were bellowing, 'Bad dog! Bad dog!' as they bashed the heads of the *cynocephali*. Grover Underwood and a team of satyrs danced around with their panpipes, playing harmonies so dissonant that the earthen-shelled ghosts cracked apart. Travis Stoll ran past, arguing with his brother. 'What do you *mean* we set the landmines on the wrong hill?'

Nico and Will were halfway down the hill when the ground trembled under their feet. Like everyone else – monster and demigod alike – they froze in horror and watched as the whirling column of earth erupted from the top of the next hill, and Gaia appeared in all her glory.

Then something large and bronze swooped out of the sky.

FOOOOMP!

Festus the bronze dragon snatched up the Earth Mother and soared away with her.

'What – how –?' Nico stammered.

‘I don’t know,’ Will said. ‘But I doubt there’s much we can do about *that*. We have other problems.’

Will sprinted towards the nearest onager. As they got closer, Nico spotted Octavian furiously re-adjusting the machine’s targeting levers. The throwing arm was already primed with a full payload of Imperial gold and explosives. The augur rushed about, tripping over gears and anchor spikes, fumbling with the ropes. Every so often he glanced up at Festus the dragon.

‘Octavian!’ Nico yelled.

The augur spun, then backed up against the huge sphere of ammunition. His fine purple robes snagged on the trigger rope, but Octavian didn’t notice. Fumes from the payload curled about him as if drawn to the Imperial gold jewellery around his arms and neck, the golden wreath in his hair.

‘Oh, I see!’ Octavian’s laughter was brittle and quite insane. ‘Trying to steal my glory, eh? No, no, son of Pluto. I am the saviour of Rome. I was promised!’

Will raised his hands in a placating gesture. ‘Octavian, get away from the onager. That isn’t safe.’

‘Of course it’s not! I will shoot Gaia down with this machine!’

Out of the corner of his eye, Nico saw Jason Grace rocket into the sky with Piper in his arms, flying straight towards Festus.

Around the son of Jupiter, storm clouds gathered, swirling into a hurricane. Thunder boomed.

‘You see?’ Octavian cried. The gold on his body was definitely smoking now, attracted to the catapult’s payload like iron to a giant magnet. ‘The gods approve of my actions!’

‘Jason is making that storm,’ Nico said. ‘If you fire the onager, you’ll kill him and Piper, and –’

‘Good!’ Octavian yelled. ‘They’re traitors! All traitors!’

‘Listen to me,’ Will tried again. ‘This is *not* what Apollo would want. Besides, your robes are –’

‘You know nothing, *Graecus!*’ Octavian wrapped his hand around the release lever. ‘I must act before they get any higher. Only an onager such as this can make the shot. I will singlehandedly –’

‘Centurion,’ said a voice behind him.

From the back of the siege engine, Michael Kahale appeared. He had a large red knot on his forehead where Tyson had knocked him unconscious. He stumbled as he walked. But somehow he had found his way here from the shore, and along the way he'd picked up a sword and shield.

'Michael!' Octavian shrieked with glee. 'Excellent! Guard me while I fire this onager. Then we will kill these *Graeci* together!'

Michael Kahale took in the scene – his boss's robes tangled in the trigger rope, Octavian's jewellery fuming from proximity to the Imperial gold ammunition. He glanced up at the dragon, now high in the air, surrounded by rings of storm clouds like the circles of an archery target. Then he scowled at Nico.

Nico readied his own sword.

Surely Michael Kahale would warn his leader to step away from the onager. Surely he would attack.

'Are you certain, Octavian?' asked the son of Venus.

'Yes!'

'Are you absolutely certain?'

'Yes, you fool! I will be remembered as the saviour of Rome. Now keep them away while I destroy Gaia!'

'Octavian, don't,' Will pleaded. 'We can't allow you –'

'Will,' Nico said, 'we can't stop him.'

Solace stared at him in disbelief, but Nico remembered his father's words in the Chapel of Bones: *Some deaths cannot be prevented.*

Octavian's eyes gleamed. 'That's right, son of Pluto. You are helpless to stop me! It is my destiny! Kahale, stand guard!'

'As you wish.' Michael moved in front of the machine, interposing himself between Octavian and the two Greek demigods. 'Centurion, do what you must.'

Octavian turned to release the catch. 'A good friend to the last.'

Nico almost lost his nerve. If the onager really *did* fire true – if it scored a hit on Festus the dragon, and Nico allowed his friends to be hurt or killed ... But he stayed where he was. For once, he decided to trust the wisdom of his father. *Some deaths should not be prevented.*

'Goodbye, Gaia!' Octavian yelled. 'Goodbye, Jason Grace the traitor!'

Octavian cut the release wire with his augur's knife.

And he disappeared.

The catapult arm sprang upward faster than Nico's eye could follow, launching Octavian along with the ammunition. The augur's scream faded until he was simply part of the fiery comet soaring skyward.

'Goodbye, Octavian,' Michael Kahale said.

He glared at Will and Nico one last time, as if daring them to speak. Then he turned his back and trudged away.

Nico could have lived with Octavian's end.

He might even have said *good riddance*.

But his heart sank as the comet kept gaining altitude. It disappeared into the storm clouds, and the sky exploded in a dome of fire.



LIV

Nico

THE NEXT DAY, THERE WEREN'T MANY ANSWERS.

After the explosion, Piper and Jason – free-falling and unconscious – were plucked out of the sky by giant eagles and brought to safety, but Leo did not reappear. The entire Hephaestus cabin scoured the valley, finding bits and pieces of the *Argo II*'s broken hull, but no sign of Festus the dragon or his master.

All the monsters had been destroyed or scattered. Greek and Roman casualties were heavy, but not nearly as bad as they might have been.

Overnight, the satyrs and nymphs disappeared into the woods for a convocation of the Cloven Elders. In the morning, Grover Underwood reappeared to announce that they could not sense the Earth Mother's presence. Nature was more or less back to normal. Apparently, Jason, Piper and Leo's plan had worked. Gaia had been separated from her source of power, charmed to sleep and then atomized in the combined explosion of Leo's fire and Octavian's man-made comet.

An immortal could never die, but now Gaia would be like her husband, Ouranos. The earth would continue to function as normal, just as the sky did, but Gaia was now so dispersed and powerless that she could never again form a consciousness.

At least, that was the hope ...

Octavian would be remembered for saving Rome by hurling himself into the sky in a fiery ball of death. But it was Leo Valdez who had made the *real* sacrifice.

The victory celebration at camp was muted, due to grief – not just for Leo but also for the many others who had died in battle. Shrouded demigods, both Greek

and Roman, were burned at the campfire, and Chiron asked Nico to oversee the burial rites.

Nico agreed immediately. He was grateful for the opportunity to honour the dead. Even the hundreds of spectators didn't bother him.

The hardest part was afterwards, when Nico and the six demigods from the *Argo II* met on the porch of the Big House.

Jason hung his head, even his glasses lost in shadow. 'We should have been there at the end. We could've helped Leo.'

'It's not right,' Piper agreed, wiping away her tears. 'All that work getting the physician's cure, for *nothing*.'

Hazel broke down crying. 'Piper, where's the cure? Bring it out.'

Bewildered, Piper reached into her belt pouch. She produced the chamois-cloth package, but when she unfolded the cloth it was empty.

All eyes turned to Hazel.

'How?' Annabeth asked.

Frank put his arm around Hazel. 'In Delos, Leo pulled the two of us aside. He pleaded with us to help him.'

Through her tears, Hazel explained how she had switched the physician's cure for an illusion – a trick of the Mist – so that Leo could keep the real vial. Frank told them about Leo's plan to destroy a weakened Gaia with one massive fiery explosion. After talking with Nike and Apollo, Leo had been certain that such an explosion would kill any mortal within a quarter of a mile, so he knew he would have to get far away from everyone.

'He wanted to do it alone,' Frank said. 'He thought there would be a slim chance that he, a son of Hephaestus, could survive the fire, but if anyone was with him ... He said that Hazel and I, being Roman, would understand about sacrifice. But he knew the rest of you would never allow it.'

At first the others looked angry, like they wanted to scream and throw things. But, as Frank and Hazel talked, the group's rage seemed to dissipate. It was hard to be mad at Frank and Hazel when they were both crying. Also ... the plan sounded exactly like the sneaky, twisted, ridiculously annoying and noble sort of thing Leo Valdez would do.

Finally Piper let out a sound somewhere between a sob and a laugh. 'If he were here right now, I would *kill* him. How was he planning to take the cure? He

was *alone!*'

'Maybe he found a way,' Percy said. 'This is Leo we're talking about. He might come back any minute. Then we can take turns strangling him.'

Nico and Hazel exchanged looks. They both knew better, but they said nothing.

The next day, the second since the battle, Romans and Greeks worked side by side to clean up the warzone and tend the wounded. Blackjack the pegasus was recovering nicely from his arrow wound. Guido had decided to adopt Reyna as his human. Reluctantly, Lou Ellen had agreed to turn her new pet piglets back into Romans.

Will Solace hadn't spoken with Nico since the encounter at the onager. The son of Apollo spent most of his time in the infirmary, but whenever Nico saw him running across camp to fetch more medical supplies, or make a house call on some wounded demigod, he felt a strange twinge of melancholy. No doubt Will Solace thought Nico was a monster now, for letting Octavian kill himself.

The Romans bivouacked next to the strawberry fields, where they insisted on building their standard field camp. The Greeks pitched in to help them raise the earthen walls and dig the trenches. Nico had never seen anything stranger or cooler. Dakota shared Kool-Aid with the kids from the [Dionysus](#) cabin. The children of Hermes and [Mercury](#) laughed and told stories and brazenly stole things from just about everyone. Reyna, Annabeth and Piper were inseparable, roaming the camp as a trio to check on the progress of the repairs. Chiron, escorted by Frank and Hazel, inspected the Roman troops and praised them for their bravery.

By evening, the general mood had improved somewhat. The dining hall pavilion had never been so crowded. The Romans were welcomed like old friends. Coach Hedge roamed among the demigods, beaming and holding his baby boy and saying, 'Hey, you want to meet Chuck? This is my boy, Chuck!'

The Aphrodite and Athena girls alike cooed over the feisty little satyr baby, who waved his pudgy fists, kicked his tiny hooves and bleated, 'Baaaa! Baaaa!'

Clarisse, who had been named the baby's godmother, trailed behind the coach like a bodyguard and occasionally muttered, 'All right, all right. Give the kid some space.'

At announcement time, Chiron stepped forward and raised his goblet.

‘Out of every tragedy,’ he said, ‘comes new strength. Today, we thank the gods for this victory. To the gods!’

The demigods all joined the toast, but their enthusiasm seemed muted. Nico understood the feeling: *We saved the gods again, and now we’re supposed to thank them?*

Then Chiron said, ‘And to new friends!’

‘TO NEW FRIENDS!’

Hundreds of demigod voices echoed across the hills.

At the campfire, everyone kept looking at the stars, as if they expected Leo to come back in some dramatic, last-minute surprise. Maybe he’d swoop in, jump off Festus’s back and launch into corny jokes. It didn’t happen.

After a few songs, Reyna and Frank were called to the front. They got a thunderous round of applause from both the Greeks and Romans. Up on Half-Blood Hill, the Athena Parthenos glowed more brightly in moonlight, as if to signal: *These kids are all right.*

‘Tomorrow,’ Reyna said, ‘we Romans must return home. We appreciate your hospitality, especially since we almost killed you –’

‘You almost *got* killed,’ Annabeth corrected.

‘Whatever, Chase.’

Oooooohhhh! the crowd said as one. Then everybody started laughing and pushing each other around. Even Nico had to smile.

‘Anyway,’ Frank took over, ‘Reyna and I agree this marks a new era of friendship between the camps.’

Reyna clapped him on the back. ‘That’s right. For hundreds of years, the gods tried to separate us to keep us from fighting. But there’s a better kind of peace – cooperation.’

Piper stood up from the audience. ‘Are you sure your mom is a *war* goddess?’

‘Yes, McLean,’ Reyna said. ‘I still intend to fight *a lot* of battles. But from now on we fight *together!*’

That got a big cheer.

Zhang raised his hand for quiet. ‘You’ll all be welcome at Camp Jupiter. We’ve come to an agreement with Chiron: a free exchange between the camps –’

weekend visits, training programmes and, of course, emergency aid in times of need –’

‘And parties?’ asked Dakota.

‘Hear, hear!’ said Conner Stoll.

Reyna spread her arms. ‘That goes without saying. We Romans invented parties.’

Another big *Oooohhhhhhh!*

‘So thank you,’ Reyna concluded. ‘All of you. We could’ve chosen hatred and war. Instead we found acceptance and friendship.’

Then she did something so unexpected Nico would later think he dreamed it. She walked up to Nico, who was standing to one side in the shadows, as usual. She grabbed his hand and pulled him gently into the firelight.

‘We had one home,’ she said. ‘Now we have two.’

She gave Nico a big hug and the crowd roared with approval. For once, Nico didn’t feel like pulling away. He buried his face in Reyna’s shoulder and blinked the tears out of his eyes.



LV

Nico

THAT NIGHT, NICO SLEPT IN THE HADES CABIN.

He'd never had any desire to use the place before, but now he shared it with Hazel, which made all the difference.

It made him happy to live with a sister again – even if it was only for a few days, and even if Hazel insisted on partitioning her side of the room with sheets for privacy so it looked like a quarantine zone.

Just before curfew, Frank came to visit and spent a few minutes talking with Hazel in hushed tones.

Nico tried to ignore them. He stretched out in his bunk, which resembled a coffin – a polished mahogany frame, brass railings, blood-red velvet pillows and blankets. Nico hadn't been present when they built this cabin. He definitely had *not* suggested these bunks. Apparently somebody thought the children of Hades were vampires, not demigods.

Finally Frank knocked on the wall next to Nico's bed.

Nico looked over. Zhang stood so tall now. He seemed so ... *Roman*.

'Hey,' Frank said. 'We'll be leaving in the morning. Just wanted to tell you thanks.'

Nico sat up in his bunk. 'You did great, Frank. It's been an honour.'

Frank smiled. 'Honestly, I'm kind of surprised I lived through it. The whole magic firewood thing ...'

Nico nodded. Hazel had told him all about the piece of firewood that controlled Frank's lifeline. Nico took it as a good sign that Frank could talk about it openly now.

'I can't see the future,' Nico told him, 'but I can often tell when people are close to death. You're not. I don't know when that piece of firewood will burn

up. Eventually, we *all* run out of firewood. But it won't be soon, Praetor Zhang. You and Hazel ... you've got a lot more adventures ahead of you. You're just getting started. Be good to my sister, okay?'

Hazel walked up next to Frank and laced her hand with his. 'Nico, you're not threatening my boyfriend, are you?'

The two of them looked so comfortable together it made Nico glad. But it also it caused an ache in his heart – a ghostly pain, like an old war wound throbbing in bad weather.

'No need for threats,' Nico said. 'Frank's a good guy. Or bear. Or bulldog. Or –'

'Oh, stop.' Hazel laughed. Then she kissed Frank. 'See you in the morning.'

'Yeah,' Frank said. 'Nico ... you sure you won't come with us? You'll always have a place in New Rome.'

'Thanks, Praetor. Reyna said the same thing. But ... no.'

'I hope I'll see you again?'

'Oh, you will,' Nico promised. 'I'm going to be the flower boy at your wedding, right?'

'Um ...' Frank got flustered, cleared his throat and shuffled off, running into the doorjamb on the way out.

Hazel crossed her arms. 'You just *had* to tease him about that.'

She sat on Nico's bunk. For a while they just stayed there in comfortable silence ... siblings, children from the past, children of the Underworld.

'I'm going to miss you,' Nico said.

Hazel leaned over and rested her head on his shoulder. 'You too, big brother. You *will* visit.'

He tapped the new officer's badge that gleamed on her shirt. 'Centurion of the Fifth Cohort now. Congratulations. Are there rules against centurions dating praetors?'

'Shhh,' Hazel said. 'It'll be a lot of work getting the legion back in shape, repairing the damage Octavian did. Dating regulations will be the least of my worries.'

'You've come so far. You're not the same girl I brought to Camp Jupiter. Your power with the Mist, your confidence –'

'It's all thanks to you.'

‘No,’ Nico said. ‘Getting a second life is one thing. Making it a *better* life, that’s the trick.’

As soon as he said it, Nico realized he could’ve been talking about himself. He decided not to bring that up.

Hazel sighed. ‘A second life. I just wish ...’

She didn’t need to finish her thought. For the past two days, Leo’s disappearance had hovered like a cloud over the whole camp. Hazel and Nico had been reluctant to join the speculation about what had happened to him.

‘You felt his death, didn’t you?’ Hazel’s eyes were watery. Her voice was small.

‘Yeah,’ Nico admitted. ‘But I don’t know, Hazel. Something about it was ... different.’

‘He couldn’t have taken the physician’s cure. Nothing could have survived that explosion. I thought ... I thought I was helping Leo. I messed up.’

‘No. It is *not* your fault.’ But Nico wasn’t quite so ready to forgive himself. He’d spent the last forty-eight hours replaying the scene with Octavian at the catapult, wondering if he’d done wrong thing. Perhaps the explosive power of that projectile had helped destroy Gaia. Or perhaps it had unnecessarily cost Leo Valdez his life.

‘I just wish he hadn’t died alone,’ Hazel murmured. ‘There was no one with him, no one to give him that cure. There’s not even a body to bury ...’

Her voice broke. Nico put his arm around her.

He held her as she wept. Eventually she fell asleep from exhaustion. Nico tucked her into his own bed and kissed her forehead. Then he went to the shrine of Hades in the corner – a little table decorated with bones and jewels.

‘I suppose,’ he said, ‘there’s a first time for everything.’

He knelt and prayed silently for his father’s guidance.



LVI

Nico

AT DAWN, HE WAS STILL AWAKE when someone rapped at the door.

He turned, registering a face with blond hair, and for a split second he thought it was Will Solace. When Nico realized it was Jason, he was disappointed. Then he felt angry with himself for feeling that way.

He hadn't talked to Will since the battle. The Apollo kids had been too busy with the injured. Besides, Will probably blamed Nico for what happened to Octavian. Why wouldn't he? Nico had basically permitted ... whatever that was. Murder by consensus. A gruesome suicide. By now, Will Solace realized just how creepy and revolting Nico di Angelo was. Of course, Nico didn't care what he thought. But still ...

'You okay?' Jason asked. 'You look –'

'Fine,' Nico snapped. Then he softened his tone. 'If you're looking for Hazel, she's still asleep.'

Jason mouthed, *Oh*, and gestured for Nico to come outside.

Nico stepped into the sunlight, blinking and disoriented. *Ugh* ... Perhaps the cabin's designers had been right about the children of Hades being like vampires. He was *not* a morning person.

Jason didn't look as though he'd slept any better. His hair had a cowlick on one side and his new glasses sat crookedly on his nose. Nico resisted the urge to reach out and straighten them.

Jason pointed to the strawberry fields, where the Romans were breaking camp. 'It was strange to see them here. Now it'll be strange *not* seeing them.'

'Do you regret not going with them?' Nico asked.

Jason's smile was lopsided. 'A little. But I'll be going back and forth between the camps a lot. I have some shrines to build.'

‘I heard. The Senate plans to elect you *Pontifex Maximus*.’

Jason shrugged. ‘I don’t care about the title so much. I *do* care about making sure the gods are remembered. I don’t want them fighting out of jealousy any more, or taking out their frustrations on demigods.’

‘They’re gods,’ Nico said. ‘That’s their nature.’

‘Maybe, but I can try to make it better. I guess Leo would say I’m acting like a mechanic, doing preventative maintenance.’

Nico sensed Jason’s sorrow like an oncoming storm. ‘You know, you couldn’t have stopped Leo. There’s nothing you could have done differently. He knew what had to happen.’

‘I – I guess. I don’t suppose you can tell if he’s still –’

‘He’s gone,’ Nico said. ‘I’m sorry. I wish I could tell you otherwise, but I *sensed* his death.’

Jason stared into the distance.

Nico felt guilty for squashing his hopes. He was almost tempted to mention his own doubts ... what a *different* sensation Leo’s death had given him, as if Leo’s soul had invented its own way into the Underworld, something that involved lots of gears, levers and steam-powered pistons.

Nevertheless, Nico was sure Leo Valdez had died. And death was death. It wouldn’t be fair to give Jason false expectations.

In the distance, the Romans were picking up their gear and toting it across the hill. On the other side, so Nico had heard, a fleet of black SUVs waited to transport the legion cross-country back to California. Nico guessed that would be an interesting road trip. He imagined the entire Twelfth Legion in the drive-through lane at Burger King. He imagined some hapless monster terrorizing a random demigod in Kansas, only to find itself surrounded by several dozen carloads of heavily armoured Romans.

‘Ella the harpy is going with them, you know,’ Jason said. ‘She and Tyson. Even Rachel Elizabeth Dare. They’re going to work together to try to reconstruct the Sibylline Books.’

‘That should be interesting.’

‘Could take years,’ Jason said. ‘But with the voice of Delphi extinguished ...’

‘Rachel still can’t see the future?’

Jason shook his head. 'I wish I knew what happened to Apollo in Athens. Maybe Artemis will get him out of trouble with Zeus and the power of prophecy will work again. But for now those Sibylline Books might be our only way to get guidance for quests.'

'Personally,' Nico said, 'I could do without prophecies or quests for a while.'

'You've got a point.' He straightened his glasses. 'Look, Nico, the reason I wanted to talk to you ... I know what you said back at Auster's palace. I know you already turned down a place at Camp Jupiter. I – I probably can't change your mind about leaving Camp Half-Blood, but I have to –'

'I'm staying.'

Jason blinked. 'What?'

'At Camp Half-Blood. The Hades cabin needs a head counsellor. Have you seen the decor? It's disgusting. I'll have to renovate. And someone needs to do the burial rites properly, since demigods insist on dying heroically.'

'That's – that's fantastic! Dude!' Jason opened his arms for a hug, then froze. 'Right. No touching. Sorry.'

Nico grunted. 'I suppose we can make an exception.'

Jason squeezed him so hard Nico thought his ribs would crack.

'Oh, man,' Jason said. 'Wait till I tell Piper. Hey, since I'm all alone in my cabin too, you and I can share a table in the dining hall. We can team up for capture the flag and sing-along contests and –'

'Are you *trying* to scare me away?'

'Sorry. Sorry. Whatever you say, Nico. I'm just glad.'

The funny thing was Nico believed him.

Nico happened to glance towards the cabins and saw someone waving at him. Will Solace stood in the doorway of the Apollo cabin, a stern look on his face. He pointed to the ground at his feet, like *You. Here. Now.*

'Jason,' Nico said, 'would you excuse me?'

'So where were you?' Will demanded. He was wearing a green surgeon's shirt with jeans and flip-flops, which was probably not standard hospital protocol.

'What do you mean?' Nico asked.

'I've been stuck in the infirmary for, like, two days. You don't come by. You don't offer to help.'

‘I ... what? Why would you want a son of Hades in the same room with people you’re trying to heal? Why would *anyone* want that?’

‘You can’t help out a friend? Maybe cut bandages? Bring me a soda or a snack? Or just a simple *How’s it going, Will?* You don’t think I could stand to see a friendly face?’

‘What ... *my* face?’

The words simply didn’t make sense together: *Friendly face. Nico di Angelo.*

‘You’re so dense,’ Will noted. ‘I hope you got over that nonsense about leaving Camp Half-Blood.’

‘I – yeah. I did. I mean, I’m staying.’

‘Good. So you may be dense, but you’re not an idiot.’

‘How can you even talk to me like that? Don’t you know I can summon zombies and skeletons and –’

‘Right now you couldn’t summon a wishbone without melting into a puddle of darkness, di Angelo,’ Will said. ‘I told you, no more Underworldy stuff, doctor’s orders. You owe me at least three days of rest in the infirmary. Starting *now.*’

Nico felt like a hundred skeletal butterflies were resurrecting in his stomach. ‘Three days? I – I suppose that would be okay.’

‘Good. Now –’

A loud *whoop!* cut through the air.

Over by the hearth in the centre of the common, Percy was grinning at something Annabeth had just told him. Annabeth laughed and playfully slapped his arm.

‘I’ll be right back,’ Nico told Will. ‘Promise on the Styx and everything.’

He walked over to Percy and Annabeth, who were both still grinning like crazy.

‘Hey, man,’ Percy said. ‘Annabeth just told me some good news. Sorry if I got a little loud.’

‘We’re going to spend our senior year together,’ Annabeth explained, ‘here in New York. And after graduation –’

‘College in New Rome!’ Percy pumped his fist like he was blowing a truck horn. ‘Four years with no monsters to fight, no battles, no stupid prophecies. Just me and Annabeth, getting our degrees, hanging out at cafés, enjoying California –’

‘And after that ...’ Annabeth kissed Percy on the cheek. ‘Well, Reyna and Frank said we could live in New Rome as long as we like.’

‘That’s great,’ Nico said. He was a little surprised to find that he meant it. ‘I’m staying too, here at Camp Half-Blood.’

‘Awesome!’ Percy said.

Nico studied his face – his sea-green eyes, his grin, his ruffled black hair. Somehow Percy Jackson seemed like a regular guy now, not a mythical figure. Not someone to idolize or crush on.

‘So,’ Nico said, ‘since we’re going to be spending at least a year seeing each other at camp, I think I should clear the air.’

Percy’s smile wavered. ‘What do you mean?’

‘For a long time,’ Nico said, ‘I had a crush on you. I just wanted you to know.’

Percy looked at Nico. Then at Annabeth, as if to check that he’d heard correctly. Then back at Nico. ‘You –’

‘Yeah,’ Nico said. ‘You’re a great person. But I’m over that. I’m happy for you guys.’

‘You ... so you mean –’

‘Right.’

Annabeth’s grey eyes started to sparkle. She gave Nico a sideways smile.

‘Wait,’ Percy said. ‘So you mean –’

‘Right,’ Nico said again. ‘But it’s cool. We’re cool. I mean, I see now ... you’re cute, but you’re not my type.’

‘I’m not your type ... Wait. So –’

‘See you around, Percy,’ Nico said. ‘Annabeth.’

She raised her hand for a high five.

Nico obliged. Then he walked back across the green, to where Will Solace was waiting.



Piper

PIPER WISHED SHE COULD CHARM HERSELF TO SLEEP.

It may have worked on Gaia, but for the last two nights she'd hardly slept a wink.

The days were fine. She loved being back with her friends Lacy and Mitchell and all the other Aphrodite kids. Even her bratty second-in-command, Drew Tanaka, seemed relieved, probably because Piper could run things and give Drew more time for gossip and in-cabin beauty treatments.

Piper kept busy helping Reyna and Annabeth coordinate between the Greeks and Romans. To Piper's surprise, the other two girls valued her skills as a go-between to smooth over any conflicts. There weren't many, but Piper did manage to return some Roman helmets that mysteriously made their way into the camp store. She also kept a fight from breaking out between the children of Mars and the children of Ares over the best way to kill a hydra.

On the morning the Romans were scheduled to leave, Piper was sitting on the pier at the canoe lake, trying to placate the naiads. Some of the lake spirits thought the Roman guys were so hot that they, too, wanted to leave for Camp Jupiter. They were demanding a giant portable fish tank for the journey west. Piper had just concluded negotiations when Reyna found her.

The praetor sat next to her on the dock. 'Hard work?'

Piper blew a strand of hair out of her eyes. 'Naiads can be challenging. I think we have a deal. If they still want to go at the end of the summer, we'll work out the details then. But naiads, uh, tend to forget things in about five seconds.'

Reyna traced her fingertips across the water. 'Sometimes I wish I could forget things that quickly.'

Piper studied the praetor's face. Reyna was one demigod who hadn't seemed to change during the war with the giants ... at least not on the outside. She still had the same strong, unstoppable gaze, the same regal, beautiful face. She wore her armour and purple cloak as easily as most people would wear shorts and a T-shirt.

Piper couldn't understand how anyone could take so much pain, shoulder so much responsibility, without breaking. She wondered if Reyna ever had anyone to confide in.

'You did so much,' Piper said. 'For both camps. Without you, none of it would've been possible.'

'All of us played a part.'

'Sure. But you ... I just wish you got more credit.'

Reyna laughed gently. 'Thank you, Piper. But I don't want attention. You understand what that's like, don't you?'

Piper did. They were so different, but she understood not wanting to attract attention. Piper had wished for that her whole life, with her dad's fame, the paparazzi, the photos and scandal stories in the press. She met so many people who said, *Oh, I want to be famous! That would be so great!* But they had no idea what it was really like. She'd seen the toll it took on her father. Piper wanted nothing to do with it.

She could understand the appeal of the Roman way, too – to blend in, be one of the team, work as a part of a well-oiled machine. Even so, Reyna had risen to the top. She couldn't stay hidden.

'Your power from your mom ...' Piper said. 'You can lend strength to others?'

Reyna pursed her lips. 'Nico told you?'

'No. I just sensed it, watching you lead the legion. That must drain you. How do you ... you know, get that strength back?'

'When I get the strength back, I'll let you know.'

She said it like a joke, but Piper sensed the sadness behind her words.

'You're always welcome here,' Piper said. 'If you need to take a break, get away ... you've got Frank now – he could assume more responsibility for a while. It might do you good to make some time for yourself, when nobody is going to be looking at you as praetor.'

Reyna met her eyes, as if trying to gauge how serious the offer was. ‘Would I be expected to sing that odd song about how Grandma puts on her armour?’

‘Not unless you really want to. But we might have to ban you from capture the flag. I have a feeling you could go against the entire camp solo and still beat us.’

Reyna smirked. ‘I’ll consider the offer. Thank you.’ She adjusted her dagger, and for a moment Piper thought about her own blade, Katoptris, which was now locked in her hope chest in her cabin. Ever since Athens, when she’d used the blade to stab the giant Enceladus, its visions had stopped completely.

‘I wonder ...’ Reyna said. ‘You’re a child of Venus. I mean Aphrodite. Perhaps – perhaps you could explain something your mother said.’

‘I’m honoured. I’ll try, but I have to warn you: my mom doesn’t make sense to *me* a lot of the time.’

‘Once in Charleston, Venus told me something. She said: *You will not find love where you wish or where you hope. No demigod shall heal your heart.* I – I have struggled with that for ...’ Her words broke.

Piper had a strong urge to find her mother and punch her. She *hated* how Aphrodite could mess up someone’s life with just a short conversation.

‘Reyna,’ she said, ‘I don’t know what she meant, but I do know this: you are an incredible person. There is someone out there for you. Maybe it’s not a demigod. Maybe it’s a mortal or ... or I don’t know. But, when it’s meant to happen, it will. And until it does, hey, you have friends. Lots of friends, both Greek and Roman. The thing about you being everyone’s source of strength: sometimes you might forget that *you* need to draw strength from others. I’m here for you.’

Reyna stared across the lake. ‘Piper McLean, you have a way with words.’

‘I’m not charmspeaking, I promise.’

‘No charmspeak required.’ Reyna offered her hand. ‘I have a feeling we’ll see each other again.’

They shook and, after Reyna left, Piper knew that Reyna was right. They would meet again, because Reyna was no longer a rival, no longer a stranger or a potential enemy. She was a friend. She was family.

That night the camp felt empty without the Romans. Piper already missed Hazel. She missed the creaking timbers of the *Argo II* and the constellations her lamp

used to make against the ceiling of her cabin aboard the ship.

Lying in her bunk in Cabin Ten, she felt so restless she knew she wouldn't be able to doze off. She kept thinking about Leo. Again and again she replayed what had happened in the fight against Gaia, trying to figure out how she could have failed Leo so badly.

Around two in the morning, she gave up trying to sleep. She sat up in bed and gazed out of the window. Moonlight turned the woods silver. The smells of the sea and the strawberry fields wafted on the breeze. She couldn't believe that just a few days ago the Earth Mother had awoken and almost destroyed everything Piper held dear. Tonight seemed so peaceful ... so normal.

Tap, tap, tap.

Piper nearly hit the top of her bunk. Jason was standing outside the window, rapping on the frame. He grinned. 'Come on.'

'What are you doing here?' she whispered. 'It's after curfew. The patrol harpies will *shred* you!'

'Just come on.'

Her heart racing, she took his hand and climbed out of the window. He led her to Cabin One and took her inside, where the huge statue of Hippie Zeus glowered in the dim light.

'Um, Jason ... what exactly ... ?'

'Check it out.' He showed her one of the marble columns that ringed the circular chamber. On the back, almost hidden against the wall, iron rungs led upward – a ladder. 'Can't believe I didn't notice this sooner. Wait till you see!'

He began to climb. Piper wasn't sure why she felt so nervous, but her hands were shaking. She followed him up. At the top, Jason pushed open a small trapdoor.

They emerged on the side of the domed roof, on a flat ledge, facing north. The whole of Long Island Sound spread out to the horizon. They were so far up, and at such an angle, that nobody below could possibly see them. The patrol harpies never flew this high.

'Look.' Jason pointed at the stars, which made a splash of diamonds across the sky – better jewels than even Hazel Levesque could have summoned.

'Beautiful.' Piper snuggled up against Jason and he put his arm around her. 'But aren't you going to get in trouble?'

‘Who cares?’ Jason asked.

Piper laughed quietly. ‘Who *are* you?’

He turned, his glasses pale bronze in starlight. ‘Jason Grace. Pleased to meet you.’

He kissed her, and ... okay, they had kissed before. But this was different. Piper felt like a toaster. All her coils heated to red-hot. Any more warmth and she’d start smelling like burnt toast.

Jason pulled away enough to look in her eyes. ‘That night at the Wilderness School, our first kiss under the stars ...’

‘The memory,’ Piper said. ‘The one that never happened.’

‘Well ... now it’s real.’ He made the ward-against-evil symbol, the same one he’d used to dispel his mother’s ghost, and pushed at the sky. ‘From this point on, we’re writing our own story, with a fresh start. And we just had our first kiss.’

‘I’m afraid to tell you this after just one kiss,’ Piper said. ‘But gods of Olympus, I love you.’

‘Love you too, Pipes.’

She didn’t want to ruin the moment, but she couldn’t stop thinking of Leo and how he would never have a fresh start.

Jason must have sensed her feelings.

‘Hey,’ he said. ‘Leo is okay.’

‘How can you believe that? He didn’t get the cure. Nico *said* he died.’

‘You once woke up a dragon with just your voice,’ Jason reminded her. ‘You *believed* the dragon should be alive, right?’

‘Yes, but –’

‘We have to believe in Leo. There is no way he would die so easily. He’s a tough guy.’

‘Right.’ Piper tried to steady her heart. ‘So we believe. Leo *has* to be alive.’

‘You remember the time in Detroit, when he flattened Ma Gasket with a car engine?’

‘Or those dwarfs in Bologna. Leo took them down with a homemade smoke grenade made from toothpaste.’

‘Commander Tool Belt,’ Jason said.

‘Bad Boy Supreme,’ Piper said.

‘Chef Leo the Tofu Taco Expert.’

They laughed and told stories about Leo Valdez, their best friend. They stayed on the roof until dawn broke, and Piper started to believe they *could* have a fresh start. It might even be possible to tell a new story in which Leo was still out there. Somewhere ...



LVIII

Leo

LEO WAS DEAD.

He knew that with absolute certainty. He just didn't understand why it *hurt* so much. He felt like every cell in his body had exploded. Now his consciousness was trapped inside a charred crispy husk of demigod roadkill. The nausea was worse than any carsickness he'd ever had. He couldn't move. He couldn't see or hear. He could only feel pain.

He started to panic, thinking maybe this was his eternal punishment.

Then somebody put jumper cables on his brain and restarted his life.

He gasped and sat up.

The first thing he felt was the wind in his face, then the searing pain in his right arm. He was still on Festus's back, still in the air. His eyes started to work again, and he noticed the large hypodermic needle retracting from his forearm. The empty injector buzzed, whirred and retreated into a panel on Festus's neck.

'Thanks, buddy.' Leo groaned. 'Man, being dead sucked. But that physician's cure? That stuff is *worse*.'

Festus clicked and clattered in Morse code.

'No, man, I'm not serious,' Leo said. 'I'm glad to be alive. And, yeah, I love you too. You did awesome.'

A metallic purr ran the length of the dragon's body.

First things first: Leo scanned the dragon for signs of damage. Festus's wings were working properly, though his left *medius* membrane was shot full of holes. His neck plating was partially fused, melted from the explosion, but the dragon didn't seem to be in danger of crashing immediately.

Leo tried to remember what had happened. He was pretty sure he had defeated Gaia, but he had no idea how his friends were doing back at Camp Half-Blood.

Hopefully Jason and Piper had got clear of the blast. Leo had a weird memory of a missile hurtling towards him and screaming like a little girl ... what the heck had that been about?

Once he landed, he'd have to check Festus's underbelly. The most serious damage would probably be in that area, where the dragon had courageously grappled with Gaia while they blowtorched the sludge out of her. There was no telling how long Festus had been aloft. He'd need to set down soon.

Which raised the question: where were they?

Below was a solid white blanket of clouds. The sun shone directly overhead in a brilliant blue sky. So it was about noon ... but of which day? How long had Leo been dead?

He opened the access panel in Festus's neck. The astrolabe was humming away, the crystal pulsing like a neon heart. Leo checked his compass and GPS, and a grin spread across his face.

'Festus, good news!' he shouted. 'Our navigation readings are *completely* messed up!'

Festus said, *Creak?*

'Yeah! Descend! Get us below these clouds and maybe –'

The dragon plummeted so fast that the breath was sucked out of Leo's lungs. They broke through the blanket of white and there, below them, was a single green island in a vast blue sea.

Leo whooped so loudly they probably heard him in China. 'YEAH! WHO DIED? WHO CAME BACK? WHO'S YOUR FREAKIN' SUPERSIZED McSHIZZLE NOW, BABY? WOOOOOOOOO!'

They spiralled towards Ogygia, the warm wind in Leo's hair. He realized his clothes were in tatters, despite the magic they'd been woven with. His arms were covered in a fine layer of soot, like he'd just died in a massive fire ... which, of course, he had.

But he couldn't worry about any of that.

She was standing on the beach, wearing jeans and a white blouse, her amber hair pulled back.

Festus spread his wings and landed with a stumble. Apparently one of his legs was broken. The dragon pitched sideways and catapulted Leo face-first into the sand.

So much for a heroic entrance.

Leo spat a piece of seaweed out of his mouth. Festus dragged himself down the beach, made clacking noises that meant *Ow, ow, ow*.

Leo looked up. Calypso stood over him, her arms crossed, her eyebrows arched.

‘You’re late,’ she announced. Her eyes gleamed.

‘Sorry, Sunshine,’ Leo said. ‘Traffic was murder.’

‘You are covered with soot,’ she noted. ‘And you managed to ruin the clothes I made for you, which were impossible to ruin.’

‘Well, you know.’ Leo shrugged. Somebody had released a hundred pachinko balls in his chest. ‘I’m all about doing the impossible.’

She offered her hand and helped him up. They stood nose to nose as she studied his condition. She smelled like cinnamon. Had she always had that tiny freckle next to her left eye? Leo really wanted to touch it.

She wrinkled her nose. ‘You smell –’

‘I know. Like I’ve been dead. Probably because I have been. *Oath to keep with a final breath* and all, but I’m better now –’

She stopped him with a kiss.

The pachinko balls slammed around inside him. He felt so happy he had to make a conscious effort not to burst into flames.

When she finally let him go, her face was covered in soot smudges. She didn’t seem to care. She traced her thumb across his cheekbone.

‘Leo Valdez,’ she said.

Nothing else – just his name, as if it were something magical.

‘That’s me,’ he said, his voice ragged. ‘So, um ... you want to get off this island?’

Calypso stepped back. She raised one hand and the winds swirled. Her invisible servants brought two suitcases and set them at her feet. ‘What gave you that idea?’

Leo grinned. ‘Packed for a long trip, huh?’

‘I don’t plan on coming back.’ Calypso glanced over her shoulder, at the path that led to her garden and her cavern home. ‘Where will you take me, Leo?’

‘Somewhere to fix my dragon, first,’ he decided. ‘And then ... wherever you want. How long was I gone, seriously?’

‘Time is difficult on Ogygia,’ Calypso said. ‘It felt like forever.’

Leo had a stab of doubt. He hoped his friends were okay. He hoped a hundred years hadn’t passed while he was flying around dead and Festus searched for Ogygia.

He would have to find out. He needed to let Jason and Piper and the others know he was okay. But right now ... priorities. Calypso was a priority.

‘So once you leave Ogygia,’ he said, ‘do you stay immortal or what?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘And you’re okay with that?’

‘More than okay.’

‘Well, then!’ He turned towards his dragon. ‘Buddy, you up for another flight to nowhere in particular?’

Festus blew fire and limped around.

‘So we take off with no plan,’ Calypso said. ‘No idea where we’ll go or what problems await beyond this island. Many questions and no tidy answers?’

Leo turned up his palms. ‘That’s how I fly, Sunshine. Can I get your bags?’

‘Absolutely.’

Five minutes later, with Calypso’s arms around his waist, Leo spurred Festus into flight. The bronze dragon spread his wings, and they soared into the unknown.

Glossary

- Acropolis** the ancient citadel of Athens, Greece, containing the oldest temples to the gods
- Actaeon** a hunter who spied Artemis while she was bathing. She was so angered by the idea of a mortal seeing her naked that she turned him into a stag.
- Ad aciem** Latin for *Assume battle stance*
- Aeolus** lord of all winds
- Alcyoneus** the eldest of the giants born to Gaia, destined to fight Pluto
- amphora** a tall ceramic wine jar
- Antinous** the leader of the suitors for Odysseus's™ wife, Queen Penelope. Odysseus killed him by shooting him through the neck with an arrow.
- Aphrodite** the Greek goddess of love and beauty. She was married to Hephaestus, but she loved Ares, the god of war. Roman form: Venus
- Aphros** the music and poetry teacher at an underwater camp for mer-heroes. He is one of the half brothers of Chiron.
- Apollo** the Greek god of the sun, prophecy, music and healing; the son of Zeus, and the twin of Artemis. Roman form: Apollo
- Aquilo** Roman god of the north wind. Greek form: Boreas
- ara** (*arai*, pl.) female spirits of curses; wrinkled hags with bat-like wings, brass talons and glowing red eyes; daughters of Nyx (night)
- Ares** the Greek god of war; the son of Zeus and Hera, and half brother to Athena. Roman form: Mars
- Artemis** the Greek goddess of nature and hunting; the daughter of Zeus and Hera, and twin to Apollo. Roman form: Diana
- Asclepeion** a hospital and medical school in Ancient Greece
- Asclepius** the healing god; son of Apollo; his temple was the healing centre of Ancient Greece
- Athena** the Greek goddess of wisdom. Roman form: Minerva
- Augustus** the founder of the Roman Empire and its first emperor, ruling from 27 B.C.E. until his death in 14 C.E.
- auxilia** Latin for *helps*; the standing non-citizen corps of the Imperial Roman army
- Ave Romae** Latin for *Hail, Romans*
- Bacchus** the Roman god of wine and revelry. Greek form: Dionysus
- Banastre Tarleton** a British commander in the American Revolution who gained infamy for his part in the slaughter of surrendering Continental Army troops during the Battle of Waxhaws
- Barrachina** a restaurant in San Juan, Puerto Rico; birthplace of the piñata colada
- Bellona** a Roman goddess of war
- bifurcum** Latin for *private parts*
- Boreas** god of the north wind. Roman form: Aquilo
- Briares** older brother of the Titans and Cyclopes; son of Gaia and Ouranos. The last of the Hundred-Handed Ones still alive.

Bythos combat trainer at an underwater camp for mer-heroes; half brother of Chiron

Calypso the goddess nymph of the mythical island of Ogygia; a daughter of the Titan Atlas. She detained the hero Odysseus for many years.

Ceres the Roman goddess of agriculture. Greek form: Demeter

chlamys a Greek garment; a white wool cloak loosely wrapped and pinned at the shoulder

Circe a Greek sorceress who once turned Odysseus's men into pigs

Clytius a giant created by Gaia to absorb and defeat all of Hecate's magic

coqui the common name for several species of small frogs indigenous to Puerto Rico

cuneum formate a Roman military manoeuvre in which infantry formed a wedge to charge and break enemy lines

Cupid Roman god of love. Greek form: Eros

Cyclops (Cyclopes, pl.) a member of a primordial race of giants, each with a single eye in the middle of his or her forehead

cynocephali (cynocephalus, sing.) dog-headed monsters

Damasen giant son of Tartarus and Gaia; created to oppose Ares; condemned to Tartarus for slaying a drakon that was ravaging the land

Deimos fear, the twin of Phobos (panic), son of Ares and Aphrodite

Delos the island birthplace of Apollo and Artemis in Greece

Demeter the Greek goddess of agriculture, a daughter of the Titans Rhea and Kronos. Roman form: Ceres

Diana the Roman goddess of nature and hunting. Greek form: Artemis

Dies Roman goddess of the day. Greek form: Hemera

Diocletian the last great pagan emperor, and the first to retire peacefully; a demigod (son of Jupiter). According to legend, his sceptre could raise a ghost army.

Dionysus the Greek god of wine and revelry, a son of Zeus. Roman form: Bacchus

dracaena (dracanae, pl.) female reptilian humanoids with snake trunks instead of legs

drakon gigantic yellow and green serpent-like monster, with frills around its neck, reptilian eyes and huge talons; it spits poison

Earthborn *Gegenees* in Greek; monsters with six arms that wear only a loincloth

Eiaculare flammas Latin for *Launch flaming arrows*

Enceladus a giant created by Gaia specifically to destroy the goddess Athena

Ephialtes a giant created by Gaia specifically to destroy the god Dionysus/Bacchus; twin brother of Otis

Epidaurus a Greek coastal town where the sanctuary of the physician god Asclepius was located

Epirus a region presently in northwestern Greece, site of the House of Hades

Erechtheion the temple to both Athena and Poseidon in Athens

Eros Greek god of love. Roman form: Cupid

espresso strong coffee made by forcing steam through finely ground dark-roast coffee beans

Eurymachus one of the suitors of Odysseus's wife, Queen Penelope

Óvora a Portuguese city still partially enclosed by mediaeval walls, with a large number of historic monuments, including a Roman temple

fartura a Portuguese pastry

Field of Mars a publicly owned area of Ancient Rome; also the practice field at Camp Jupiter

filia Romana girl of Rome

frigidarium a room in a Roman bath with cold water

Furies Roman goddesses of vengeance; usually characterized as three sisters – Alecto, Tisiphone and Megaera; the children of Gaia and Ouranus. They reside in the Underworld, tormenting evil-doers and sinners. Greek form: the Erinyes

Gaia the Greek earth goddess; mother of Titans, giants, Cyclopes and other monsters. Roman form: Terra

Gaius Vitellius Reticulus a member of the Roman legion when it was first created; a medic during the time of Julius Caesar; now a Lar (ghost) at Camp Jupiter

geminus (*gemini*, pl.) half human, half snake; the original Athenians

Hades the Greek god of death and riches. Roman form: Pluto

Hasdrubal of Carthage king of Ancient Carthage, in present day Tunisia, from 530 to 510 B.C.E.; he was elected as "king" eleven times and was granted a triumph four times, the only Carthaginian ever to receive this honour

Hebe the Greek goddess of youth; daughter of Zeus and Hera. Roman form: Juventas

Hecate goddess of magic and crossroads; controls the Mist; daughter of Titans Perses and Asteria

Hemera Greek goddess of day; daughter of Erebus (darkness) and Nyx (night). Roman form: Dies

Hephaestus the Greek god of fire and crafts and of blacksmiths; the son of Zeus and Hera, and married to Aphrodite. Roman form: Vulcan

Hera the Greek goddess of marriage; Zeus's wife and sister. Roman form: Juno

Hermes Greek god of travellers; guide to spirits of the dead; god of communication. Roman form: Mercury

Hippias a tyrant of Athens who, after he was deposed, sided with the Persians against his own people

hippodrome an oval stadium for horse and chariot races in Ancient Greece

Hippolytus a giant created to be the bane of Hermes

House of Hades a place in the Underworld where Hades, the Greek god of death, and his wife, Persephone, rule over the souls of the departed; also the name of an old temple in Epirus in Greece

Hundred-Handed Ones children of Gaia and Ouranos with one hundred hands and fifty faces; elder brothers of the Cyclopes; primeval gods of violent storms

Hygeia goddess of health, cleanliness and sanitation; daughter of the god of medicine, Asclepius

Hypnos Greek god of sleep. Roman form: Somnus

Invidia the Roman goddess of revenge. Greek form: Nemesis

Iris goddess of the rainbow and a messenger of the gods

Iros an old man who ran errands for the suitors for Odysseus's wife, Queen Penelope, in exchange for scraps of food

Ithaca a Greek island and home to Odysseus's palace, which the Greek hero had to rid of suitors for his queen after the Trojan War

Janus Roman god of doorways, beginnings and transitions; depicted as having two faces, because he looks to the future and to the past

Juno the Roman goddess of women, marriage and fertility; sister and wife of Jupiter; mother of Mars. Greek form: Hera

Jupiter the Roman king of the gods; also called Jupiter Optimus Maximus (the best and the greatest). Greek form: Zeus

Juventas the Roman goddess of youth; daughter of Zeus and Hera. Greek form: Hebe

Kekrops leader of the *gemini* "half human, half snake. He was the founder of Athens and judged the dispute between Athena and Poseidon. He chose Athena as the city's patron and was the first to build a shrine to her.

Kerkopes a pair of chimpanzee-like dwarfs who steal shiny things and create chaos

Keto an ancient marine goddess and the mother of most sea monsters; daughter of Pontus and Gaia; sister of Phorcys

Khione the Greek goddess of snow; daughter of Boreas

Khios the fifth largest of the Greek islands, in the Aegean Sea, off the west coast of Turkey

Kronos the youngest of the twelve Titans; the son of Ouranos and Gaia; the father of Zeus. He killed his father at his mother's bidding. Titan lord of fate, harvest, justice and time. Roman form: Saturn

Kymopoleia minor Greek goddess of violent sea storms; nymph daughter of Poseidon and wife of Briares, a Hundred-Handed One

Laistrygonian ogre a monster giant cannibal from the far north

Little Tiber a river that flows in Camp Jupiter. Though not as large as the original Tiber River in Rome, it flows with as much power and is able to wash away Greek blessings.

Lupa the sacred Roman she-wolf that nursed the foundling twins Romulus and Remus

Lycaon a king of Arcadia who tested Zeus's omniscience by serving him the roasted flesh of a guest. Zeus punished him by transforming him into a wolf.

makhai the spirits of battle and combat

mania a Greek spirit of insanity

manticore a creature with a human head, a lion's body and a scorpion's tail

Mars the Roman god of war; also called Mars Ultor. Patron of the empire; divine father of Romulus and Remus. Greek form: Ares

medius Latin for *middle*

Medusa a priestess whom Athena turned into a gorgon when she caught Medusa with Poseidon in Athena's temple. Medusa has snakes for hair and can turn people to stone if they look directly into her eyes.

Mercury Roman messenger of the gods; god of trade, profit and commerce. Greek form: Hermes

Merope one of the seven Pleiades, star-nymph daughters of the Titan Atlas

Mimas a giant created to be the bane of Ares

Minerva the Roman goddess of wisdom. Greek form: Athena

mofongo a fried plantain-based dish from Puerto Rico

Mykonos a Greek island, part of the Cyclades, lying between Tinos, Syros, Paros and Naxos

Nemesis the Greek goddess of revenge. Roman form: Invidia

Neptune the Roman god of the sea. Greek form: Poseidon

Nereids fifty female sea spirits; patrons of sailors and fishermen and caretakers of the sea's bounty

Nestor's Cave the spot where Hermes hid the cattle he stole from Apollo

Nike the Greek goddess of strength, speed and victory. Roman form: Victoria

numina montanum Roman mountain god. Greek form: *ourae*

Nyx goddess of night, one of the ancient, firstborn elemental gods

Odysseus legendary Greek king of Ithaca and the hero of Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*. Roman form: Ulysses

Olympia the most ancient and probably most famous sanctuary in Greece, and home of the Olympic Games. Located in the western region of the Peloponnese.

onager a giant siege weapon

Oracle of Delphi a speaker of the prophecies of Apollo. The current Oracle is Rachel Elizabeth Dare.

Orbem formate! At this command, Roman legionnaires assumed a circle-like formation with archers placed among and behind them to provide missile fire support.

Orcus the Underworld god of eternal punishment and broken vows

Orion a giant huntsman who became the most loyal and valued of Artemis's attendants. In a jealous rage, Apollo drove Orion mad with bloodlust until the giant was slain by a scorpion. Heartbroken, Artemis transformed her beloved hunting companion into a constellation to honour his memory.

Otis a giant created by Gaia specifically to destroy the god Dionysus/Bacchus; twin brother of Ephialtes

ourae Greek for mountain gods. Roman form: *numina montanum*

Ouranos father of the Titans; the sky god. The Titans defeated him by calling him down to the earth. They got him away from his home territory, ambushed him, held him down and cut him up.

panaderÃa Spanish for *bakery*

Parthenon a temple on the Athenian Acropolis, Greece, dedicated to the goddess Athena. Its construction began in 447 B.C.E., when the Athenian Empire was at the height of its power.

Pegasus a winged divine horse; sired by Poseidon in his role as horse god, and foaled by the Gorgon Medusa; the brother of Chrysaor

Pelopion a funerary monument to Pelops located in Olympia, Greece

Peloponnese a large peninsula and geographic region in southern Greece, separated from the northern part of the country by the Gulf of Corinth

Pelops According to Greek myth, the son of Tantalus and the grandson of Zeus. When he was a boy, his father cut him into pieces, cooked him and served him as a feast for the gods. The gods detected the trick and restored him to life.

Penelope Queen of Ithaca and Odysseus's wife. During her husband's twenty-year absence, she remained faithful to him, fending off a hundred arrogant suitors.

Periboia a giantess; the youngest daughter of Porphyron, the king of the giants

Phobos panic, the twin of Deimos (fear), son of Ares and Aphrodite

Philip of Macedonia a king of the Ancient Greek kingdom of Macedon from 359 B.C.E. until his assassination in 336 B.C.E. He was the father of Alexander the Great and Philip III.

Phlegethon the River of Fire that flows from Hades's realm down into Tartarus; it keeps the wicked alive so they can endure the torments of the Field of Punishment

Phorcys a primordial god of the dangers of the sea; son of Gaia; brother-husband of Keto

piragua a frozen treat made of shaved ice and covered with fruit-flavoured syrup, from Puerto Rico

Pluto the Roman god of death and riches. Greek form: Hades

Polybotes the giant son of Gaia, the Earth Mother; born to kill Poseidon

Pompeii In 79 C.E., this Roman town near modern Naples was destroyed when the volcano Mount Vesuvius erupted and covered it in ash, killing thousands of people.

Pontifex Maximus Roman high priest to the gods

Porphyron the king of the Giants in Greek and Roman mythology

Poseidon the Greek god of the sea; son of the Titans Kronos and Rhea, and brother of Zeus and Hades.
Roman form: Neptune

praetor elected Roman magistrate and commander of the army

propylon an outer monumental gateway standing before a main gateway (as of a temple)

Pylos a town in Messenia, Peloponnese, Greece

Python a monstrous serpent that Gaia appointed to guard the oracle at Delphi

Repellere equites Latin for *Repel horsemen*; a square formation used by Roman infantry to resist cavalry

retiarius a gladiator who uses a trident and a weighted net

Romulus and Remus the twin sons of Mars and the priestess Rhea Silvia. They were thrown into the River Tiber by their human father, Amulius, and rescued and raised by a she-wolf. Upon reaching adulthood, they founded Rome.

Senatus Populusque Romanus (SPQR) meaning "The Senate and People of Rome", refers to the government of the Roman Republic and is used as an official emblem of Rome

shadow-travel a form of transportation that allows creatures of the Underworld and children of Hades to travel to any desired place on earth or in the Underworld, although it makes the user extremely fatigued

Sibylline Books a collection of prophecies in rhyme written in Greek. Tarquinius Superbus, a king of Rome, bought them from a prophetess named Sibyl and consulted them in times of great danger.

Somnus Roman god of sleep. Greek form: Hypnos

Spartans citizens of the Greek city Sparta; soldiers of Ancient Sparta, especially its renowned infantry

Spes goddess of hope; the Feast of Spes, the Day of Hope, falls on 1 August

Straits of Corinth a shipping canal that connects the Gulf of Corinth with the Saronic Gulf in the Aegean Sea

Tartarus husband of Gaia; spirit of the abyss; father of the giants; also the lowest part of the Underworld

Terminus the Roman god of boundaries and landmarks

Terra the Roman goddess of the earth. Greek form: Gaia

Thoon a giant born to kill the Three Fates

Three Fates Even before there were gods there were the Fates: Clotho, who spins the thread of life; Lachesis, the measurer, who determines how long a life will be; and Atropos, who cuts the thread of life with her shears.

Titans a race of powerful Greek deities, descendants of Ouranos and Gaia, who ruled during the Golden Age and were overthrown by a race of younger gods, the Olympians

Ulysses Roman form of Odysseus

Venus the Roman goddess of love and beauty. She was married to Vulcan, but she loved Mars, the god of war. Greek form: Aphrodite

Victoria the Roman goddess of strength, speed and victory. Greek form: Nike

Vulcan the Roman god of fire and crafts and of blacksmiths; the son of Jupiter and Juno, and married to Venus. Greek form: Hephaestus

Zeus Greek god of the sky and king of the gods. Roman form: Jupiter

Zoë « **Nightshade** a daughter of Atlas who was exiled and later joined the Hunters of Artemis, becoming the loyal lieutenant of Artemis

Coming Autumn 2015

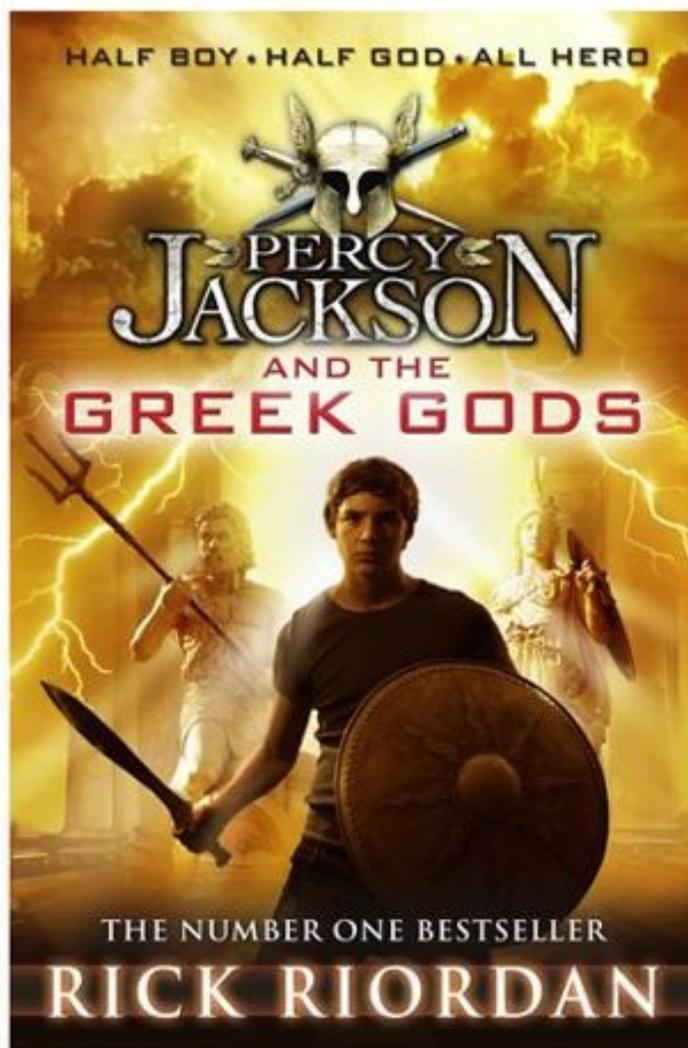
MAGNUS
CHASE
AND THE
GODS OF ASGARD

THE SWORD OF
SUMMER



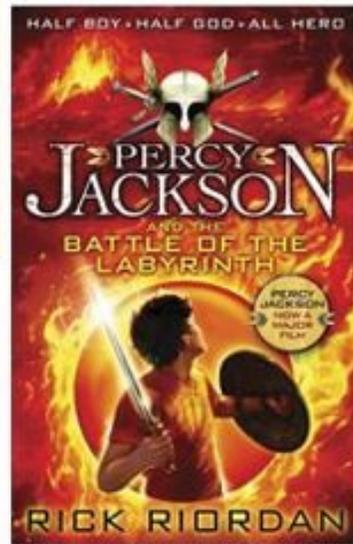
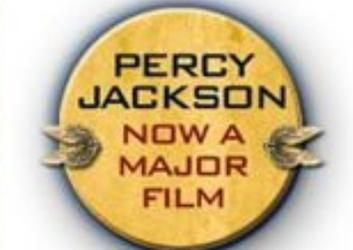
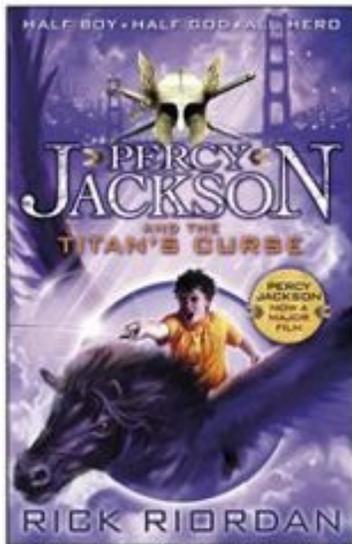
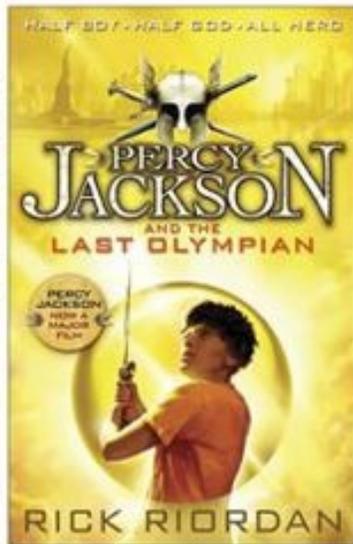
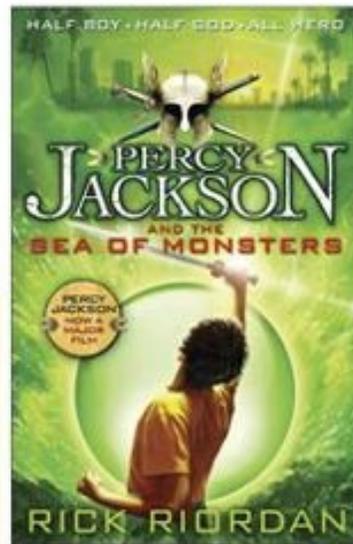
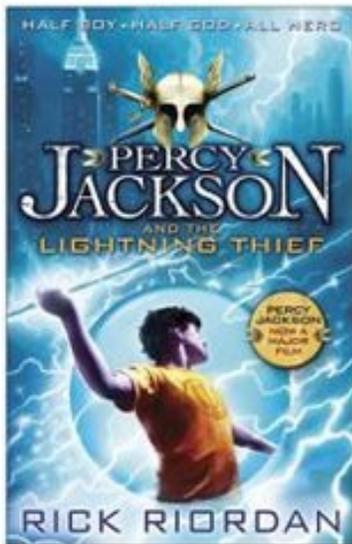
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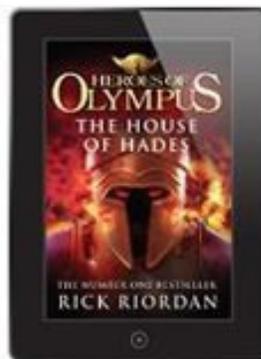
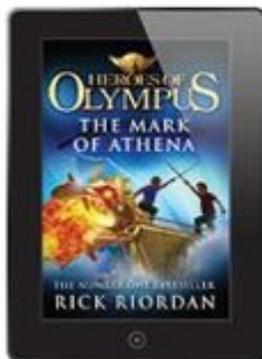
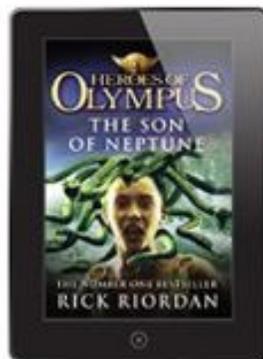
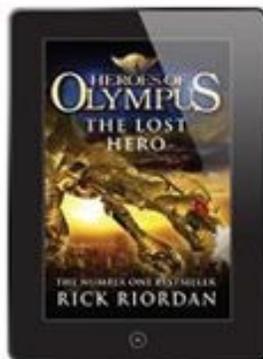


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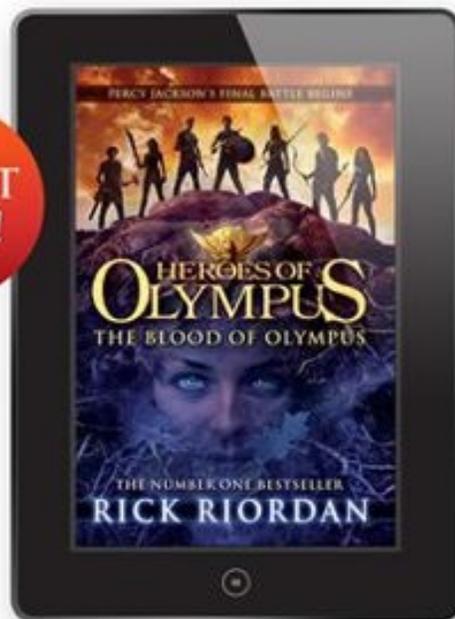


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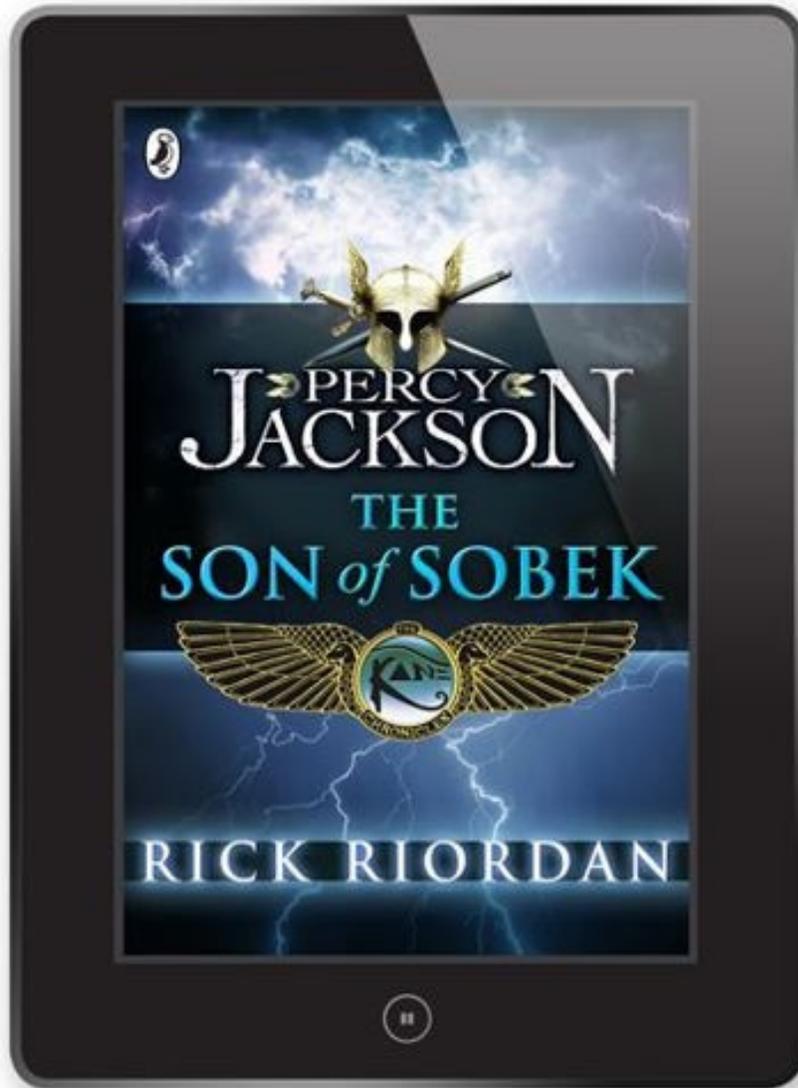


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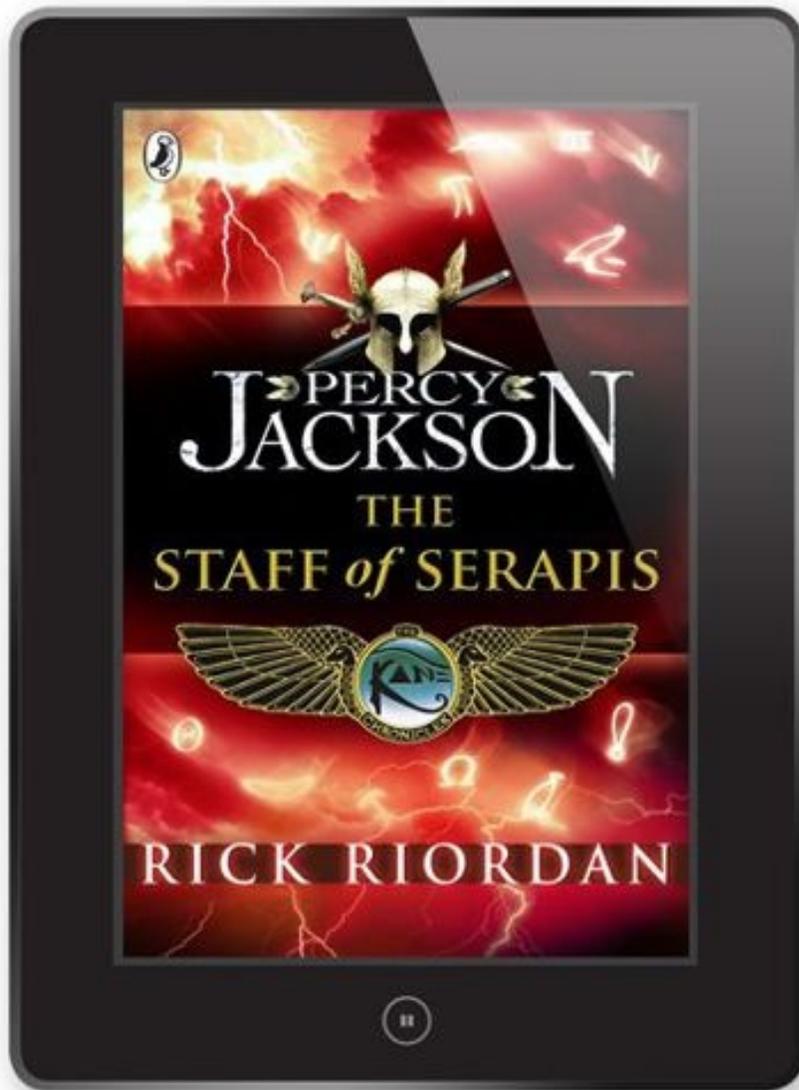


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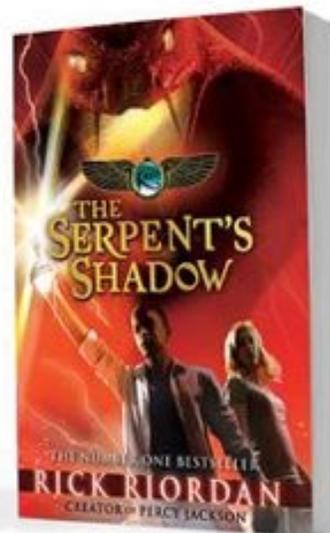
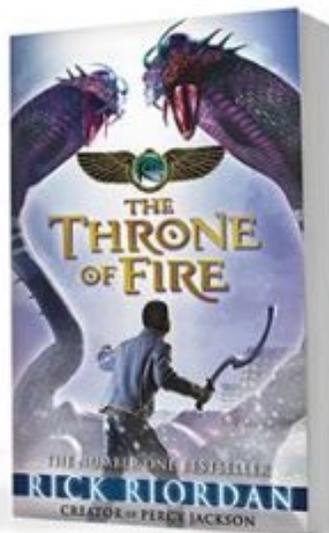
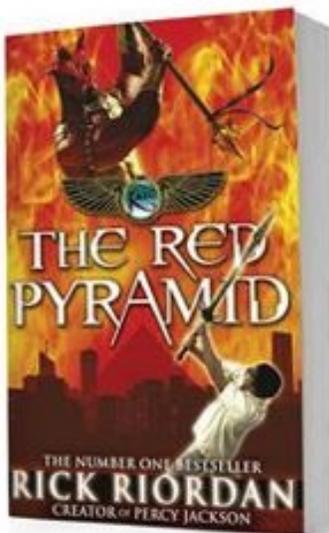
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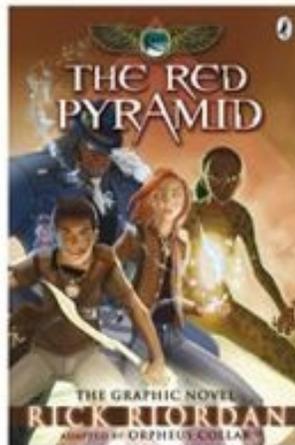
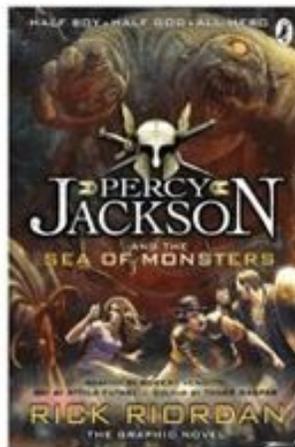


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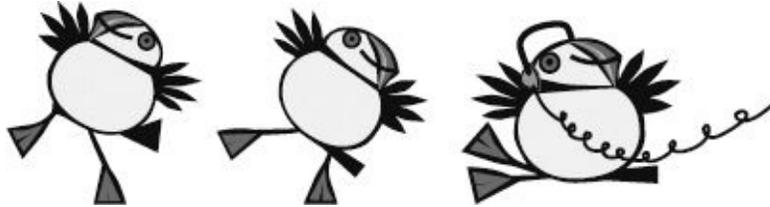


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Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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First published in the USA by Disney • Hyperion, an imprint of Disney Book Group, 2014

Published simultaneously in Great Britain by Puffin Books 2014

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ISBN: 978-0-141-33923-8