THE HEROES

OF OLYMPUS

# THE SON OF NEPTUNE

NEW YORK TIMES #1 BEST-SELLING AUTHOR.

RICK RIORDAN

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# RICK RIORDAN

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The Lightning Thief

Percy Jackson and the Olympians, Book Two:

The Sea of Monsters

Percy Jackson and the Olympians, Book Three:

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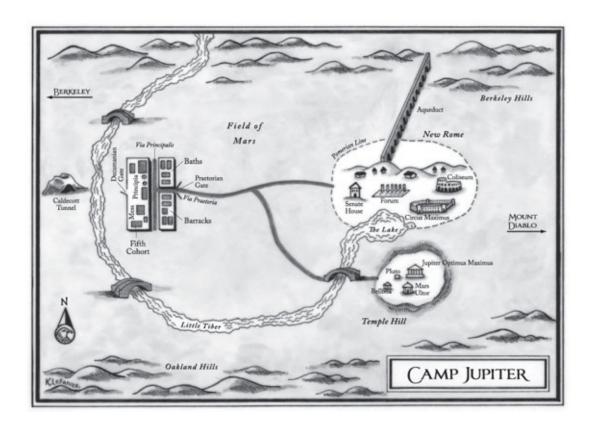
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The Throne of Fire

The Heroes of Olympus, Book One:

The Lost Hero

To Becky, who shares my sanct	uary in New Rome. Ever you.	n Hera could never make m	e forget



# 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 Percyhad 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 nameso 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 re-form, 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 yardsuphill 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.

Per	cy hated	tests.	Since	he'd	lost h	is men	nory, his w	hole life wa	as one t	oig fill-in	-the-
blank.	He was					, fro	om		•	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 runback 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 rumpled 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. "Mostlythey'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 handpainted 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

**O**N **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 *major*gods. 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 TempleHill. 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. QueenMarie 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 crep tup 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 beaned 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 are 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 practor 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 takenfrom 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 hourlong 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 fourthgeneration 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 shout ing, 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 somer saulted 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 though the'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'she art 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 dozeng hosts and a few older veterans from the city, all in formal togas. Octavian stood in front with a knife and a Beanie Babylion, 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 HazelLevesque."

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 MarsUltor. 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. "Ourpraetor 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 Porphyrion, 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 tenfoot 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, aplastic 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 pulsated 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 agrassy hurricane wrapped around Hazel and dragged her intothe 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, sos he 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."

"Hmmmm," 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\_\_"

"Centaurs," 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-Feed!' 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 grumpylooking, 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-...*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 ROFL copter."

"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 lobbing 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 the 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 SWEPT 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 yelped. "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 Irismessage 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, Annabet hand 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 deepfried 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.

*WHIRRR!* 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."

"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 groused. "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 coffeebrown 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.

"Nnnnnooo." 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 youagain. 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 b-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 ofpoison would probably keep even *me* from coming back tolife...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-overwater 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 Erebos. 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."

## 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'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," 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 marchedthem 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 theaters 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. TheSea 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 yelped. "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 herwarriors 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, Arionis 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."

#### HAZEL

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."

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 orscream 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."

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."

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: "Puppiesin-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 forestson 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—"

"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 rednosed 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* 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 hadwound 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'dfind 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 QueenMarie. "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 cussed 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 godsin 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 Porphyrionis 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 Th anatos.

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 breath 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 Alyconeus 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 hand some 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 afighter?"

Percy smiled. "Is he a fighter? Frank, you're looking at General Tyson of the Cyclops 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—"
"ROOOF!"

"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!"

"Rarrr!" 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 siste rand 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 hisfriends 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 apolar 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 hereabout 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 practor. We will trus 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 futureaurae invisible wind spirits

aurum gold

basilisk snake, literally "little crown"

**Bellerophon** a Greek demigod, son of Poseidon, whodefeated 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 thenewly 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 herforehead

**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. Patronof the empire; divine father of Romulus and Remus. Greekform: 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 andOtrera, another Amazon queen

**Periclymenus** a Greek prince of Pylos and a son ofPoseidon, 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, Zeuspunished 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 betweenEarth and the Underworld

**Romulus and Remus** the twin sons of Mars and the priestess Rhea Silvia who were thrown into the RiverTiber 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 writtenin 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, amagical 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 wasfounded 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 Troyby 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.

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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 <a href="https://www.rickriordan.com">www.rickriordan.com</a>.

PERCY JACKSON'S DEADLIEST ADVENTURE YET



THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER
RICK RIORDAN



# **RICK RIORDAN**





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#### Books by Rick Riordan

#### The Percy Jackson series:

PERCY JACKSON AND THE LIGHTNING THIEF

PERCY JACKSON AND THE SEA OF MONSTERS

PERCY JACKSON AND THE TITAN'S CURSE

PERCY JACKSON AND THE BATTLE OF THE LABYRINTH

PERCY JACKSON AND THE LAST OLYMPIAN

PERCY JACKSON: THE DEMIGOD FILES

#### For more about Percy Jackson, try:

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THE HOUSE OF HADES

HEROES OF OLYMPUS: THE DEMIGOD DIARIES

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THE KANE CHRONICLES: SURVIVAL GUIDE

#### A Carter Kane / Percy Jackson Adventure ebook:

THE SON OF SOBEK

www.rickriordanmythmaster.co.uk

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 <u>Argo II</u> 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 towards 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 <u>numina</u> <u>montanum</u>, Jason had called them. Or <u>ourae</u>, 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 prised 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 <u>Celestial bronze</u> 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 north-west, 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 <u>Cohort barracks</u>. She missed dinners in the mess hall, with wind spirits whisking platters through the air and <u>legionnaires</u> joking about the war games. She wanted to wander the streets of <u>New Rome</u>, 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 <u>Tartarus</u>, Leo had been working almost non-stop. 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 bootshaped 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 <u>House of Hades</u> (or <u>Pluto</u>, 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 <u>Gaia</u>, Hazel's least favourite goddess. That made them *very* determined enemies. The *Argo II* couldn't fly high enough to avoid their attacks and, even with all its defences, 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 colour 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 <u>Stygian iron</u> 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 <u>Athena</u> 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 <u>Poseidon</u> ... 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 <u>Archimedes</u> 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 <u>Doors of Death</u>. 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 Gaia'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 had fallen 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 <u>Athena Parthenos</u> 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 about – 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 <u>shadow-travel</u>. But that won't work for an entire ship. And, honestly, I'm not sure I have the strength to even transport *myself* any more.'

'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 <u>Thanatos</u>, god of death, had suggested that Pluto might be doing Hazel a favour 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 vapour 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 any more, remember? You know, with Gaia 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



#### 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 his neck. 'I missed you!' She pressed her face into the horse's warm flank, 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 on the spot. 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* Gaia'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 any more, and pulling gold from the ground was easy.

She fed Arion the nugget ... his favourite 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 towards 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.

### HAZEL

THE STORM SWALLOWED THE HILL in a swirling cone of black vapour.

Arion charged straight into it.

Hazel found herself at the summit, but it felt like a different dimension. The world lost its colour. The walls of the storm encircled the hill in murky black. The sky churned grey. The crumbling ruins were bleached so white that 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 centre 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 how l cut through the air - closer this time.

Hazel stepped towards the centre 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 towards the

centre 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 centre 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 sandalled feet, the two wispy animals took on solid form. One was a black Labrador retriever. The other was a long, grey 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 to be 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'd called Marie Levesque a witch. The nuns had 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 <u>Mist</u>. A flurry of black-and-white images glowed and flickered, like the old silent movies that were still playing in theatres when Hazel was small.

In the western doorway, Roman and Greek demigods in full armour 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 <u>Janus</u>.' 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 backwards. 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 backwards,' Hecate suggested, 'retrace your steps to Rome ... but Gaia'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 Gaia is supposed to wake in Greece. That's where the giants are gathering.'

'True. Gaia has set the date of August first, the Feast of <u>Spes</u>, 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 Gaia 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, that you could still reach Epirus and close the Doors of Death. You might find Gaia 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 <u>Hannibal</u> 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 Gaia 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, practise 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 <u>Titans</u> 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 <u>Zeus</u> against <u>Kronos</u>. I was not blind to Kronos's cruelty. I hoped Zeus would prove a better king.'

She gave a small, bitter laugh. 'When <u>Demeter</u> lost her daughter <u>Persephone</u>, 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 arch-enemy Clytius, made by Gaia 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 any more.' 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 nor 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 Gaia, 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 Gaia,' Hazel said. 'We're going to rescue our friends from Tartarus. We're going 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 had 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



# **ANNABETH**

#### NINE DAYS.

As she fell, Annabeth thought about <u>Hesiod</u>, 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'd 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 <u>Arachne</u>. Despite having been trapped in her own webbing, smashed by a car and plunged into Tartarus, the spider lady had got 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 Gaia 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 grey-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 fitted 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 away in a series of cliffs, like colossal steps leading deeper into the abyss.

The stench of sulphur 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 towards 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 sulphurous. 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 <u>Cocytus</u> – 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 Gaia 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 sulphurous 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 <u>Daedalus</u>'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-coloured clouds floating in the hazy grey 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 towards the wreckage. One of the car's tyres had come off and was floating in a back-water 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 laboured.

'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 towards 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.'

# VII

### **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 sunburnt. Every breath took more effort, as if her chest were filled with styrofoam peanuts. The cuts on her hands bled more rather than less. Annabeth's ankle, which had almost healed, now seemed to be broken again. 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 shinned 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 three counts 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 chilli pepper that had come with a plate of Indian food. After barely nibbling it, she'd thought her respiratory system was going to implode. Drinking from the Phlegethon was like gulping down a ghost chilli 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 <u>Hera</u>. 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 downwards 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-coloured clouds swirling in the grey 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. Gaia'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 Gaia'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 that 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 that 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.'

# VIII

### **ANNABETH**

THEY'D ONLY TRAVELLED 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 speciality, 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 hadn't done 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, on 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 Gaia –'

'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 any more.

'Believe me,' said the mall girl. 'Gaia 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 yelped 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 burnt 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 <u>charmspeak</u>, tricking mortals into letting down their guard. Men were especially susceptible. The *empousa*'s favourite 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 painkillers. 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 and 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 got 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 Gaia. 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 manoeuvres. 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 in 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 towards 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? Gaia asked. Stay and meet my favourite 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, Gaia 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 <u>Camp Half-Blood</u>, except the camp was in ruins. The cabins were charred husks. Burnt fields smouldered 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 weaved 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 towards 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 <u>augur</u> from <u>Camp Jupiter</u>, 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 Gaia'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 Gaia. 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 liquorice-coloured 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 <u>Hades</u> 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 towards 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.'

### **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 further 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 Gaia'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 <u>praetor</u> 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-coloured hair was tied back in a bandanna, 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 <u>satvr</u> chaperone.

Leo wished Piper were here. She had a way of calming things down with that <u>Aphrodite</u> 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 honour 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 got 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 honour 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 <u>Necromanteion</u>, 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 towards 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 Gaia'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 Gaia'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 Gaia 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 Gaia 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 backwards 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 into a burlap bag – Piper's dagger, Leo's Wii controllers. Then he prised 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.

### 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'd 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 trousers 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 <u>ballista</u>, 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, 'HHHmmmmm 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 in 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 espressos.

None of the locals seemed to notice the huge Greek warship hovering over the piazza, nor 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 manoeuvred 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 got 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 got 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 towards 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 <u>Neptune</u>.

'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 <u>Cupid</u> 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 <u>Jupiter</u>. Or <u>Minerva</u>. 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 backwards somersault and landed out of reach. Leo's trousers 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 trousers.

'Give – stupid – zipper!' Leo stuttered, trying to shake his fist and hoist up his trousers 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 <u>Kerkopes</u>!' 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. '<u>Hercules</u>. We called him Black Bottom because he used to go around without clothes. He got so tanned that his backside, well –'

'At least he had a sense of humour!' 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 humour,' 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 trousers had slipped around his ankles again, revealing his blue boxer shorts. '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 dived 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.

# XII

### **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 trousers 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 neighbourhood – maybe mediaeval watch-towers? 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 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 neighbourhood, 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 trousers 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 aluminium 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 till. 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 potato 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 top.

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 aluminium 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 a pretty decent flash-bang.

The Kerkopes wailed, clawing at their eyes. They stumbled towards 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, jewellery, 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 <u>astrolabe</u> 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 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 Gaia 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 towards 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 Gaia 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 speciality!'

'I love harassment!' Akmon agreed. 'Where are we going?'

Leo grinned. 'Ever heard of New York?'

## XIII

#### **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 sulphur-scented fibreglass. 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 blonde hair back with a strip of denim torn from her jeans, and in the fiery light of the river her grey 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 had 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 <u>Three Fates</u> 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-grey 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 any more.

All the newly formed monsters were crawling and hobbling in the same direction – towards 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 towards 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 spiralled in and out of the blood-red 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 any more. 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 towards the dark horizon. Percy was just brimming with enthusiasm for that.

## XIV

### **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 favourite.'

'What was the Titan's name?' Annabeth asked.

'Uh ... <u>lapetus</u>. 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-coloured 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 <u>Tantalus</u>, 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 <u>Fields of Punishment</u>. 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 towards 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 <u>telkhine</u> would pop up in 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 <u>drachmas</u> 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 grey 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!'

#### **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 had 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 favourite 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. 'Gaia has spoken.'

'You're heading towards 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 Gaia! 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 got at Camp Jupiter – the <u>SPOR</u> 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 favours? 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 Gaia!'

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 got 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 towards 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* hitch-hiker, 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, savouring 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.

# XVI

### **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!'

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 further away. Her arm was bleeding badly. 'Called you? He – wait. You're 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 grey 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, fuelled 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 into the background, allowing him to think.

He'd got 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 non-stop. 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 <u>Ares</u> 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 favourite pullover before remembering he didn't need it. The weather was too warm. More important, he didn't need the pockets any more 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 Gaia 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 kilometre wide. On the other spread the city of Venice – red-tiled roofs, metal church domes, steepled towers and sun-bleached buildings in all the colours 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 neighbourhoods, 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 grey 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 grey 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 to 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 ghost-like.

'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 humour. '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.* 

Nico stared at the canals, as if wondering what new and interesting forms of evil spirits might be



## 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 stone pavements 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 ground.

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 that 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-storey 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 neighbourhood 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 grey 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 vapour 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 behaviour 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 got 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 towards 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 metres 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 manoeuvre around them, then turn and run after his friends ...

He was doing all right, until he took his first backwards step towards 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 ground – 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 towards 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 round. Standing on 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.'

## XIX

# **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 further into the building. Nico offered to help, but Frank didn't need it. Hazel weighed nothing, and Frank's body hummed with adrenalin. 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 got 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 ploughed fields and tractors. Against the right wall was 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!' 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 <a href="harpy">harpy</a> 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, <u>Proserpine</u> –'

'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 offence. 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 website in maroon and gold, with a picture of a happy farmer in a toga and a farmer's hat, 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 programme. 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 ploughshares 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 Gaia'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 favourites.'

The colour 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!'

# **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 defenceless, 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 <u>Cadmus</u>, 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 <u>Tiber River</u>.

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 defences, 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 towards 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 prise up some cobblestones, unearthing a big tangle of spiky roots. The tendrils unfurled, exuding their stinky green fumes as they crept towards 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 favourite 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 towards 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 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 <u>spatha</u> – 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 dived 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 centre 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 metres 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 ankledeep 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 with 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 Gaia 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 outwards, 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 got 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 ploughshare, 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 got shorter. Frank was taller. His gut had shrunk. His chest seemed bulkier.

Frank had had growth spurts before. Once he'd woken up two centimetres 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?'

# XXI

# **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 towards 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 was 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 Gaia 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 aeons. 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 <u>Hypnos</u> cabin at Camp Half-Blood, overcome with drowsiness. She curled up on the hard ground and closed her eyes.

# XXII

# **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, <u>Aegis</u>.

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 colour of blood fresh from a vein. Her gold armour 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 grey 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. Gaia rose over Camp Half-Blood – her sleeping face as large as a mountain.

Hellhounds poured over the hills. Giants, six-armed <u>Earthborn</u> 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 honour 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. Travelling 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, Gaia 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 travellers, 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.'

# XXIII

### **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 armour, his skin the colour 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 armour and cut his hair, change his colour 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.

# XXIV

# **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.

'Rrow?' 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 fitted 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 knitted 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 sabre-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 neighbourhood 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 bat-like 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.

# XXV

# 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 got 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 got worse. She found herself back in the Fields of Asphodel, drifting aimlessly among the ghosts. Then she was in Gaia'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 <u>Clytius</u> 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 that 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 become. 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 any more. He looked like a football player, solid and strong, with a new centre 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 had 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 got 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.

# XXVI

# HAZEL

**HAZEL AND FRANK TUMBLED OVER EACH OTHER.** Hazel accidentally gave herself the Heimlich manoeuvre 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 towards the stern. Piper was already on the quarterdeck, shooting food from her <u>cornucopia</u> 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-galloped to the stern and leaped over the rail with a gleeful 'Ha-HA!'

Hazel staggered towards 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 jewellery 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.' 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 any more!'

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 vapour.

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 harboured 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've given 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 in the other direction, you big galoot.'

Frank looked confused. 'What's a galoot?'

'Guys!' Nico called down from the mast. 'About sailing in 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. 'Worst 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 towards 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 armour 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 <u>catapults</u>!' 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 <u>Imperial gold</u>.

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 practising,' 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 were 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 practor, 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 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 into 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 Gaia. 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 duelling 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 bandanna 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 that 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 waggled 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 ploughed 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 bandanna 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 levelled 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. Gaia 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 earth was anxious to expel them.

She found herself surrounded by a knee-high mound of treasure – Roman <u>denarii</u>, silver drachmas, ancient gold jewellery, 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!'

'Gaia 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 Gaia destroys the world.'

The muzzles of Sciron's pistols wavered. 'Pardon?'

'Gaia 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 Gaia 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 more than she hated that farting weasel,

more than she hated Sciron's feet.

'Unfortunately, yes,' Hazel said. 'We have to let Sciron win.' 'What?' Jason demanded.

Hazel told him the plan.

## XXVIII

### HAZEL

'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 knitted 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 odour 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 backwards 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 that 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 bandanna. '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 levelled 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 backwards, 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.'

## XXIX

### **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 shrivelled 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 <u>arai</u>. 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 levelled 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.

<u>Polyphemus</u> 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 backwards 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, eying 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 dishonourable, so unworthy of having a friend.

The arai attacked, and this time Bob did not stop them.

# XXX

#### **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 weaved 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 further 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.

## XXXI

#### **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 spiralling 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 towards Annabeth, but she was just out of reach, calling his name as she wandered among the demons.

As Percy blundered towards 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 oesophagus.

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 weed whacker. 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 had dissolved and returned to the Underworld he probably hadn't wished Percy a long and happy life.

After Percy's victory then, Gaia 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.

## XXXII

#### **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 its 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 towards the edge of the cliff.

'Uh!' Percy grunted.

Bob followed his gaze. He bounded towards Annabeth and scooped her up. She yelled and kicked, pummelling 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 any more. 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 any more.'

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.'

## XXXIII

### **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 that 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 night-time 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 colours were fighting for dominance.

On the roof of Jason's building stood his old comrades from Camp Jupiter: an array of demigods in combat armour, 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 centre of the line stood Reyna, her metal dogs <u>Aurum</u> and <u>Argentum</u> 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 armour. 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 <u>faun</u> – 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 red-headed 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' armour 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 towards 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 <u>Sibylline Books</u> –'

'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* levelled. 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 that 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 Gaia.'

Octavian stepped forward to speak, but Reyna shot him a withering look.

'According to Percy Jackson,' Reyna said, 'the battle with Gaia 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. Gaia is stirring – I mean, she's *right* on the edge of consciousness. She's whispering in the minds of <u>naiads</u>, trying to turn them. She's causing earthquakes, uprooting the <u>dryads</u>' 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: Gaia 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 <u>Trojan Horse</u> 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 towards him.

# XXXIV

### **JASON**

#### 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 humour.

After what Jason had seen in his dream, he didn't feel much like joking.

While they are 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'd 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'd become 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 Gaia 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 Gaia. 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 towards him, her caramel braid falling over her shoulder. Her multicoloured 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 harbour,' 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 afterwards, 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 <u>Diocletian</u>'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 <u>Juno</u> 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 sceptre 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 sceptre 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 Gaia 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 sceptre 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 sceptre 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.'

# XXXV

### **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 <u>trireme</u> 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 harbour 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 mediaeval castle towers, Roman walls, limestone town houses with red-tiled roofs and modern office buildings all crammed together. In the distance, grey-green hills marched towards a mountain ridge, which made Jason a little nervous. He kept glancing at that rocky escarpment, expecting the face of Gaia to appear in its shadows.

Nico and he were wandering along the esplanade when Jason spotted a 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 towards the street cart, Jason worried that this winged dude might be a son of <u>Boreas</u> the North Wind. At his side, the angel carried the same kind of jagged bronze sword the <u>Boreads</u> 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 colours, 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, spiralling down the sidewalk and blowing postcards from the carousels in front of the tourist shops. The wind headed towards the end of the promenade, where a big fortress-like 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 grey arches. On the right side was a white marble building with rows of tall windows.

'The <u>peristyle</u>,' 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 <u>Lotus Hotel</u>. 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 got past that, at least according to Percy. Piper had also mentioned a rumour 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 any more,' 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-coloured 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 favourite place.'

Underground was *not* Jason's favourite place.

Ever since his trip beneath Rome with Piper and Percy, fighting those twin giants in the <a href="https://hypogeum.nuber

Having Nico along was not reassuring. His Stygian iron blade seemed to make the shadows even gloomier, as if the infernal metal were 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 <u>Terminus</u>, the talking statue-god back at New Rome. He hoped Diocletian wouldn'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, spiralled 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 behaviour to my gusty brethren in the north.'

Nico inched backwards. '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 <u>Zephyros</u>, 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 pyjamas. 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 Pike's 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 <u>Aeolus</u>.'

'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 knitted 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 sceptre,' 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 aeons, 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 <u>Psyche</u>, 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 tranquillity and love in a turbulent world. When Diocletian's Palace was ransacked –'

'You took the sceptre,' 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 sceptre.'

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.

## XXXVI

### **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 amphitheatre and empty pedestals that must have once held statues. Rows of columns marched off to nowhere. The old city walls weaved 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 towards him, but Nico waved him off.

At Nico's feet, the grass turned brown and wilted. The dead patch spread outwards, 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 behaviour. 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 <u>quoits</u> –'

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 sceptre.

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 towards 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 sceptre!' Nico shouted. 'We're trying to stop Gaia. 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 sceptre?' 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 practor. 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 sank 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 aeons 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 amphitheatre 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 sceptre,' 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 armour 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 <u>manticore</u>. 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 had believed him. Nico had looked into his sea-green eyes and thought, *How can he possibly fail? This is a real hero*. He was Nico's favourite 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 sceptre 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 any more,' Nico muttered. 'I mean  $\dots$  I gave up on Percy. I was young and impressionable, and I-I don't  $\dots$ '

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-travelling. I've had enough of the winds for a while.'

## XXXVII

#### **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 travelling 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 got 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 levelled out into a black swamp. Sulphur-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 trashcan 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 more slowly. Once Annabeth caught up, she could walk right behind him and keep an eye on Percy, who was muttering deliriously, his forehead dangerously hot. Several times he mumbled *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 centre 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 towards them.

## XXXVIII

### **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 favourite 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 snake-like 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 armour, he wore only a shirt stitched together from sheep hides and green-spotted leather. His skin was cherry-red; his beard and hair the colour 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 towards 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 on 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 dragon'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.'

## XXXXIX

### **ANNABETH**

#### Cosy.

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 cosy.

In the centre blazed a bonfire made of pitch and bone; yet the smoke was white and odourless, rising through the hole in the middle of the ceiling. The floor was covered with dry marsh grass and grey 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.

<u>Damasen</u> 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 colour 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 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 Gaia 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 Gaia 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 the 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 Gaia could not forgive.'

'Because you helped someone?'

'Yes.' Damasen looked ashamed. 'Gaia 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 aeons 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.

### **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 colours.'

'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. Further 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.

# XLI

### **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, grey 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 sceptre,' 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 sceptre might have caused this weather change. The black orb on top seemed to leach the colour right out of the air. The golden eagles at its base glinted coldly. The sceptre 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 sceptre 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 goodbye.

'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 sceptre 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 defences 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'd 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 Millennial 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 any more. 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 <u>Achelous</u> were 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.

'Gaia.' Jason's eyes gleamed with sudden interest. 'You mean, to storm or fire Gaia must fall?'

'Oh ...' Leo grinned even wider. 'You know, I like your version a lot better. 'Cause if Gaia 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 Gaia.'

'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 Gaia. The other one would die.

## XLII

### **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 Gaia 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 into trouble trying to thwart them.'

'Yeah,' Leo muttered. 'We'd hate to get into 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 Gaia 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 <u>Porphyrion</u>. 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 favourite 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 Gaia 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 sceptre. 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 <u>Greek fire</u>. 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 that 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 doughnut 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 towards him, but a voice in the storm said, 'Oh, yes, Leo Valdez. I will let you go permanently.'

Leo shot skywards, 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 colour 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.'

# XLIII

### **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.

<u>Khione</u> 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 trousers were grotesquely tight, and his acne had only got 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,' Cal agreed.

'No, you idiots!' Khione snapped. 'She is charmspeaking. Use your wits.'

'Wits ...' Cal 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 <u>Wolf House</u> in Sonoma, the snow goddess had vowed revenge. But why were Zethes and Cal here? In Quebec, the Boreads had seemed almost friendly – at least compared to their sub-zero sister.

'Guys, listen,' Piper said. 'Your sister disobeyed Boreas. She's working with the giants, trying to raise Gaia. 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 skilful liar.'

'Liar?' Piper cried. 'You tried to kill us! Zethes, she's working for Gaia!'

Zethes winced. 'Alas, beautiful girl. We all are working for Gaia 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 Porphyrion 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,' Cal 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 <u>Elysium</u> – 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 Gaia 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!' Cal 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 goodbye! 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 Gaia 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 counsellor 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. Gaia 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?' Cal 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 humour.

Go ahead, she dared. Call my bluff.

'What secret?' Khione demanded. 'Reveal it to us!'

Piper shrugged. 'Suit yourself.' She pointed casually towards the prow. 'Follow me, ice people.'

## XLIV

### **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 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?' Cal 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 that Zethes and Cal started laughing, too.

'That is très bon!' Zethes said. 'A D-list goddess. Ha!'

'Ha!' Cal 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 Cal 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 favourite 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?' Cal asked.

'Almost as good,' Piper promised. 'You fought at the side of Jason and the <u>Argonauts</u>, 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 Gaia, 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,' Cal 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,' Cal 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 <u>Ouranos</u> 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 dived 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 dived for it.

Her fingers closed around the bomb just as the ice shattered and the winds exploded.

## XLV

### **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 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 travelled, 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 centre, 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.'

## XLVI

### **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 grey 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 any more, 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 Gaia 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 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.

## XLVII

#### **PERCY**

#### PERCY MISSED BOB.

He'd got 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're a demigod, that goes with the territory. Most half-bloods don'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 towards 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.

### XLVIII

### **PERCY**

**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 backwards, 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 towards 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 dived 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 further 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 towards 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 <u>ichor</u> 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 towards the goddess. The lake of poison rolled towards her in tiny waves and rivulets.

Akhlys shrieked. 'What is this?'

'Poison,' Percy said. 'That's your speciality, right?'

He stood, his anger growing hotter in his gut. As the flood of venom rolled towards 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 towards 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 wool.

'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.'

### XLIX

### **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 manoeuvring, 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 towards 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 artefact 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 centre 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 colour 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 figured that wasn't 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 tranquillity? 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.

### **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 <u>Bunker Nine</u> 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 towards 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 towards 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 that 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 and 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 practising 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 developed 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 multicoloured 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.'

### 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 got 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 Gaia 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 lemonade at the edge of the garden. She even sent him a few new sets of clothes – simple undyed cotton trousers and shirts that she must have made on her loom. They fitted him so well, Leo wondered how she'd got 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 burnt. 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 underpants. 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 potthrowing 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 had 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 towards 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 to his first project. He didn't see her approach 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 favourite colour. 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 favourite 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 you not smelling so bad and walking around my island in smouldering 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 favour. 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 been 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 chiselled, 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 extrasmall 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 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 armour 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 <u>greaves</u>. 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 <u>phalanx</u> 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 trousers 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, 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 marshal 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 practor 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 armour. 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 favourite goddess, the Mistress of Mud, the Princess of Potty Sludge, Gaia 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 was intently listening to her favourite 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, Gaia was uglier.

You want to live, Gaia 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 Gaia'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.'

Gaia's laughter was a soft rustling sound, like gravel 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 Gaia's sandy face to glass. Then he felt Calypso's hand on his shoulder.

'Gaia.' 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. Gaia 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 Gaia, all the way to the horizon.

Yes, Gaia 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?'

Gaia 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, Gaia 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? Gaia was making her the ultimate deal – kill one annoying guy, get a handsome one free!

Calypso thrust her hand towards Gaia 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 Gaia'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 smouldered with anger, but for once Leo didn't think the anger was aimed at him. 'Your friends must need you, or else Gaia 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.'

# LII

### **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 Gaia. 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 on?'

'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 Gaia 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 Gaia. 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 Gaia 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 had 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.'

'Humour 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.

'Lemonade 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 lemonade 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 got 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 lemonade 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 towards 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.'

## LIII

#### **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 colours 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 – 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 Gaia. 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 <u>Hemera</u>? 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!'

### LIV

### **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 <u>Geras</u>, 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 <u>Eris</u>, 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 see 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 <u>Mansion of Night!</u>'

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 favourite child? Which one is that?'

The brood rustled. Dozens of horrible glowing eyes turned towards 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 favourite 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.

# $\mathbf{L}\mathbf{V}$

### **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 Gaia 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 further 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 towards 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 sulphurous. 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 led to her death if Percy hadn't stopped her.

# LVI

### **ANNABETH**

**'Annabeth!' Percy pulled her back** just as her foot hit the edge of a drop. 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 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 imagine 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 adrenalin. 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 hold 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 centre 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 towards 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.'

# LVII

### **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 got 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 to 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, none of them knew how 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 Ouebec.

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 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 towards Epirus, assuming she'd got 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 sceptre 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 practise raising spirits with Diocletian's sceptre, 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 sceptre 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 came 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 honour 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 goodbye, 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 <u>Notus</u>. 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 got 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-coloured 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 harbour.'

'Ship in the harbour!' The god leaned back and chuckled, rain pouring out of his beard. 'You know the *last* time mortal ships came into my harbour? 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 harbour?'

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 some day. 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 <u>Tempest</u>. 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, they 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 harbour.'

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 towards the fiery wind steeds. Suddenly he wasn't afraid of them.

He thrust out his hand. A swirl of dust shot towards 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 towards 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.

### LIX

#### **JASON**

AT SIXTEEN, MOST KIDS WOULD STRESS about parallel parking tests, getting a driver's licence 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 favourite 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 to 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 colours 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 towards 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 this quest okay. But, if not, Jason had to be prepared. He would protect his friends and stop Gaia – 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 mediaeval-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 harbour. 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 harbour as possible, where the *Argo II* couldn't fail to spot it.

'Get the others,' Jason told Piper. 'Leo is here.'

## LX

#### **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 harbour. Leo must have seen the *Argo II* sail in. Yet he'd 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 humour 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 <u>Circe</u>. 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 colour 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. 'Gaia'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!'

### LXI

#### **PERCY**

PERCY WASN'T DEAD YET, but he was already tired of being a corpse.

As they trudged towards 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 towards 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 <u>Laistrygonian giant</u> pummelled 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 <u>eidolon</u> – 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 colour 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. Some day, 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 grey eyes full of determination, her blonde hair pulled back in a bandanna, 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 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!'

### LXII

#### **PERCY**

A TITAN STRODE TOWARDS THEM, casually kicking lesser monsters out of his way. He was roughly the same height as Bob, with elaborate Stygian iron armour, a single diamond blazing in the centre of his breastplate. His eyes were blue-white, like core samples from a glacier and just as cold. His hair was the same colour, 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 <u>Koios!</u> 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 have noticed 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. <u>Leto</u> 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 towards 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 trouser 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 further.'

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 further 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 Gaia'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 Gaia wanted them to go – Camp Half-Blood, Camp Jupiter or in the path of the *Argo II* before it could even reach Epirus.

'If Gaia 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 Gaia 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, surrounding 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 armour that shimmered with heat.

'Hyperion,' Percy muttered. 'That guy just won't stay dead.'

The one on the right wore dark-blue armour, with ram horns curling from the sides of his helmet. Percy had only seen him in dreams before, but it was definitely <u>Krios</u>, 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.'

### LXIII

#### **PERCY**

**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 colours 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 Gaia 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 the 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.'

### LXIV

#### **PERCY**

**'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 towards the right side of the Doors. Annabeth sneaked towards 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 manoeuvre 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 armour without getting spots in his eyes.

On Percy's side of the Doors, Krios stood dark and silent, his ram-horned 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 Gaia'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 levelled 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 smouldered. '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 Gaia.'

'She is our *mother*!' Hyperion bellowed.

'She did not wake for *our* war on Olympus,' Bob recalled. 'She favours 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 armour, 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 backwards. 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 armoured 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 armour 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 honoured, 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!

# LXV

### **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 <u>Periclymenus</u> 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 duelling 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 marvelling 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 towards a glittering green river snaking through the hills a kilometre away. 'Manoeuvre 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 got 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 favourite 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 any more. 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 Irismessage?'

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. His 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 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 any more.'

- '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 L.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. Afterwards, I went looking for my mom. I was too late.'

Frank watched the tuft of goat hair settle on top of a basket-ball. '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 Gaia. 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 Gaia 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 got stuck in the underground workshop in Rome. Gaia 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 was melting just behind his sternum – a frozen chunk of fear he'd got 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 metres 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 kilometre downstream, some fishing boats were puttering 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 sceptre of Diocletian. Its orb glowed with purple light, as if in sympathy with the dark storm. Roman relic or not, the sceptre 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 sceptre. '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 Gaia'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 Gaia's party.'

### LXVI

#### **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 humour. 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 favourite 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 spiralled gently downwards, 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 honours?'

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 barrelled 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 downwards.

'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 sceptre, 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 Gaia 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 travelled deeper, the corridors widened. The ceilings rose to six metres 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 honouring the ancestors. It was a Chinese thing. You had to appease ghosts. You had to take them seriously.

Frank had 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 sceptre 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 centre of the room, coming straight towards 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 metres 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-metre-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 sceptre.'

Nico raised Diocletian's sceptre, 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 dived 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 towards the monster army.

# LXVII

## **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 ploughed 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 towards 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 metres ahead, Nico was swinging his black sword with one hand, holding the sceptre 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 spiralled 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 leader-ship 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 any more. 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 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 backwards 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 counter-ing 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 odour 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 sceptre 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 towards 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 centre, 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 sceptre 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.

# LXVIII

### **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.

'Testudo 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 sceptre.

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 towards 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 trousers, because they were starting to smoulder. 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 adrenalin 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 sceptre, 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, armour, 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.'

# LXIX

### **ANNABETH**

GETTING KILLED BY TARTARUS didn't seem like much of an honour.

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 backwards recording – as if the words were being sucked into the vortex of his face rather than projected. In fact, *everything* seemed to be drawn towards 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 towards 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 savouring 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 Gaia 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 levelled 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 that 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 towards 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 sabre-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 enamoured 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 sabre-toothed fangs dripping with golden ichor.

You will die first, Iapetus, Tartarus decided. Afterwards, I will add your soul to my armour, 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 towards 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 Gaia! I will make you suffer for your arrogance. And as for your tiny mortal friends ...

Tartarus swept his hand towards the monster army, beckoning them forward. DESTROY THEM!

# LXX

## **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 dived 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 yelped, '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 sabre-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 towards the Doors. A spear flew past Annabeth's head. She turned and stabbed an *empousa* through the gut, then dived 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 favours. 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. Sabre-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. Sabre-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-coloured braids, a jerkin of green leather and a drakon-rib lance in his hand.

'Damasen!' Annabeth cried.



# LXXI

### **ANNABETH**

W HAT 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 towards 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 war-like? Perhaps I will start by destroying you!'

Damasen levelled 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 sabre-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 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 sabre-toothed growled in agreement.

'Besides,' Bob said, 'it is your destiny to return to the world. Put an end to this madness of Gaia.'

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 further 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. Gaia 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 towards 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 Oil 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. Some day, 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 Gaia.'

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 sabre-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.

# LXXII

## **ANNABETH**

### 'PERCY, HELP ME!' ANNABETH YELPED.

She shoved her entire body against the left door, pressing it towards the centre. 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 of 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? Sulphur?

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 Gaia,' 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 Gaia. 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 Gaia*.

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.

# LXXIII

### 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 been 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 marvelled, '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 Gaia had forced her to resurrect Porphyrion the giant king. Hazel had thwarted Gaia'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 <u>stela</u> – 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 centre 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-coloured scales; a massive humanoid upper body encased in Stygian armour; 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. Gaia 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. Gaia 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 Gaia'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 towards 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, Gaia 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 centre 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 Gaia 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.

# LXXIV

### HAZEL

#### HAZEL'S INTERNAL COMPASS SPUN WILDLY.

She remembered when she had been 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 levelled. 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 towards the ceiling with a persistent *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 trouser 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 Gaia 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 in 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 towards 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 centre of the room.

'A pity,' said Pasiphaë. 'I wish I could kill you *and* your friends in the elevator, but Gaia 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 towards 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 better 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 <u>Ariadne</u>. 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 Porphyrion 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 travelled 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 towards 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 further across the room, covering Annabeth and Percy, billowing towards 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 blonde woman stood in a black dress, the Mist swirling around her.

The giant stumbled backwards, 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?'

# LXXV

### 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 <u>Dionysus</u> – 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 her find 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 Gaia 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 towards the giant, punching through his armour like buckshot.

Clytius staggered backwards. 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 favourite 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 <u>Bacchus</u> dealt with the <u>Alodai</u> 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 Gaia'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 towards 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 it might just have 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 towards 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?'

## LXXVI

### 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 armour. 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 backwards. 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. Gaia 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 into 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 goodbye, 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. Gaia 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 towards 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 her 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 favour from the dead is all I can manage today.'

'Wait, what?' Hazel asked.

Piper raised her eyebrows. 'Your *unbelievable* boyfriend called in a favour 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-travelled 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 backwards. '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 sceptre 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 practor. 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 towards 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.

## LXXVII

### **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 <u>Scipio</u> 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 armour before. It was onboard 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 practor.'

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've 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 Gaia 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 Gaia ...' 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 Gaia 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* Gaia 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 Gaia 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 Gaia 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 Gaia. 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 any more. 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 had 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'd 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 towards 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 Gaia. 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 Gaia needs the blood of two demigods to wake – what did Clytius call it? The blood of Olympus? – then aren't we doing exactly what Gaia 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 blonde hair catching the sunlight – even if she was still thin and wan, like him, and her grey 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. Gaia 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?'

# LXXVIII

### **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 humour. '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 armour 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 Gaia'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 Gaia.'

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 towards 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 practised 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 practor.

'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 Gaia.'

He smiled, happy to have something to look forward to. 'Whatever you say.'

As they sailed further 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 Gaia, 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
- <u>Arachne</u> 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 bat-like 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
- <u>Ares</u> the Greek god of war; the son of Zeus and Hera, and half-brother to Athena. Roman form: Mars <u>argentum</u> 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 favourite 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

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target (see also scorpion ballista)
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- **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
- <u>Calypso</u> 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
- <u>Camp Jupiter</u> 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
- <u>charmspeak</u> 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 Gaia 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
- <u>Colosseum</u> an elliptical amphitheatre in the centre 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, re-enactments of famous battles and dramas.
- <u>cornucopia</u> 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
- <u>Cyclops</u> a member of a primordial race of giants (**Cyclopes**, pl.), each with a single eye in the middle of his or her forehead
- <u>Daedalus</u> in Greek mythology, a skilled craftsman who created the Labyrinth on Crete in which the Minotaur (part man, part bull) was kept
- **Damasen** giant son of Tartarus and Gaia; 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 sceptre 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 with six arms that wear only a loincloth

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

<u>Fields of Punishment</u> 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

Gaia 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 armour

<u>Greek fire</u> an incendiary weapon used in naval battles because it can continue burning in water <u>gris-gris</u> In this New Orleans Voodoo practice named after the French word for grey (*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

**<u>Hades</u>** the Greek god of death and riches. Roman form: Pluto

Hannibal a Carthaginian commander who lived between 247–183/182 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
- **<u>Heracles</u>** the Greek equivalent of Hercules; the son of Zeus and Alcmene; the strongest of all mortals
- <u>Hercules</u> the Roman equivalent of Heracles; the son of Jupiter and Alcmene, who was born with great strength
- <u>Hermes</u> Greek god of travellers; guide to spirits of the dead; god of communication. Roman form: Mercury
- **<u>Hesiod</u>** a Greek poet who speculated that it would take nine days to fall to the bottom of Tartarus
- <u>Horatius</u> 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 defences, he saved the Republic.
- <u>House of Hades</u> 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
- <u>Iapetus</u> 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
- <u>Imperial gold</u> a rare metal deadly to monsters, consecrated at the Pantheon; its existence was a closely guarded secret of the emperors
- <u>Janus</u> 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
- <u>Jupiter</u> the Roman king of the gods; also called Jupiter Optimus Maximus (the best and the greatest). Greek form: Zeus
- <u>Kampê</u> 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 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

<u>Labyrinth</u> 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

<u>Lotus Hotel</u> 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 <a href="maiads">naiads</a> water nymphs

<u>Necromanteion</u> the Oracle of Death, or House of Hades in Greek; a multilevel 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

<u>Pasiphaë</u> 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
- <u>Periclymenus</u> 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
- <u>Persephone</u> 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 Field 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 Gaia, the Earth Mother
- **Polyphemus** the gigantic one-eyed son of Poseidon and Thoosa; one of the Cyclopes
- **Porphyrion** the king of the giants in Greek and Roman mythology
- <u>Poseidon</u> 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
- <u>Psyche</u> 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
- <u>River Lethe</u> 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 Gaia, 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
- <u>Sciron</u> an infamous robber who ambushed passers-by 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 launched a large projectile at a distant target
- **Senatus Populusque Romanus** (SPOR) 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
- <u>Sibylline Books</u> 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
- <u>Stygian iron</u> 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.
- <u>Tantalus</u> 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 Gaia; 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: Gaia
- **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.
- <u>Tiber River</u> 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 sombre ruler who never really wanted to be emperor.
- <u>Titans</u> 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
- <u>Triptolemus</u> 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
- <u>Trojan Horse</u> 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
- <u>Venus</u> 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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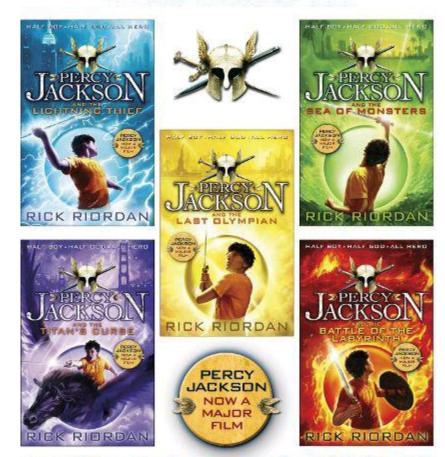
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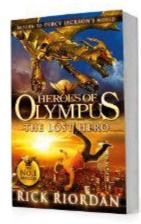


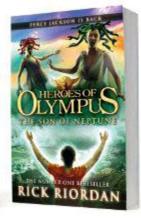
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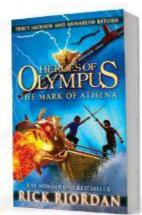


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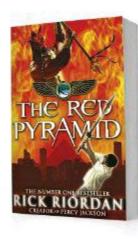


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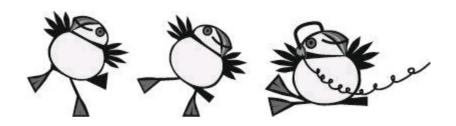
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