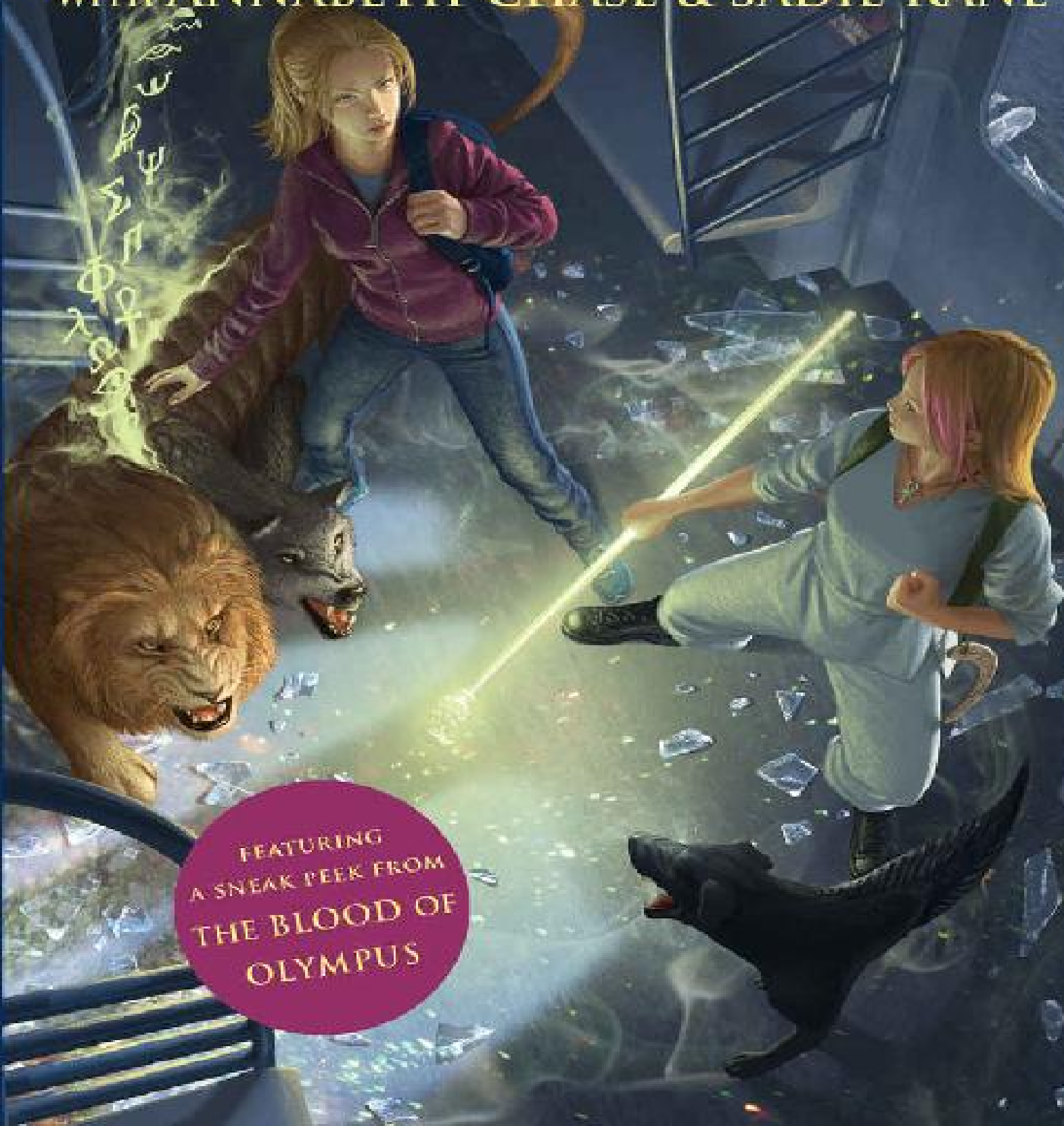


RICK RIORDAN

THE STAFF OF SERAPIS

WITH ANNABETH CHASE & SADIE KANE

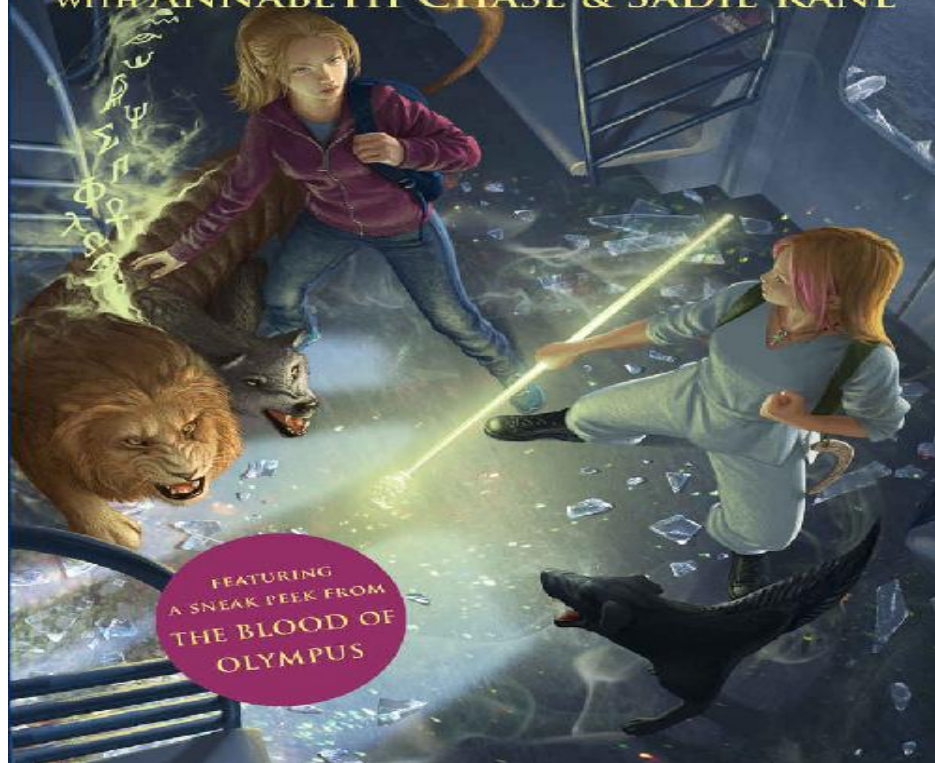


FEATURING
A SNEAK PEEK FROM
THE BLOOD OF
OLYMPUS

RICK RIORDAN

THE STAFF OF SERAPIS

WITH ANNABETH CHASE & SADIE KANE



THE HEROES



OF OLYMPUS

THE STAFF OF SERAPIS

An Annabeth Chase/Sadie Kane Adventure

Disney • HYPERION
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UNTIL SHE SPOTTED the two-headed monster, Annabeth didn't think her day could get any worse.

She'd spent all morning doing makeup work for school. (Skipping classes on a regular basis to save the world from monsters and rogue Greek gods was seriously messing up her GPA.) Then she'd turned down a movie with her boyfriend Percy and some of their friends so she could try out for a summer internship at a local architecture firm. Unfortunately, her brain had been mush. She was pretty sure she'd flubbed the interview.

Finally, around four in the afternoon, she'd trudged through Washington Square Park on her way to the subway station and stepped in a fresh pile of cow manure.

She glared at the sky. "Hera!"

The other pedestrians gave her funny looks, but Annabeth didn't care. She was tired of the goddess's practical jokes. Annabeth had done *so* many quests for Hera, but still the Queen of Heaven left presents from her sacred animal right where Annabeth could step in them. The goddess must have had a herd of stealth cows patrolling Manhattan.

By the time Annabeth made it to the West Fourth Street station, she was cranky and exhausted and just wanted to catch the F train uptown to Percy's place. It was too late for the movie, but maybe they could get dinner or something.

Then, she spotted the monster.

Annabeth had seen some crazy stuff before, but this beastie definitely made her “What Were the Gods Thinking?” list. It looked like a lion and a wolf lashed together, wedged butt-first into a hermit crab shell.

The shell itself was a rough brown spiral, like a waffle cone—about six feet long with a jagged seam down the middle, as if it had been cracked in half, then glued back together. Sprouting from the top were the forelegs and head of a gray wolf on the left, a golden-maned lion on the right.

The two animals didn’t look happy about sharing a shell. They dragged it behind them down the platform, weaving left and right as they tried to pull in different directions. They snarled at one another in irritation. Then both of them froze and sniffed the air.

Commuters streamed past. Most maneuvered around the monster and ignored it. Others just frowned or looked annoyed.

Annabeth had seen the Mist in action many times before, but she was always amazed by how the magical veil could distort mortal vision, making even the fiercest monster look like something explainable—a stray dog, or maybe a homeless person wrapped in a sleeping bag.

The monster’s nostrils flared. Before Annabeth could decide what to do, both heads turned and glared directly at her.

Annabeth’s hand went for her knife. Then she remembered she didn’t have one. At the moment, her most deadly weapon was her backpack, which was loaded with heavy architecture books from the public library.

She steadied her breathing. The monster stood about thirty feet away.

Taking on a lion-wolf-crab in the middle of a crowded subway station wasn’t her first choice, but if she had to, she would. She was a child of Athena.

She stared down the beast, letting it know she meant business.

“Bring it on, Crabby,” she said. “I hope you’ve got a high tolerance for pain.”

The lion and wolf heads bared their fangs. Then the floor rumbled. Air rushed through the tunnel as a train arrived.

The monster snarled at Annabeth. She could’ve sworn it had a look of regret in its eyes, as if thinking, *I would love to rip you to tiny pieces, but I have business elsewhere.*

Then Crabby turned and bounded off, dragging its huge shell behind. It disappeared up the stairs, heading for the A train.

For a moment, Annabeth was too stunned to move. She’d rarely seen a monster leave a demigod alone like that. Given the chance, monsters almost *always* attacked.

If this two-headed hermit crab had something more important to do than kill her, Annabeth wanted to know what it was. She couldn’t just let the monster go, pursuing its nefarious plans and riding public transportation for free.

She glanced wistfully at the F train that would’ve taken her uptown to Percy’s place. Then she ran up the stairs after the monster.

Annabeth jumped on board just as the doors were closing. The train pulled away from the platform and plunged into darkness. Overhead lights flickered. Commuters rocked back and forth. Every seat was filled. A dozen more passengers stood, swaying as they clung to the handrails and poles.

Annabeth couldn’t see Crabby until somebody at the front yelled, “Watch it, freak!”

The wolf-lion-crab was pushing its way forward, snarling at the mortals, but the commuters just acted regular-New-York-subway annoyed. Maybe they saw the monster as a random drunk guy.

Annabeth followed.

As Crabby pried open the doors to the next car and clambered through, Annabeth noticed its shell was glowing faintly.

Had it been doing that before? Around the monster swirled red neon symbols—Greek letters, astrological signs, and picture writing. *Egyptian hieroglyphs*.

A chill spread between Annabeth's shoulder blades. She remembered something Percy had told her a few weeks ago—about an encounter he'd had that seemed so impossible, she'd assumed he was joking.

But now...

She pushed through the crowd, following Crabby into the next car.

The creature's shell was definitely glowing brighter now. As Annabeth got closer, she started to get nauseous. She felt a warm tugging sensation in her gut, as if she had a fishhook in her belly button, pulling her toward the monster.

Annabeth tried to steady her nerves. She had devoted her life to studying Ancient Greek spirits, beasts, and *daimons*. Knowledge was her most important weapon. But this two-headed crab thing—she had no frame of reference for it. Her internal compass was spinning uselessly.

She wished she had backup. She had her cell phone, but even if she could get reception in the tunnel, whom would she call? Most other demigods didn't carry phones. The signals attracted monsters. Percy was way uptown. The majority of her friends were back at Camp Half-Blood on the north shore of Long Island.

Crabby kept shoving its way toward the front of the train.

By the time Annabeth caught up with it in the next car, the monster's aura was so strong that even the mortals had started to notice. Many gagged

and hunched over in their seats, as if someone had opened a locker full of spoiled lunches. Others fainted onto the floor.

Annabeth felt so queasy, she wanted to retreat; but the fishhook sensation kept tugging at her navel, reeling her toward the monster.

The train rattled into the Fulton Street station. As soon as the doors opened, every commuter who was still conscious stumbled out. Crabby's wolf head snapped at one lady, catching her purse in its teeth as she tried to flee.

"Hey!" Annabeth yelled.

The monster let the woman go.

Both sets of eyes fixed on Annabeth as if thinking: *Do you have a death wish?*

Then it threw back its heads and roared in harmony. The sound hit Annabeth like an ice pick between the eyes. The windows of the train shattered. Mortals who had passed out were startled back to consciousness. Some managed to crawl out of the doors. Others tumbled through broken windows.

Through blurred vision, Annabeth saw the monster crouched on its mismatched forearms, ready to pounce.

Time slowed. She was dimly aware of the shattered doors closing, the now-empty train pulling out of the station. Had the conductor not realized what was happening? Was the train running on autopilot?

Only ten feet away from it now, Annabeth noticed new details about the monster. Its red aura seemed brightest along the seam in its shell. Glowing Greek letters and Egyptian hieroglyphs spewed out like volcanic gas from a deep-sea fissure. The lion's left forearm was shaved at the wrist, tattooed with a series of small black stripes. Stuck inside the wolf's left ear was an orange price tag that read \$99.99.

Annabeth gripped the strap of her backpack. She was ready to swing it at the monster, but it wouldn't make much of a weapon. Instead, she relied on her usual tactic when facing a stronger enemy. She started talking.

"You're made of two different parts," she said. "You're like...pieces of a statue that came to life. You've been fused together?"

It was total conjecture, but the lion's growl made Annabeth think she'd hit the mark. The wolf nipped at the lion's cheek as if telling it to shut up.

"You're not used to working together," Annabeth guessed. "Mr. Lion, you've got an ID code on your leg. You were an artifact in a museum? Maybe the Met?"

The lion roared so loudly, Annabeth's knees wobbled.

"I guess that's a yes. And you, Mr. Wolf...That sticker on your ear...you were for sale in some antiques shop?"

The wolf snarled and took a step toward her.

Meanwhile, the train kept tunneling under the East River. Cold wind swirled through the broken windows and made Annabeth's teeth chatter.

All her instincts told her to run, but her joints felt like they were dissolving. The monster's aura kept getting brighter, filling the air with misty symbols and bloody light.

"You...you're getting stronger," Annabeth noted. "You're heading somewhere, aren't you? And the closer you get—"

The monster's heads roared again in harmony. A wave of red energy rippled through the car. Annabeth had to fight to stay conscious.

Crabby stepped closer. Its shell expanded, the fissure down the center burning like molten iron.

"Hold up," Annabeth croaked. "I—I get it now. You're not finished yet. You're looking for another piece. A third head?"

The monster halted. Its eyes glinted warily, as if to say: *Have you been reading my diary?*

Annabeth's courage rose. Finally she was getting the measure of her enemy. She'd met lots of three-headed creatures before. When it came to mythical beings, *three* was sort of a magic number. It made sense that this monster would have another head.

Crabby had been some kind of statue, divided into pieces. Now something had awakened it. It was trying to put itself back together.

Annabeth decided she couldn't let that happen. Those glowing red hieroglyphs and Greek letters floated around it like the burning cord of a fuse, radiating magic that felt fundamentally *wrong*, as though it were slowly dissolving Annabeth's cell structure.

"You're not exactly a Greek monster, are you?" she ventured. "Are you from Egypt?"

Crabby didn't like that comment. It bared its fangs and prepared to spring.

"Whoa, boy," she said. "You're not at full strength yet, are you? Attack me now, and you'll lose. After all, you two don't trust each other."

The lion tilted its head and growled.

Annabeth feigned a look of shock. "Mr. Lion! How can you say that about Mr. Wolf?"

The lion blinked.

The wolf glanced at the lion and snarled suspiciously.

"And Mr. Wolf!" Annabeth gasped. "You shouldn't use that kind of language about your friend!"

The two heads turned on each other, snapping and howling. The monster staggered as its forearms went in different directions.

Annabeth knew she'd only bought herself a few seconds. She racked her brain, trying to figure out what this creature was and how she could defeat it; but it didn't match anything she could remember from her lessons at Camp Half-Blood.

She considered getting behind it, maybe trying to break its shell; but before she could, the train slowed. They pulled into the High Street station, the first Brooklyn stop.

The platform was strangely empty, but a flash of light by the exit stairwell caught Annabeth's eye. A young blond girl in white clothes was swinging a wooden staff, trying to hit a strange animal that weaved around her legs, barking angrily. From the shoulders up, the creature looked like a black Labrador retriever, but its back end was nothing but a rough tapered point, like a calcified tadpole tail.

Annabeth had time to think: *The third piece.*

Then the blond girl whacked the dog across its snout. Her staff flared with golden light, and the dog hurtled backward—straight through a broken window into the far end of Annabeth's subway car.

The blond girl followed it. She leaped in through the closing doors just as the train pulled out of the station.

For a moment they all just stood there—two girls and two monsters.

Annabeth studied the other girl at the other end of the car, trying to assess her threat level.

The newcomer wore white linen pants and a matching blouse, kind of like a karate uniform. Her steel-tipped combat boots looked like they could inflict damage in a fight. Slung over her left shoulder was a blue nylon backpack with a curved ivory stick—a boomerang?—hanging from the strap. But the girl's most intimidating weapon was her white wooden staff

—about five feet long, carved with the head of an eagle, the whole length glowing like Celestial bronze.

Annabeth met the girl's eyes, and a feeling of déjà vu rocked her.

Karate Girl couldn't have been older than thirteen. Her eyes were brilliant blue, like a child of Zeus's. Her long blond hair was streaked with purple highlights. She looked very much like a child of Athena—ready for combat, quick and alert and fearless. Annabeth felt like she was seeing herself from four years ago, around the time she first met Percy Jackson.

Then Karate Girl spoke and shattered the illusion.

“Right.” She blew a strand of purple hair out of her face. “Because my day wasn't barmy enough already.”

British, Annabeth thought. But she didn't have time to ponder that.

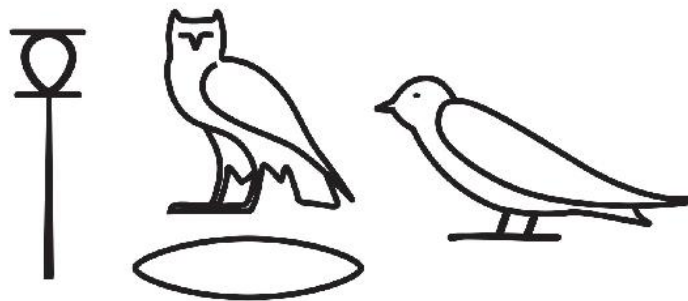
The dog-tadpole and Crabby had been standing in the center of the car, about fifteen feet apart, staring at each other in amazement. Now they overcame their shock. The dog howled—a triumphant cry, like *I found you!* And the lion-wolf-crab lunged to meet it.

“Stop them!” Annabeth yelled.

She leaped onto Crabby's back, and its front paws collapsed from the extra weight.

The other girl yelled something like “*Mar!*”

A series of golden hieroglyphs blazed in the air:



The dog creature staggered backward, retching as if it had swallowed a billiard ball.

Annabeth struggled to keep Crabby down, but the beast was twice her weight. It pushed up on its forelegs, trying to throw her. Both heads turned to snap at her face.

Fortunately she'd harnessed plenty of wild pegasi at Camp Half-Blood. She managed to keep her balance while slipping off her backpack. She smacked twenty pounds of architecture books into the lion's head, then looped her shoulder strap through the wolf's maw and yanked it like a bit.

Meanwhile, the train burst into the sunlight. They rattled along the elevated rails of Queens, fresh air blowing through the broken windows and glittering bits of glass dancing across the seats.

Out of the corner of her eye, Annabeth saw the black dog shake off its fit of retching. It lunged at Karate Girl, who whipped out her ivory boomerang and blasted the monster with another golden flash.

Annabeth wished she could summon golden flashes. All she had was a stupid backpack. She did her best to subdue Crabby, but the monster seemed to get stronger by the second while the thing's red aura weakened Annabeth. Her head felt stuffed with cotton. Her stomach twisted.

She lost track of time as she wrestled the creature. She only knew she couldn't let it combine with that dog-headed thing. If the monster turned into a complete three-headed whatever-it-was, it might be impossible to stop.

The dog lunged again at Karate Girl. This time it knocked her down. Annabeth, distracted, lost her grip on the crab monster, and it threw her off—slamming her head into the edge of a seat.

Her ears rang as the creature roared in triumph. A wave of red-hot energy rippled through the car. The train pitched sideways, and Annabeth

went weightless.

“Up you come,” said a girl’s voice. “We have to move.”

Annabeth opened her eyes. The world was spinning. Emergency sirens wailed in the distance.

She was lying flat on her back in some prickly weeds. The blond girl from the train leaned over her, tugging on her arm.

Annabeth managed to sit up. She felt like someone was hammering hot nails into her rib cage. As her vision cleared, she realized she was lucky to be alive. About fifty yards away, the subway train had toppled off the track. The cars lay sideways in a broken, steaming zigzag of wreckage that reminded Annabeth of a *drakon* carcass (unfortunately, she’d seen several of those).

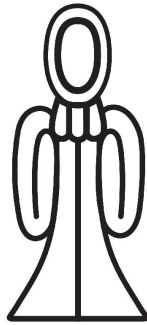
She spotted no wounded mortals. Hopefully they’d all fled the train at the Fulton Street station. But still—what a disaster.

Annabeth recognized where she was: Rockaway Beach. A few hundred feet to the left, vacant lots and bent chain-link fences gave way to a yellow sand beach dotted with tar and trash. The sea churned under a cloudy sky. To Annabeth’s right, past the train tracks, stood a row of apartment towers so dilapidated, they might’ve been make-believe buildings fashioned from old refrigerator boxes.

“Yoo-hoo.” Karate Girl shook her shoulder. “I know you’re probably in shock, but we need to go. I don’t fancy being questioned by the police with *this* thing in tow.”

The girl scooted to her left. Behind her on the broken asphalt, the black Labrador monster flopped like a fish out of water, its muzzle and paws bound in a glowing golden rope.

Annabeth stared at the younger girl. Around her neck glinted a chain with a silver amulet—a symbol like an Egyptian ankh crossed with a gingerbread man.



At her side lay her staff and her ivory boomerang—both carved with hieroglyphs and pictures of strange, very *un-Greek* monsters.

“Who *are* you?” Annabeth demanded.

A smile tugged at the corner of the girl’s mouth. “Usually I don’t give my name to strangers. Magical vulnerabilities, and all that. But I have to respect someone who fights a two-headed monster with nothing but a rucksack.” She offered her hand. “Sadie Kane.”

“Annabeth Chase.” They shook.

“Lovely to meet you, Annabeth,” Sadie said. “Now, let’s take our dog for a walk, shall we?”

They left just in time.

Within minutes, emergency vehicles had surrounded the train wreck, and a crowd of spectators gathered from the nearby apartment buildings.

Annabeth felt more nauseous than ever. Red spots danced before her eyes, but she helped Sadie drag the dog creature backward by its tail into the sand dunes. Sadie seemed to take pleasure in pulling the monster over as many rocks and broken bottles as she could find.

The beast snarled and wriggled. Its red aura glowed more brightly, while the golden rope dimmed.

Normally Annabeth liked walking on the beach. The ocean reminded her of Percy. But today she was hungry and exhausted. Her backpack felt heavier by the moment, and the dog creature's magic made her want to hurl.

Also, Rockaway Beach was a dismal place. A massive hurricane had blown through more than a year ago, and the damage was still obvious. Some of the apartment buildings in the distance had been reduced to shells, their boarded-up windows and cinder-block walls covered in graffiti. Rotted lumber, chunks of asphalt, and twisted metal littered the beach. The pylons of a destroyed pier jutted up out of the water. The sea itself gnawed resentfully at the shore as if to say: *Don't ignore me. I can always come back and finish the job.*

Finally they reached a derelict ice cream truck half sunken in the dunes. Painted on the side, faded pictures of long-lost tasty treats made Annabeth's stomach howl in protest.

"Gotta stop," she muttered.

She dropped the dog monster and staggered over to the truck, then slid down with her back against the passenger's door.

Sadie sat cross-legged facing her. She rummaged around in her own backpack and brought out a cork-stoppered ceramic vial.

"Here." She handed it to Annabeth. "It's yummy. Drink."

Annabeth studied the vial warily. It felt heavy and warm, like it was full of hot coffee. "Uh...this won't unleash any golden flashes of *ka-bam* in my face?"

Sadie snorted. "It's just a healing potion, silly. A friend of mine, Jaz, brews the best in the world."

Annabeth still hesitated. She'd sampled potions before, brewed by the children of Hecate. Usually they tasted like pond scum soup, but at least they were made to work on demigods. Whatever was in this vial, it definitely wasn't.

"I'm not sure I should try," she said. "I'm...not like you."

"*No one* is like me," Sadie agreed. "My amazingness is unique. But if you mean you're not a magician, well, I can *see* that. Usually we fight with a staff and wand." She patted the carved white pole and the ivory boomerang lying next to her. "Still, I think my potions should work on you. You wrestled a monster. You survived that train wreck. You *can't* be normal."

Annabeth laughed weakly. She found the other girl's brashness sort of refreshing. "No, I'm definitely not normal. I'm a demigod."

"Ah." Sadie tapped her fingers on her curved wand. "Sorry, that's a new one on me. A *demon god*?"

"Demigod," Annabeth corrected. "Half god, half mortal."

"Oh, right." Sadie exhaled, clearly relieved. "I've hosted Isis in my head quite a few times. Who's *your* special friend?"

"My— No. I don't *host* anybody. My mother is a Greek goddess, Athena."

"Your mother."

"Yeah."

"A goddess. A *Greek* goddess."

"Yeah." Annabeth noticed that her new friend had gone pale. "I guess you don't have that kind of thing, um, where you come from."

"Brooklyn?" Sadie mused. "No. I don't think so. Or London. Or Los Angeles. I don't recall meeting Greek *demigods* in any of those places. Still,

when one has dealt with magical baboons, goddess cats, and dwarfs in Speedos, one can't be surprised very easily."

Annabeth wasn't sure she'd heard right. "Dwarfs in Speedos?"

"Mmm." Sadie glanced at the dog monster, still writhing in its golden bonds. "But here's the rub. A few months ago my mum gave me a warning. She told me to beware of other gods and other types of magic."

The vial in Annabeth's hands seemed to grow warmer. "Other gods. You mentioned Isis. She's the Egyptian goddess of magic. But...she's not your mom?"

"No," Sadie said. "I mean, yes. Isis is the goddess of Egyptian magic. But she's not my mum. My mum's a ghost. Well...she was a magician in the House of Life, like me, but then she died, so—"

"Just a sec." Annabeth's head throbbed so badly, she figured nothing could make it worse. She uncorked the potion and drank it down.

She'd been expecting pond scum consommé, but it actually tasted like warm apple cider. Instantly, her vision cleared. Her stomach settled.

"Wow," she said.

"Told you." Sadie smirked. "Jaz is quite the apothecary."

"So you were saying...House of Life. Egyptian magic. You're like the kid my boyfriend met."

Sadie's smile eroded. "Your boyfriend...met someone like me? Another magician?"

A few feet away, the dog creature snarled and struggled. Sadie didn't appear concerned, but Annabeth was worried about how dimly the magic rope was glowing now.

"This was a few weeks ago," Annabeth said. "Percy told me a crazy story about meeting a boy out near Moriches Bay. Apparently this kid used hieroglyphs to cast spells. He helped Percy battle a big crocodile monster."

“The Son of Sobek!” Sadie blurted. “But my *brother* battled that monster. He didn’t say anything about—”

“Is your brother’s name Carter?” Annabeth asked.

An angry golden aura flickered around Sadie’s head—a halo of hieroglyphs that resembled frowns, fists, and dead stick men.

“As of this moment,” Sadie growled, “my brother’s name is Punching Bag. Seems he hasn’t been telling me everything.”

“Ah.” Annabeth had to fight the urge to scoot away from her new friend. She feared those glowing angry hieroglyphs might explode. “Awkward. Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Sadie said. “I’ll rather enjoy bashing my brother’s face in. But first, tell me everything—about yourself, demigods, Greeks, and whatever it might have to do with our evil canine friend here.”

Annabeth told her what she could.

Usually she wasn’t so quick to trust, but she’d had a lot of experience reading people. She liked Sadie immediately: the combat boots, the purple highlights, the attitude....In Annabeth’s experience, untrustworthy people weren’t so up-front about wanting to bash someone’s face in. They certainly didn’t help an unconscious stranger and offer a healing potion.

Annabeth described Camp Half-Blood. She recounted some of her adventures battling gods and giants and Titans. She explained how she’d spotted the two-headed lion-wolf-crab at the West Fourth Street station and decided to follow it.

“So here I am,” Annabeth summed up.

Sadie’s mouth quivered. She looked like she might start yelling or crying. Instead, she broke down in a fit of the giggles.

Annabeth frowned. “Did I say something funny?”

“No, no...” Sadie snorted. “Well...it is a *bit* funny. I mean, we’re sitting on the beach talking about Greek gods. And a camp for demigods, and—”

“It’s all true!”

“Oh, I believe you. It’s too ridiculous *not* to be true. It’s just that each time my world gets stranger, I think: *Right. We’re at maximum oddness now. At least I know the full extent of it.* First, I find out my brother and I are descended from the pharaohs and have magic powers. All right. No problem. Then I find out my dead father has merged his soul with Osiris and become the lord of the dead. Brilliant! Why not? Then my uncle takes over the House of Life and oversees hundreds of magicians around the world. Then my boyfriend turns out to be a hybrid magician boy/immortal god of funerals. And all the while I’m thinking, *Of course! Keep calm and carry on! I’ve adjusted!* And then you come along on a random Thursday, la-di-da, and say: *Oh, by the way, Egyptian gods are just one small part of the cosmic absurdity. We’ve also got the Greeks to worry about! Hooray!*”

Annabeth couldn’t follow everything Sadie had said—a funeral god boyfriend?—but she had to admit giggling about it was healthier than curling into a ball and sobbing.

“Okay,” she admitted. “It all sounds a little crazy, but I guess it makes sense. My teacher Chiron...for years he’s been telling me that ancient gods are immortal because they’re part of the fabric of civilization. If Greek gods can stick around all these millennia, why not the Egyptians?”

“The more the merrier,” Sadie agreed. “But, erm, what about this little doggie?” She picked up a tiny seashell and bounced it off the head of the Labrador monster, which snarled in irritation. “One minute it’s sitting on the table in our library—a harmless artifact, a stone fragment from some statue, we think. The next minute it comes to life and breaks out of

Brooklyn House. It shreds our magic wards, plows through Felix's penguins, and shrugs off my spells like they're nothing."

"Penguins?" Annabeth shook her head. "No. Forget I asked."

She studied the dog creature as it strained against its bonds. Red Greek letters and hieroglyphs swirled around it as if trying to form new symbols—a message Annabeth could almost read.

"Will those ropes hold?" she asked. "They look like they're weakening."

"No worries," Sadie assured her. "Those ropes have held gods before. And not small gods, mind you. Extra-large ones."

"Um, okay. So you said the dog was part of a statue. Any idea *what* statue?"

"None." Sadie shrugged. "Cleo, our librarian, was just researching that question when Fido here woke up."

"But it has to be connected to the other monster—the wolf and the lion heads. I got the impression they'd just come to life too. They'd fused together and weren't used to working as a team. They got on that train searching for something—probably this dog."

Sadie fiddled with her silver pendant. "A monster with three heads: a lion, a wolf, and a dog. All sticking out of...what was that conical thing? A shell? A torch?"

Annabeth's head started to spin again. *A torch.*

She flashed on a distant memory—maybe a picture she'd seen in a book. She hadn't considered that the monster's cone might be something you could hold, something that belonged in a massive hand. But a torch wasn't right....

"It's a scepter," she realized. "I don't remember which god held it, but the three-headed staff was his symbol. He was...Greek, I think, but he was

also from somewhere in Egypt—”

“Alexandria,” Sadie guessed.

Annabeth stared at her. “How do you know?”

“Well, granted, I’m not a history nut like my brother, but I *have* been to Alexandria. I recall something about it being the capital when the Greeks ruled Egypt. Alexander the Great, wasn’t it?”

Annabeth nodded. “That’s right. Alexander conquered Egypt, and after he died, his general Ptolemy took over. He wanted the Egyptians to accept him as their pharaoh, so he mashed the Egyptian gods and Greek gods together and made up new ones.”

“Sounds messy,” Sadie said. “I prefer my gods unmashed.”

“But there was one god in particular...I can’t remember his name. The three-headed creature was at the top of his scepter....”

“Rather large scepter,” Sadie noted. “I don’t fancy meeting the bloke who could carry it around.”

“Oh, gods.” Annabeth sat up. “That’s it! The staff isn’t just trying to reassemble itself—it’s trying to find its master.”

Sadie scowled. “I’m not in favor of that at all. We need to make sure—”

The dog monster howled. The magical ropes exploded like a grenade, spraying the beach with golden shrapnel.

The blast knocked Sadie across the dunes like a tumbleweed.

Annabeth slammed into the ice cream truck. Her limbs turned to lead. All the air was forced out of her lungs.

If the dog creature had wanted to kill her, it could have, easily.

Instead, it bounded inland, disappearing in the weeds.

Annabeth instinctively grabbed for a weapon. Her fingers closed around Sadie’s curved wand. Pain made her gasp. The ivory burned like dry ice.

Annabeth tried to let go, but her hand wouldn't obey. As she watched, the wand steamed, changing form until the burn subsided and Annabeth held a Celestial bronze dagger—just like the one she'd carried for years.

She stared at the blade. Then she heard groaning from the nearby dunes.

"Sadie!" Annabeth staggered to her feet.

By the time she reached the magician, Sadie was sitting up, spitting sand out of her mouth. She had bits of seaweed in her hair, and her backpack was wrapped around one of her combat boots, but she looked more outraged than injured.

"Stupid Fido!" she snarled. "No dog biscuits for him!" She frowned at Annabeth's knife. "Where did you get that?"

"Um...it's your wand," Annabeth said. "I picked it up and...I don't know. It just changed into the kind of dagger I usually use."

"Huh. Well, magic items do have a mind of their own. Keep it. I've got more at home. Now, which way did Fido go?"

"Over there." Annabeth pointed with her new blade.

Sadie peered inland. Her eyes widened. "Oh...right. Toward the storm. That's new."

Annabeth followed her gaze. Past the subway tracks, she saw nothing except an abandoned apartment tower, fenced off and forlorn against the late afternoon sky. "What storm?"

"You don't see it?" Sadie asked. "Hold on." She disentangled her backpack from her boot and rummaged through her supplies. She brought out another ceramic vial, this one stubby and wide like a face-cream jar. She pulled off the lid and scooped out some pink goo. "Let me smear this on your eyelids."

"Wow, that sounds like an automatic *no*."

“Don’t be squeamish. It’s perfectly harmless...well, for magicians. Probably for demigods, too.”

Annabeth wasn’t reassured, but she closed her eyes. Sadie smeared on the goop, which tingled and warmed like menthol rub.

“Right,” Sadie said. “You can look now.”

Annabeth opened her eyes and gasped.

The world was awash in color. The ground had turned translucent—gelatinous layers descending into darkness below. The air rippled with shimmering veils, each one vibrant but slightly out of sync, as if multiple high-definition videos had been superimposed on top of one another. Hieroglyphs and Greek letters swirled around her, fusing and bursting as they collided. Annabeth felt like she was seeing the world on the atomic level. Everything invisible had been revealed, painted with magic light.

“Do—do you see like this all the time?”

Sadie snorted. “Gods of Egypt, no! It would drive me bonkers. I have to concentrate to see the Duat. That’s what you’re doing—peering into the magical side of the world.”

“I...” Annabeth faltered.

Annabeth was usually a confident person. Whenever she dealt with regular mortals, she carried a smug certainty that she possessed secret knowledge. She understood the world of gods and monsters. Mortals didn’t have a clue. Even with other demigods, Annabeth was almost always the most seasoned veteran. She’d done more than most heroes had ever dreamed of, and she’d survived.

Now, looking at the shifting curtains of colors, Annabeth felt like a six-year-old kid again, just learning how terrible and dangerous her world really was.

She sat down hard in the sand. “I don’t know what to think.”

“Don’t think,” Sadie advised. “Breathe. Your eyes will adjust. It’s rather like swimming. If you let your body take over, you’ll know what to do instinctively. Panic, and you’ll drown.”

Annabeth tried to relax.

She began to discern patterns in the air: currents flowing between the layers of reality, vapor trails of magic streaming off cars and buildings. The site of the train wreck glowed green. Sadie had a golden aura with misty plumes spreading behind her like wings.

Where the dog monster once lay, the ground smoldered like live coals. Crimson tendrils snaked away from the site, following the direction the monster had fled.

Annabeth focused on the derelict apartment building in the distance, and her heartbeat doubled. The tower glowed red from the inside—light seeping through the boarded-up windows, shooting through cracks in the crumbling walls. Dark clouds swirled overhead, and more tendrils of red energy flowed toward the building from all over the landscape, as if being drawn into the vortex.

The scene reminded Annabeth of Charybdis, the whirlpool-inhaling monster she’d once encountered in the Sea of Monsters. It wasn’t a happy memory.

“That apartment building,” she said. “It’s attracting red light from all over the place.”

“Exactly,” Sadie said. “In Egyptian magic, red is bad. It means evil and chaos.”

“So that’s where the dog monster is heading,” Annabeth guessed. “To merge with the other piece of the scepter—”

“And to find its master, I’d wager.”

Annabeth knew she should get up. They had to hurry. But looking at the swirling layers of magic, she was afraid to move.

She'd spent her whole life learning about the Mist—the magical boundary that separated the mortal world from the world of Greek monsters and gods. But she'd never thought of the Mist as an actual curtain.

What had Sadie called it—the *Duat*?

Annabeth wondered if the Mist and the Duat were related, or maybe even the same thing. The number of veils she could see was overwhelming—like a tapestry folded in on itself a hundred times.

She didn't trust herself to stand. *Panic, and you'll drown.*

Sadie offered her hand. Her eyes were full of sympathy. "Look, I know it's a lot, but nothing has changed. You're still the same tough-skinned, rucksack-wielding demigod you've always been. And now you have a lovely dagger as well."

Annabeth felt the blood rise to her face. Normally she would've been the one giving the pep talk.

"Yeah. Yeah, of course." She accepted Sadie's hand. "Let's go find a god."

A chain-link fence ringed the building, but they squeezed through a gap and picked their way across a field of spear grass and broken concrete.

The enchanted goop on Annabeth's eyes seemed to be wearing off. The world no longer looked so multilayered and kaleidoscopic, but that was fine with her. She didn't need special vision to know the tower was full of bad magic.

Up close, the red glow in the windows was even more radiant. The plywood rattled. The brick walls groaned. Hieroglyphic birds and stick

figures formed in the air and floated inside. Even the graffiti seemed to vibrate on the walls, as if the symbols were trying to come alive.

Whatever was inside the building, its power tugged at Annabeth too, the same way Crabby had on the train.

She gripped her new bronze dagger, realizing it was too small and too short to provide much offensive power. But that's why Annabeth *liked* daggers: They kept her focused. A child of Athena should never rely on a blade if she could use her wits instead. Intelligence won wars, not brute force.

Unfortunately, Annabeth's wits weren't working very well at the moment.

"I wish I knew what we were dealing with," she muttered as they crept toward the building. "I like to do research first—arm myself with knowledge."

Sadie grunted. "You sound like my brother. Tell me, how often do monsters give you the luxury of Googling them before they attack?"

"Never," Annabeth admitted.

"Well, there you are. Carter—he would love to spend hours in the library, reading up on every hostile demon we might face, highlighting the important bits and making flash cards for me to study. Sadly, when demons attack, they don't give us any warning, and they rarely bother to identify themselves."

"So what's *your* standard operating procedure?"

"Forge ahead," Sadie said. "Think on my feet. When necessary, blast enemies into teeny-tiny bits."

"Great. You'd fit right in with my friends."

"I'll take that as a compliment. That door, you think?"

A set of steps led to a basement entrance. A single two-by-four was nailed across the doorway in a halfhearted attempt to keep out trespassers, but the door itself was slightly ajar.

Annabeth was about to suggest scouting the perimeter. She didn't trust such an easy way in, but Sadie didn't wait. The young magician trotted down the steps and slipped inside.

Annabeth's only choice was to follow.

As it turned out, if they'd come through any other door, they would have died.

The whole interior of the building was a cavernous shell, thirty stories tall, swirling with a maelstrom of bricks, pipes, boards, and other debris, along with glowing Greek symbols, hieroglyphs, and red neon tufts of energy. The scene was both terrifying and beautiful—as if a tornado had been caught, illuminated from within, and put on permanent display.

Because they'd entered on the basement level, Sadie and Annabeth were protected in a shallow stairwell—a kind of trench in the concrete. If they'd walked into the storm on ground level, they would've been ripped to shreds.

As Annabeth watched, a twisted steel girder flew overhead at race-car speed. Dozens of bricks sped by like a school of fish. A fiery red hieroglyph slammed into a flying sheet of plywood, and the wood ignited like tissue paper.

"Up there," Sadie whispered.

She pointed to the top of the building, where part of the thirtieth floor was still intact—a crumbling ledge jutting out into the void. It was hard to see through the swirling rubble and red haze, but Annabeth could discern a bulky humanoid shape standing at the precipice, his arms spread as if welcoming the storm.

“What’s he doing?” Sadie murmured.

Annabeth flinched as a helix of copper pipes spun a few inches over her head. She stared into the debris and began noticing patterns like she had with the Duat: a swirl of boards and nails coming together to form a platform frame, a cluster of bricks assembling like Legos to make an arch.

“He’s building something,” she realized.

“Building what, a disaster?” Sadie asked. “This place reminds me of the Realm of Chaos. And believe me, that was *not* my favorite holiday spot.”

Annabeth glanced over. She wondered if Chaos meant the same thing for Egyptians as it did for Greeks. Annabeth had had her own close call with Chaos, and if Sadie had been there, too...well, the magician must be even tougher than she seemed.

“The storm isn’t completely random,” Annabeth said. “See there? And there? Bits of material are coming together, forming some kind of structure inside the building.”

Sadie frowned. “Looks like bricks in a blender to me.”

Annabeth wasn’t sure how to explain it, but she’d studied architecture and engineering long enough to recognize the details. Copper piping was reconnecting like arteries and veins in a circulatory system. Sections of old walls were piecing themselves together to form a new jigsaw puzzle. Every so often, more bricks or girders peeled off the outer walls to join the tornado.

“He’s cannibalizing the building,” she said. “I don’t know how long the outer walls will last.”

Sadie swore under her breath. “Please tell me he’s not building a pyramid. Anything but that.”

Annabeth wondered why an Egyptian magician would hate pyramids, but she shook her head. “I’d guess it’s some kind of conical tower. There’s

only one way to know for sure.”

“Ask the builder.” Sadie gazed up at the remnant of the thirtieth floor.

The man on the ledge hadn’t moved, but Annabeth could swear he’d grown larger. Red light swirled around him. In silhouette, he looked like he was wearing a tall angular top hat *à la* Abe Lincoln.

Sadie shouldered her backpack. “So, if that’s our mystery god, where’s the—”

Right on cue, a three-part howl cut through the din. At the opposite end of the building, a set of metal doors burst open and the crab monster loped inside.

Unfortunately, the beast now had all three heads—wolf, lion, and dog. Its long spiral shell glowed with Greek and hieroglyphic inscriptions. Completely ignoring the flying debris, the monster clambered inside on its six forelegs, then leaped into the air. The storm carried it upward, spiraling through the chaos.

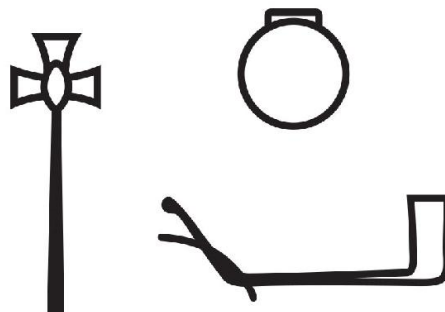
“It’s heading for its master,” Annabeth said. “We have to stop it.”

“Lovely,” Sadie grumbled. “This is going to drain me.”

“What will?”

Sadie raised her staff. “*N’dah.*”

A golden hieroglyph blazed in the air above them:



And suddenly they were surrounded in a sphere of light.

Annabeth's spine tingled. She'd been encased in a protective bubble like this once before, when she, Percy, and Grover had used magic pearls to escape the Underworld. The experience had been...claustrophobic.

"This will shield us from the storm?" she asked.

"Hopefully." Sadie's face was now beaded with sweat. "Come on."

She led the way up the steps.

Immediately, their shield was put to the test. A flying kitchen counter would have decapitated them, but it shattered against Sadie's force field. Chunks of marble swirled harmlessly around them.

"Brilliant," Sadie said. "Now, hold the staff while I turn into a bird."

"Wait. *What?*"

Sadie rolled her eyes. "We're thinking on our feet, remember? I'll fly up there and stop the staff monster. You try to distract that god...whoever he is. Get his attention."

"Fine, but I'm no magician. I can't maintain a spell."

"The shield will hold for a few minutes, as long as you use the staff."

"But what about you? If you're not inside the shield—"

"I have an idea. It might even work."

Sadie fished something out of her pack—a small animal figurine. She curled her fingers around it, then began to change form.

Annabeth had seen people turn into animals before, but it never got easier to watch. Sadie shrank to a tenth of her size. Her nose elongated into a beak. Her hair and clothes and backpack melted into a sleek coat of feathers. She became a small bird of prey—a kite, maybe—her blue eyes now brilliant gold. With the little figurine still clutched in her talons, Sadie spread her wings and launched herself into the storm.

Annabeth winced as a cluster of bricks plowed into her friend—but somehow the debris went straight through without turning Sadie into

feather puree. Sadie's form just shimmered as if she were traveling under a deep layer of water.

Sadie was in the Duat, Annabeth realized—flying on a different level of reality.

The idea made Annabeth's mind heat up with possibilities. If a demigod could learn to pass through walls like that, run straight through monsters...

But that was a conversation for another time. Right now she needed to move. She charged up the steps and into the maelstrom. Metal bars and copper pipes clanged against her force field. The golden sphere flashed a little more dimly each time it deflected debris.

She raised Sadie's staff in one hand and her new dagger in the other. In the magical torrent, the Celestial bronze blade guttered like a dying torch.

"Hey!" she yelled at the ledge far above. "Mr. God Person!"

No response. Her voice probably couldn't carry over the storm.

The shell of the building started to groan. Mortar trickled from the walls and swirled into the mix like cotton candy tufts.

Sadie the hawk was still alive, flying toward the three-headed monster as it spiraled upward. The beast was about halfway to the top now, flailing its legs and glowing ever more brightly, as if soaking up the power of the tornado.

Annabeth was running out of time.

She reached into her memory, sifting through old myths, the most obscure tales Chiron had ever told her at camp. When she was younger, she'd been like a sponge, soaking up every fact and name.

The three-headed staff. The god of Alexandria, Egypt.

The god's name came to her. At least, she hoped she was right.

One of the first lessons she'd learned as a demigod: *Names have power.* You never said the name of a god or monster unless you were prepared to

draw its attention.

Annabeth took a deep breath. She shouted at the top of her lungs: “SERAPIS!”

The storm slowed. Huge sections of pipe hovered in midair. Clouds of bricks and lumber froze and hung suspended.

Becalmed in the middle of the tornado, the three-headed monster tried to stand. Sadie swooped overhead, opened her talons, and dropped her figurine, which instantly grew into a full-sized camel.

The shaggy dromedary slammed into the monster’s back. Both creatures tumbled out of the air and crashed to the floor in a tangle of limbs and heads. The staff monster continued to struggle, but the camel lay on top of it with its legs splayed, bleating and spitting and basically going limp like a thousand-pound toddler throwing a tantrum.

From the thirtieth floor ledge, a man’s voice boomed: “WHO DARES INTERRUPT MY TRIUMPHAL RISE?”

“I do!” yelled Annabeth. “Come down and face me!”

She didn’t like taking credit for other people’s camels, but she wanted to keep the god focused on her so Sadie could do...whatever Sadie decided to do. The young magician clearly had some good tricks up her sleeve.

The god Serapis leaped from his ledge. He plummeted thirty stories and landed on his feet in the middle of the ground floor, an easy dagger throw away from Annabeth.

Not that she was tempted to attack.

Serapis stood fifteen feet tall. He wore only a pair of swim trunks in a Hawaiian floral pattern. His body rippled with muscles. His bronze skin was covered in shimmering tattoos of hieroglyphs, Greek letters, and other languages Annabeth didn’t recognize.

His face was framed with long, nappy hair like Rastafarian dreadlocks. A curly Greek beard grew down to his collarbone. His eyes were sea green—so much like Percy’s that Annabeth got goose bumps.

Normally she didn’t like hairy bearded dudes, but she had to admit this god was attractive in an older, wild surfer kind of way.

His headgear, however, ruined the look. What Annabeth had taken for a stovepipe hat was actually a cylindrical wicker basket embroidered with images of pansies.

“Excuse me,” she said. “Is that a flowerpot on your head?”

Serapis raised his bushy brown eyebrows. He patted his head as if he’d forgotten about the basket. A few wheat seeds spilled from the top. “That’s a *modius*, silly girl. It’s one of my holy symbols! The grain basket represents the Underworld, which I control.”

“Uh, you do?”

“Of course!” Serapis glowered. “Or I *did*, and soon I will again. But who are you to criticize my fashion choices? A Greek demigod, by the smell of you, carrying a Celestial bronze weapon and an Egyptian staff from the House of Life. Which are you—hero or magician?”

Annabeth’s hands trembled. Flowerpot hat or no, Serapis radiated power. Standing so near him, Annabeth felt watery inside, as if her heart, her stomach, and her courage were all melting.

Get a hold of yourself, she thought. *You’ve met plenty of gods before.*

But Serapis was different. His presence felt fundamentally *wrong*—as if simply by being here, he was pulling Annabeth’s world inside out.

Twenty feet behind the god, Sadie the bird landed and changed back to human form. She gestured to Annabeth: finger to lips (*shh*), then rolled her hand (*keep him talking*). She began rooting quietly through her bag.

Annabeth had no idea what her friend was planning, but she forced herself to meet Serapis's eyes. "Who says I'm not both—magician *and* demigod? Now, explain why you're here!"

Serapis's face darkened. Then, to Annabeth's surprise, he threw back his head and laughed, spilling more grain from his *modius*. "I see! Trying to impress me, eh? You think yourself worthy of being my high priestess?"

Annabeth gulped. There was only one answer to a question like that. "Of course I'm worthy! Why, I was once the *magna mater* of Athena's cult! But are you worthy of my service?"

"HA!" Serapis grinned. "A big mother of Athena's cult, eh? Let's see how tough you are."

He flicked his hand. A bathtub flew out of the air, straight at Annabeth's force field. The porcelain burst into shrapnel against the golden sphere, but Sadie's staff became so hot, Annabeth had to drop it. The white wood burned to ashes.

Great, she thought. Two minutes, and I've already ruined Sadie's staff.

Her protective shield was gone. She faced a fifteen-foot-tall god with only her usual weapons—a tiny dagger and a lot of attitude.

To Annabeth's left, the three-headed monster was still struggling to get out from under the camel, but the camel was heavy, stubborn, and fabulously uncoordinated. Every time the monster tried to push it off, the camel farted with gusto and splayed its legs even farther.

Meanwhile, Sadie had taken a piece of chalk from her bag. She scribbled furiously on the concrete floor behind Serapis, perhaps writing a nice epitaph to commemorate their imminent death.

Annabeth recalled a quote her friend Frank had once shared with her—something from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*:

When weak, act strong.

Annabeth stood straight and laughed in Serapis's face. "Throw things at me all you want, Lord Serapis. I don't even need a staff to defend myself. My powers are too great! Or perhaps you want to stop wasting my time and tell me how I may serve you, *assuming* I agree to become your new high priestess."

The god's face glowed with outrage.

Annabeth was sure he would drop the entire whirlwind of debris on her, and there was no way she'd be able to stop it. She considered throwing her dagger at the god's eye, the way her friend Rachel had once distracted the Titan Kronos, but Annabeth didn't trust her aim.

Finally Serapis gave her a twisted smile. "You have courage, girl. I'll grant you that. And you did make haste to find me. Perhaps you *can* serve. You will be the first of many to give me your power, your life, your very soul!"

"Sounds fun." Annabeth glanced at Sadie, wishing she would hurry up with that chalk art.

"But first," Serapis said, "I must have my staff!"

He gestured toward the camel. A red hieroglyph burned on the creature's hide, and with one final fart, the poor dromedary dissolved into a pile of sand.

The three-headed monster got to its forepaws, shaking off the sand.

"Hold it!" Annabeth yelled.

The monster's three heads snarled at her.

Serapis scowled. "What now, girl?"

"Well, I should...you know, present the staff to you, as your high priestess! We should do things properly!"

Annabeth lunged for the monster. It was much too heavy for her to pick up, but she stuck her dagger in her belt and used both hands to grab the end

of the creature's conical shell, dragging it backward, away from the god.

Meanwhile, Sadie had drawn a big circle about the size of a hula-hoop on the concrete. She was now decorating it with hieroglyphs, using several different colors of chalk.

By all means, Annabeth thought with frustration. Take your time and make it pretty!

She managed to smile at Serapis while holding back the staff monster that was still trying to claw its way forward.

"Now, my lord," Annabeth said, "tell me your glorious plan! Something about souls and lives?"

The staff monster howled in protest, probably because it could see Sadie hiding behind the god, doing her top secret sidewalk art. Serapis didn't seem to notice.

"Behold!" He spread his muscular arms. "The new center of my power!"

Red sparks blazed through the frozen whirlwind. A web of light connected the dots until Annabeth saw the glowing outline of the structure Serapis was building: a massive tower three hundred feet tall, designed in three tapering tiers—a square bottom, an octagonal middle, and a circular top. At the zenith blazed a fire as bright as a Cyclops's forge.

"A lighthouse," Annabeth said. "The Lighthouse of Alexandria."

"Indeed, my young priestess." Serapis paced back and forth like a teacher giving a lecture, though his floral-print shorts were pretty distracting. His wicker basket hat kept tilting to one side or the other, spilling grain. Somehow he still failed to notice Sadie squatting behind him, scribbling pretty pictures with her chalk.

"Alexandria!" the god cried. "Once the greatest city in the world, the ultimate fusion of Greek and Egyptian power! I was its supreme god, and

now I have risen again. I will create my new capital here!”

“Uh...in Rockaway Beach?”

Serapis stopped and scratched his beard. “You have a point. That name won’t do. We will call it...Rockandria? Serapaway? Well, we’ll figure that out later! Our first step is to complete my new lighthouse. It will be a beacon to the world—drawing the deities of Ancient Greece and Egypt here to me just as it did in the old days. I shall feed on their essence and become the most powerful god of all!”

Annabeth felt like she’d swallowed a tablespoon of salt. “*Feed on their essence*. You mean, destroy them?”

Serapis waved dismissively. “*Destroy* is such an ugly word. I prefer *incorporate*. You know my history, I hope? When Alexander the Great conquered Egypt—”

“He tried to merge the Greek and Egyptian religions,” Annabeth said.

“Tried and failed.” Serapis chuckled. “Alexander chose an Egyptian sun god, Amun, to be his main deity. That didn’t work too well. The Greeks didn’t like Amun. Neither did the Egyptians of the Nile Delta. They saw Amun as an upriver god. But when Alexander died, his general took over Egypt.”

“Ptolemy the First,” Annabeth said.

Serapis beamed, obviously pleased. “Yes...Ptolemy. Now, there was a mortal with *vision*!”

It took all of Annabeth’s will not to stare at Sadie, who had now completed her magic circle and was tapping the hieroglyphs with her finger, muttering something under her breath as if to activate them.

The three-headed staff monster snarled in disapproval. It tried to lunge forward, and Annabeth barely managed to hold him back. Her fingers were weakening. The creature’s aura was as nauseating as ever.

“Ptolemy created a new god,” she said, straining with effort. “He created you.”

Serapis shrugged. “Well, not from *scratch*. I was once a minor village god. Nobody had even heard of me! But Ptolemy discovered my statue and brought it to Alexandria. He had the Greek and Egyptian priests do auguries and incantations and whatnot. They all agreed that I was the great god Serapis, and I should be worshipped above all other gods. I was an instant hit!”

Sadie rose within her magic circle. She unlatched her silver necklace and began swinging it like a lasso.

The three-headed monster roared what was probably a warning to its master: *Look out!*

But Serapis was on a roll. As he spoke, the hieroglyphic and Greek tattoos on his skin glowed more brightly.

“I became the most important god of the Greeks and Egyptians!” he said. “As more people worshipped me, I drained the power of the older gods. Slowly but surely, I took their place. The Underworld? I became its master, replacing both Hades and Osiris. The guard dog Cerberus transformed into my staff, which you now hold. His three heads represent the past, present, and future—all of which I will control when the staff is returned to my grasp.”

The god held out his hand. The monster strained to reach him. Annabeth’s arm muscles burned. Her fingers began to slip.

Sadie was still swinging her pendant, muttering an incantation.

Holy Hecate, Annabeth thought, how long does it take to cast a stupid spell?

She caught Sadie’s gaze and saw the message in her eyes: *Hold on. Just another few seconds.*

Annabeth wasn't sure she had a few more seconds.

"The Ptolemaic dynasty..." She gritted her teeth. "It fell centuries ago. Your cult was forgotten. How is it that you're back now?"

Serapis sniffed. "That's not important. The one who awakened me...well, he has delusions of grandeur. He thinks he can control me just because he found some old spells in the Book of Thoth."

Behind the god, Sadie flinched like she'd been smacked between the eyes. Apparently, this "Book of Thoth" struck a chord with her.

"You see," Serapis continued, "back in the day, King Ptolemy decided it wasn't enough to make *me* a major god. He wanted to become immortal, too. He declared himself a god, but his magic backfired. After his death, his family was cursed for generations. The Ptolemaic line grew weaker and weaker until that silly girl Cleopatra committed suicide and gave everything to the Romans."

The god sneered. "Mortals...always so greedy. The magician who awakened me *this* time thinks he can do better than Ptolemy. Raising me was only one of his experiments with hybrid Greek-Egyptian magic. He wishes to make himself a god, but he has overstepped himself. I am awake now. *I* will control the universe."

Serapis fixed Annabeth with his brilliant green eyes. His features seemed to shift, reminding Annabeth of many different Olympians: Zeus, Poseidon, Hades. Something about his smile even reminded Annabeth of her mother, Athena.

"Just think, little demigod," Serapis said, "this lighthouse will draw the gods to me like moths to a candle. Once I have consumed their power, I will raise a great city. I will build a new Alexandrian library with all the knowledge of the ancient world, both Greek and Egyptian. As a child of

Athena, you should appreciate this. As my high priestess, think of all the power you will have!”

A new Alexandrian library.

Annabeth couldn’t pretend that the idea didn’t thrill her. So much knowledge of the ancient world had been destroyed when that library had burned.

Serapis must have seen the hunger in her eyes.

“Yes.” He extended his hand. “Enough talk, girl. Give me my staff!”

“You’re right,” Annabeth croaked. “Enough talk.”

She drew her dagger and plunged it into the monster’s shell.

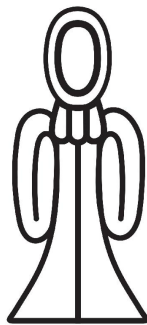
So many things could have gone wrong. Most of them did.

Annabeth was hoping the knife would split the shell, maybe even destroy the monster. Instead, it opened a tiny fissure that spewed red magic as hot as a line of magma. Annabeth stumbled back, her eyes stinging.

Serapis bellowed, “TREACHERY!” The staff creature howled and thrashed, its three heads trying in vain to reach the knife stuck in its back.

At the same moment, Sadie cast her spell. She threw her silver necklace and yelled, “*Tyet!*”

The pendant exploded. A giant silvery hieroglyph enveloped the god like a see-through coffin:



Serapis roared as his arms were pinned to his side.

Sadie shouted, “I name you Serapis, god of Alexandria! God of...uh, funny hats and three-headed staffs! I bind you with the power of Isis!”

Debris began falling out of the air, crashing around Annabeth. She dodged a brick wall and a fuse box. Then she noticed the wounded staff monster crawling toward Serapis.

She lunged in that direction, only to get smacked in the head with a falling piece of lumber. She hit the floor hard, her skull throbbing, and was immediately buried in more debris.

She took a shaky breath. “Ow, ow, ow.”

At least she hadn’t been buried in bricks. She kicked her way out of a pile of plywood and plucked a six-inch splinter out of her shirt.

The monster had made it to Serapis’s feet. Annabeth knew she should have stabbed one of the monster’s heads, but she just couldn’t make herself do it. She was always a softie when it came to animals, even if they were part of a magical evil creature trying to kill her. Now it was too late.

The god flexed his considerable muscles. The silvery prison shattered around him. The three-headed staff flew into his hand, and Serapis turned on Sadie Kane.

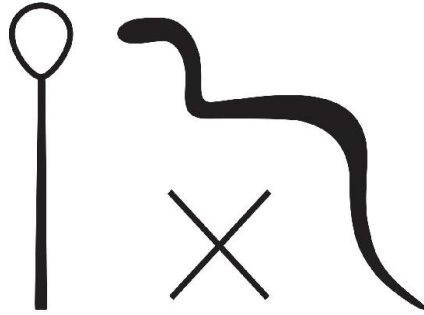
Her protective circle evaporated in a cloud of red steam.

“You would *bind* me?” Serapis cried. “You would *name* me? You do not even have the proper language to name me, little magician!”

Annabeth staggered forward, but her breathing was shallow. Now that Serapis held the staff, his aura felt ten times more powerful. Annabeth’s ears buzzed. Her ankles turned to mush. She could feel her life force being drained away—vacuumed into the red halo of the god.

Somehow, Sadie stood her ground, her expression defiant. “Right, Lord Cereal Bowl. You want proper language? *HA-DI!*”

A new hieroglyph blazed in Serapis’s face:



But the god swiped it out of the air with his free hand. He closed his fist and smoke shot between his fingers, as if he'd just crushed a miniature steam engine.

Sadie gulped. "That's impossible. How—"

"Expecting an explosion?" Serapis laughed. "Sorry to disappoint you, child, but my power is both Greek and Egyptian. It combines both, consumes both, *replaces* both. You are favored of Isis, I see? Excellent. She was once my wife."

"*What?*" Sadie cried. "No. No, no, no."

"Oh, yes! When I deposed both Osiris and Zeus, Isis was forced to serve me. Now I will use you as a gateway to summon her here and bind her. Isis will once again be my queen!"

Serapis thrust out his staff. From each of the three monstrous mouths, red tendrils of light shot forth, encircling Sadie like thorny branches.

Sadie screamed, and Annabeth finally overcame her shock.

She grabbed the nearest sheet of plywood—a wobbly square about the size of a shield—and tried to remember her Ultimate Frisbee lessons from Camp Half-Blood.

"Hey, Grain Head!" she yelled.

She twisted from the waist, using the force of her entire body. The plywood sailed through the air just as Serapis turned to look at her, and the edge smacked him between the eyes.

"GAH!"

Annabeth dove to one side as Serapis blindly thrust his staff in her direction. The three monster heads blasted super-heated plumes of vapor, melting a hole in the concrete where Annabeth had just been standing.

She kept moving, picking her way through mounds of debris that now littered the floor. She dove behind a pile of broken toilets as the god's staff blasted another triple column of steam in her direction, coming so close that she felt blisters rise on the back of her neck.

Annabeth spotted Sadie about thirty yards away, on her feet and staggering away from Serapis. At least she was still alive. But Annabeth knew she would need time to recover.

"Hey, Serapis!" Annabeth called from behind the mountain of commodes. "How did that plywood taste?"

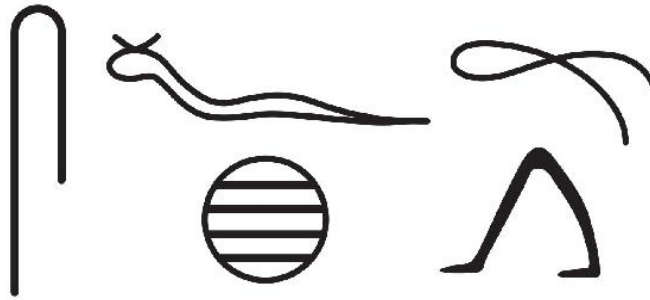
"Child of Athena!" the god bellowed. "I will devour your life force! I will use you to destroy your wretched mother! You think you are wise? You are nothing compared to the one who awakened me, and even *he* does not understand the power he has unleashed. None of you shall gain the crown of immortality. I control the past, present, and future. I alone will rule the gods!"

And thank you for the long speech, Annabeth thought.

By the time Serapis blasted her position, turning the toilets into a porcelain slag heap, Annabeth had crept halfway across the room.

She was searching for Sadie when the magician popped up from her hiding place, only ten feet away, and shouted: "*Suh-FAH!*"

Annabeth turned as a new hieroglyph, twenty feet tall, blazed on the wall behind Serapis:



Mortar disintegrated. The side of the building groaned, and as Serapis screamed, “NO!” the entire wall collapsed on top of him in a brick tidal wave, burying him under a thousand tons of wreckage.

Annabeth choked on a cloud of dust. Her eyes stung. She felt like she’d been parboiled in a rice cooker, but she stumbled to Sadie’s side.

The young magician was covered in lime powder like she’d been rolled in sugar. She stared at the gaping hole she’d made in the side of the building.

“That worked,” she muttered.

“It was genius.” Annabeth squeezed her shoulders. “What spell was that?”

“*Loosen*,” Sadie said. “I reckoned...well, making things fall apart is usually easier than putting them together.”

As if in agreement, the remaining shell of the building creaked and rumbled.

“Come on.” Annabeth took Sadie’s hand. “We need to get out of here. These walls—”

The foundation shook. From beneath the rubble came a muffled roar. Shafts of red light shot from gaps in the debris.

“Oh, please!” Sadie protested. “He’s still *alive*?”

Annabeth’s heart sank, but she wasn’t surprised. “He’s a god. He’s immortal.”

“Well, then how—?”

Serapis's hand, still clutching his staff, thrust through the bricks and boards. The monster's three heads blasted shafts of steam in all directions. Annabeth's knife remained hilt-deep in the monster's shell, the scar around it venting red-hot hieroglyphs, Greek letters, and English curse words—thousands of years of bad language spilling free.

Like a time line, Annabeth thought.

Suddenly an idea clicked in her mind. "Past, present, and future. He controls them all."

"What?" Sadie asked.

"The staff is the key," Annabeth said. "We have to destroy it."

"Yes, but—"

Annabeth sprinted toward the pile of rubble. Her eyes were fixed on the hilt of her dagger, but she was too late.

Serapis's other arm broke free, then his head, his flower-basket hat crushed and leaking grain. Annabeth's plywood Frisbee had broken his nose and blackened his eyes, leaving a mask like a raccoon's.

"Kill you!" he bellowed, just as Sadie yelled an encore: "*Suh-FAH!*"

Annabeth beat a hasty retreat, as Serapis yelled, "NO!" as another thirty-story section of wall collapsed on top of him.

The magic must have been too much for Sadie. She crumpled like a rag doll, and Annabeth caught her just before her head hit the ground. As the remaining sections of wall shuddered and leaned inward, Annabeth scooped up the younger girl and carried her outside.

Somehow she cleared the building before the rest of it collapsed. Annabeth heard the tremendous roar, but she wasn't sure if it was the devastation behind her or the sound of her own skull splitting from pain and exhaustion.

She staggered on until she reached the subway tracks. She set Sadie down gently in the weeds.

Sadie's eyes rolled back in her head. She muttered incoherently. Her skin felt so feverish, Annabeth had to fight down a sense of panic. Steam rose from the magician's sleeves.

Over by the train wreck, the mortals had noticed the new disaster. Emergency vehicles were peeling away, heading for the collapsed apartment building. A news helicopter circled overhead.

Annabeth was tempted to yell for medical help, but before she could, Sadie inhaled sharply. Her eyelids fluttered.

She spit a chip of concrete out of her mouth, sat up weakly, and stared at the column of dust churning into the sky from their little adventure.

"Right," Sadie muttered. "What should we destroy next?"

Annabeth sobbed with relief. "Thank the gods you're okay. You were literally steaming."

"Hazard of the trade." Sadie brushed some dust off her face. "Too much magic, and I can literally burn up. That's about as close to self-immolation as I'd like to come today."

Annabeth nodded. She'd been jealous of all those cool spells Sadie could cast, but now she was glad to be just a demigod. "No more magic for you."

"Not for a while." Sadie grimaced. "I don't suppose Serapis is defeated?"

Annabeth gazed toward the site of the would-be lighthouse. She wanted to think the god was gone, but she knew better. She could still feel his aura disrupting the world, pulling at her soul and draining her energy.

"We've got a few minutes at best," she guessed. "He'll work his way free. Then he'll come after us."

Sadie groaned. “We need reinforcements. Sadly, I don’t have enough energy to open a portal, even if I could find one. Isis isn’t responding to me, either. She knows better than to show up and have her essence absorbed by Lord Cereal Bowl.” She sighed. “I don’t suppose you have any other demigods on speed dial?”

“If only...” Annabeth faltered.

She realized her own backpack was still on her shoulder. How had it not slipped off during the fight? And why did it feel so light?

She unslung the pack and opened the top. The architecture books were gone. Instead, nestled at the bottom was a brownie-sized square of ambrosia wrapped in cellophane, and under that...

Annabeth’s lower lip trembled. She pulled out something she hadn’t carried with her in a long time: her battered blue New York Yankees cap.

She glanced up at the darkening sky. “Mom?”

No reply; but Annabeth couldn’t think of any other explanation. Her mother had sent her help. The realization both encouraged and terrified her. If Athena was taking a personal interest in this situation, Serapis truly was a monumental threat—not just to Annabeth, but to the gods.

“It’s a baseball cap,” Sadie noted. “Is that good?”

“I—I think so,” Annabeth said. “The last time I wore it, the magic didn’t work. But if it *does*... I might have a plan. It’ll be your turn to keep Serapis distracted.”

Sadie frowned. “Did I mention I’m out of magic?”

“That’s okay,” Annabeth said. “How are you at bluffing, lying, and trash-talking?”

Sadie raised an eyebrow. “I’ve been told those are my most attractive qualities.”

“Excellent,” Annabeth said. “Then it’s time I taught you some Greek.”

They didn't have long.

Annabeth had barely finished coaching Sadie when the ruined building shook, debris exploded outward, and Serapis emerged, roaring and cursing.

Startled emergency workers scattered from the scene, but they didn't seem to notice the fifteen-foot-tall god marching away from the wreckage, his three-headed staff spewing steam and red beams of magic into the sky.

Serapis headed straight in Sadie and Annabeth's direction.

"Ready?" Annabeth asked.

Sadie exhaled. "Do I have a choice?"

"Here." Annabeth gave her the square of ambrosia. "Demigod food. It might restore your strength."

"*Might*, eh?"

"If I can use your healing potion, you should be able to eat ambrosia."

"Cheers, then." Sadie took a bite. Color returned to her cheeks. Her eyes brightened. "Tastes like my gran's scones."

Annabeth smiled. "Ambrosia always tastes like your favorite comfort food."

"That's a shame." Sadie took another bite and swallowed. "Gran's scones are always burnt and rather horrid. Ah—here comes our friend."

Serapis kicked a fire truck out of his way and lumbered toward the train tracks. He didn't seem to have spotted Sadie and Annabeth yet, but Annabeth guessed he could *sense* them. He scanned the horizon, his expression full of murderous rage.

"Here we go." Annabeth donned her Yankees cap.

Sadie's eyes widened. "Well done. You're quite invisible. You won't start shooting sparks, will you?"

"Why would I do that?"

“Oh...my brother cast an invisibility spell once. Didn’t work out so well. Anyway, good luck.”

“You, too.”

Annabeth dashed to one side as Sadie waved her arms and yelled, “Oi, Serapis!”

“DEATH TO YOU!” the god bellowed.

He barreled forward, his massive feet making craters in the asphalt.

As they’d planned, Sadie backed toward the beach. Annabeth crouched behind an abandoned car and waited for Serapis to pass. Invisible or not, she wasn’t going to take any chances.

“Come on!” Sadie taunted the god. “Is that the fastest you can run, you overgrown village idiot?”

“RAR!” The god charged past Annabeth’s position.

She ran after Serapis, who caught up with Sadie at the edge of the surf.

The god raised his glowing staff, all three monstrous heads belching steam. “Any last words, magician?”

“For you? Yes!” Sadie whirled her arms in movements that could’ve been magic—or possibly kung fu.

“*Meana aedei thea!*” She chanted the lines Annabeth had taught her. “*En...ponte pathen algae!*”

Annabeth winced. Sadie’s pronunciation was pretty bad. She’d gotten the first line right, more or less: *Sing of rage, O goddess*. But the second line should’ve been: *In the sea, suffer misery*. Instead, Sadie had said something like: *In the sea, suffer moss!*

Fortunately, the sound of Ancient Greek was enough to shock Serapis. The god wavered, his three-headed staff still raised. “What are you—”

“Isis, hear me!” Sadie continued. “Athena, to my aid!” She rattled off some more phrases—some Greek, some Ancient Egyptian.

Meanwhile, Annabeth sneaked up behind the god, her eyes on the dagger still impaled in the monster's shell. If Serapis would just lower his staff...

"Alpha, Beta, Gamma!" Sadie cried. "Gyros, spanakopita. Presto!" She beamed in triumph. "There. You're done for!"

Serapis stared at her, clearly baffled. The red tattoos on his skin dimmed. A few of the symbols turned into question marks and sad faces. Annabeth crept closer...twenty feet from him now.

"Done for?" Serapis asked. "What on earth are you talking about, girl? I'm about to destroy you."

"And if you do," Sadie warned, "you will activate the death link that sends you to oblivion!"

"Death link? There is no such thing!" Serapis lowered his staff. The three animal heads were level with Annabeth's eyes.

Her heart pounded. Ten feet to go. Then, if she jumped, she might be able to reach the dagger. She'd only have one chance to pull it out.

The heads of the staff didn't seem to notice her. They snarled and snapped, spitting steam in random directions. Wolf, lion, dog—past, present, and future.

To do maximum damage, she knew which head she had to strike.

But why did the future have to be a dog? That black Labrador was the least threatening of the monster heads. With its big gold eyes and floppy ears, it reminded Annabeth of too many friendly pets she'd known.

It's not a real animal, she told herself. It's part of a magical staff.

But as she got within striking distance, her arms grew heavy. She couldn't look at the dog without feeling guilty.

The future is a good thing, the dog seemed to say. It's cute and fuzzy!

If Annabeth struck at the Labrador's head, what if she killed her *own* future—the plans she had for college, the plans she'd made with Percy... ?

Sadie was still talking. Her tone had taken on a harder edge.

"My mother, Ruby Kane," Sadie told Serapis, "she gave her life to seal Apophis in the Duat. *Apophis*, mind you—who is thousands of years older than you, and much more powerful. So if you think I'm going to let a second-rate god take over the world, think again!"

The anger in her voice was no mere bluff, and suddenly Annabeth was glad she'd given Sadie the job of facing down Serapis. The magician was surprisingly terrifying when she wanted to be.

Serapis shifted his weight uneasily. "I will destroy you!"

"Good luck," Sadie said. "I've bound you with Greek and Egyptian spells so powerful, they will scatter your atoms to the stars."

"You lie!" Serapis yelled. "I feel no spell upon me. Even the one who summoned me had no such magic."

Annabeth was face-to-face with the black dog. The dagger was just overhead, but every molecule in her body rebelled at the idea of killing the animal...killing the future.

Meanwhile, Sadie managed a brave laugh. "The one who summoned you? You mean that old con artist Setne?"

Annabeth didn't know the name, but Serapis obviously did. The air around him rippled with heat. The lion snarled. The wolf bared its teeth.

"Oh, yes," Sadie continued. "I'm very familiar with Setne. I suppose he didn't tell you who let him back into the world. He's only alive because *I* spared him. You think *his* magic is powerful? Try me. Do it NOW."

Annabeth stirred. She realized Sadie was talking to *her*, not the god. The bluff was getting old. She was out of time.

Serapis sneered. "Nice try, magician."

As he raised his staff to strike, Annabeth jumped. Her hand closed around the hilt of the dagger, and she pulled it free.

“What?” Serapis cried.

Annabeth let loose a guttural sob and plunged her dagger into the dog’s neck.

She expected an explosion.

Instead, the dagger was sucked into the dog’s neck like a paper clip into a vacuum cleaner. Annabeth barely had time to let go.

She rolled free as the dog howled, shrinking and shriveling until it imploded into the monster’s shell. Serapis roared. He shook his scepter but he couldn’t seem to let go of it.

“What have you done?” he cried.

“Taken your future,” Annabeth said. “Without that, you’re nothing.”

The staff cracked open. It grew so hot that Annabeth felt the hairs on her arms start to burn. She crawled backward through the sand as the lion and wolf heads were sucked into the shell. The entire staff collapsed into a red fireball in the god’s palm.

Serapis tried to shake it off. It only glowed brighter. His fingers curled inward. His hand was consumed. His entire arm contracted and vaporized as it was drawn into the fiery sphere.

“I cannot be destroyed!” Serapis yelled. “I am the pinnacle of your worlds combined! Without my guidance, you will never attain the crown! You shall all perish! You shall—”

The fireball flared and sucked the god into its vortex. Then it winked out as if it had never existed.

“Ugh,” Sadie said.

They sat on the beach at sunset, watching the tide and listening to the wail of emergency vehicles behind them.

Poor Rockaway. First a hurricane. Then a train wreck, a building collapse, and a rampaging god all in one day. Some communities never catch a break.

Annabeth sipped her Ribena—a British drink that Sadie had summoned from her “personal storage area” in the Duat.

“Don’t worry,” Sadie assured her. “Summoning snacks isn’t hard magic.”

As thirsty as Annabeth was, the Ribena tasted even better than nectar.

Sadie seemed to be on the mend. The ambrosia had done its work. Now, rather than looking like she was at death’s door, she merely looked like she’d been run over by a pack of mules.

The waves lapped at Annabeth’s feet, helping her relax, but still she felt a residual disquiet from her encounter with Serapis—a humming in her body, as if all her bones had become tuning forks.

“You mentioned a name,” she recalled. “Setne?”

Sadie wrinkled her nose. “Long story. Evil magician, back from the dead.”

“Oh, I hate it when evil people come back from the dead. You said...you allowed him to go free?”

“Well, my brother and I needed his help. At the time, we didn’t have much choice. At any rate, Setne escaped with the Book of Thoth, the most dangerous collection of spells in the world.”

“And Setne used that magic to awaken Serapis.”

“Stands to reason.” Sadie shrugged. “The crocodile monster my brother and your boyfriend fought a while ago, the Son of Sobek...I wouldn’t be

surprised if that was another of Setne's experiments. He's trying to combine Greek and Egyptian magic."

After the day she'd just had, Annabeth wanted to put her invisibility cap back on, crawl into a hole, and sleep forever. She'd saved the world enough times already. She didn't want to think about another potential threat. Yet she couldn't ignore it. She fingered the brim of her Yankees cap and thought about why her mother had given it back to her today—its magic restored.

Athena seemed to be sending a message: *There will always be threats too powerful to face head-on. You are not done with stealth. You must tread carefully here.*

"Setne wants to be a god," Annabeth said.

The wind off the water suddenly turned cold. It smelled less like fresh sea air, more like burning ruins.

"A god..." Sadie shuddered. "That scrawny old codger with the loincloth and Elvis hair. What a horrible thought."

Annabeth tried to picture the guy Sadie was describing. Then she decided she didn't want to.

"If Setne's goal is immortality," Annabeth said, "waking Serapis won't be his last trick."

Sadie laughed without humor. "Oh, no. He's only playing with us now. The Son of Sobek...Serapis. I'd wager that Setne planned both events just to see what would happen, how the demigods and magicians would react. He's testing his new magic, and our capabilities, before he makes his real bid for power."

"He can't succeed," Annabeth said hopefully. "No one can make themselves a god just by casting a spell."

Sadie's expression wasn't reassuring. "I hope you're right. Because a god who knows both Greek and Egyptian magic, who can control both

worlds...I can't even imagine."

Annabeth's stomach twisted like it was learning a new yoga position. In any war, good planning was more important than sheer power. If this Setne had orchestrated Percy and Carter's battle with that crocodile, if he'd engineered Serapis's rise so Sadie and Annabeth would be drawn to confront him...an enemy who planned so well would be very hard to stop.

She dug her toes into the sand. "Serapis said something else before he disappeared—you *will never obtain the crown*. I thought he meant it like a metaphor. Then I remembered what he said about Ptolemy I, the king who tried to become a god—"

"The crown of immortality," Sadie recalled. "Maybe a *pschent*."

Annabeth frowned. "I don't know that word. A *shent*?"

Sadie spelled it. "An Egyptian crown, looks rather like a bowling pin. Not a lovely fashion statement, but the *pschent* invested the pharaoh with his divine power. If Setne is trying to recreate the old king's god-making magic, I bet five quid and a plate of Gran's burnt scones that he's trying to find the crown of Ptolemy."

Annabeth decided not to take that bet. "We have to stop him."

"Right." Sadie sipped her Ribena. "I'll go back to Brooklyn House. After I smack my brother for not confiding in me about you demigod types, I'll put our researchers to work and see what we can learn about Ptolemy. Perhaps his crown is sitting in a museum somewhere." Sadie curled her lip. "Though I *do* hate museums."

Annabeth traced her finger through the sand. Without really thinking about it, she drew the hieroglyphic symbol for Isis: the *tyet*. "I'll do some research, too. My friends in the Hecate cabin may know something about Ptolemy's magic. Maybe I can get my mom to advise me."

Thinking about her mother made her uneasy.

Today, Serapis had been on the verge of destroying both Annabeth and Sadie. He'd threatened to use them as gateways to draw Athena and Isis to their doom.

Sadie's eyes were stormy, as if she were thinking the same thoughts. "We can't let Setne keep experimenting. He'll rip our worlds apart. We have to find this crown, or—"

She glanced into the sky and her voice faltered. "Ah, my ride is here."

Annabeth turned. For a moment she thought the *Argo II* was descending from the clouds, but this was a different kind of flying boat—a smaller Egyptian reed barque with painted eyes on the prow and a single white sail emblazoned with the *tyet* symbol.

It settled gently at the edge of the surf.

Sadie rose and brushed the sand off her pants. "Give you a lift home?"

Annabeth tried to imagine a boat like this sailing into Camp Half-Blood. "Um, it's okay. I can make it back."

"Suit yourself." Sadie shouldered her pack, then helped Annabeth up. "You say Carter drew a hieroglyph on your boyfriend's hand. All well and good, but I'd rather stay in touch with you directly."

Annabeth smirked. "You're right. Can't trust boys to communicate."

They exchanged cell phone numbers.

"Just don't call unless it's urgent," Annabeth warned. "Cell phone activity attracts monsters."

Sadie looked surprised. "Really? Never noticed. I suppose I shouldn't send you any funny-face selfies on Instagram, then."

"Probably not."

"Well, until next time." Sadie threw her arms around Annabeth.

Annabeth was a little shocked to be getting a hug from a girl she'd just met—a girl who could just as easily have seen Annabeth as an enemy. But

the gesture made her feel good. In life-and-death situations, Annabeth had learned, you could make friends pretty quickly.

She patted Sadie's shoulder. "Stay safe."

"Hardly ever." Sadie climbed in her boat, and it pushed out to sea. Fog rose out of nowhere, thickening around the vessel. When the mist cleared, the ship and Sadie Kane were gone.

Annabeth stared at the empty ocean. She thought about the Mist and the Duat and how they were connected.

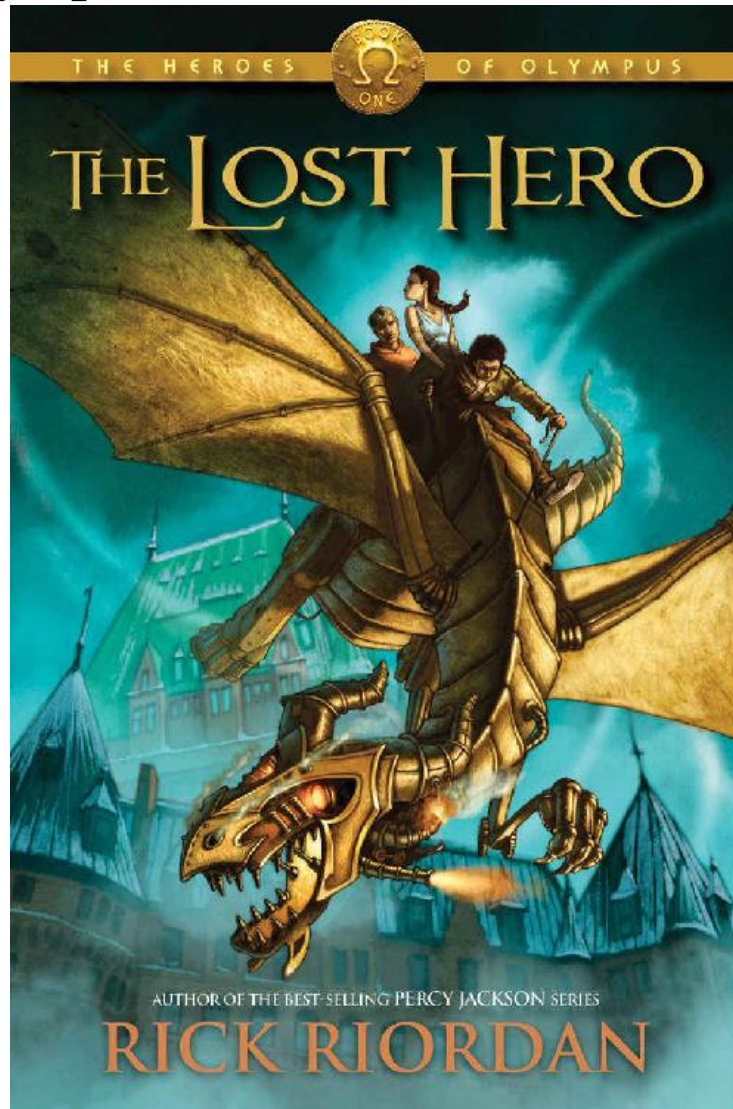
Mostly she thought about the staff of Serapis, and the howl the black dog had made when she'd stabbed it with her dagger.

"That wasn't my future I destroyed," she assured herself. "I make my own future."

But somewhere out there, a magician named Setne had other ideas. If Annabeth was going to stop him, she had planning to do.

She turned and set out across the beach, heading east on the long journey back to Camp Half-Blood.

Keep reading for a sneak peek at The Heroes of Olympus, Book One: *The Lost Hero*!



JASON

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason let go of her hand. “Um, I don’t—”

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

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

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

A jolt went down Jason’s spine. He was sure the coach knew he didn’t belong there. He was going to call Jason out, demand to know what he was doing on the bus—and Jason wouldn’t have a clue what to say.

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

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

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

She shrugged. “Always does. This is the Wilderness School. ‘Where kids are the animals.’”

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

“This is some kind of mistake,” Jason said. “I’m not supposed to be here.”

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

The girl blushed. “I didn’t steal that car, Leo!”

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

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

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

“I don’t know you,” Jason said.

Leo gave him a crocodile grin. “Sure. I’m not your best friend. I’m his evil clone.”

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

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

Coach Hedge grunted like he was pleased to have an excuse. He unclipped the megaphone from his belt and continued giving directions,

but his voice came out like Darth Vader's. The kids cracked up. The coach tried again, but this time the megaphone blared: "The cow says moo!"

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

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

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

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

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

"No! I have no idea—"

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

Jason stared at him blankly.

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

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

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

The rest of the kids cheered.

"There's a shocker," Leo muttered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Leo!" Piper snapped.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The new guy had dark hair cut Superman style, a deep tan, and teeth so white they should’ve come with a warning label: DO NOT STARE DIRECTLY AT TEETH. PERMANENT BLINDNESS MAY OCCUR. He wore a Dallas Cowboys jersey, Western jeans and boots, and he smiled like he was God’s gift to juvenile delinquent girls everywhere. Jason hated him instantly.

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

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

Leo got up and brushed himself off. “I hate that guy.” He offered Jason his arm, like they should go skipping inside together. “I’m Dylan. I’m so

cool, I want to date myself, but I can't figure out how! You want to date me instead? You're so lucky!"

"Leo," Jason said, "you're weird."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why? What about her dad?”

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

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

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

They reached the far end of the exhibit hall, where some big glass doors led out to a terrace.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The storm rumbled, and Jason’s head began to hurt again. Not knowing why he did it, he reached into his jeans pocket and brought out a coin—a circle of gold the size of a half-dollar, but thicker and more uneven. Stamped on one side was a picture of a battle-ax. On the other was some guy’s face wreathed in laurels. The inscription said something like IVLIVS.

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

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

“It’s nothing,” he said. “Just a coin.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Last I checked."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Before Leo could protest, Jason headed across the skywalk.

Their school group had the place to themselves. Maybe it was too early in the day for tourists, or maybe the weird weather had scared them off. The Wilderness School kids had spread out in pairs across the skywalk. Most were joking around or talking. Some of the guys were dropping pennies over the side. About fifty feet away, Piper was trying to fill out her worksheet, but her stupid partner Dylan was hitting on her, putting his hand on her shoulder and giving her that blinding white smile. She kept pushing him away, and when she saw Jason she gave him a look like, *Throttle this guy for me.*

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

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

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

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

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

Hedge snorted. “Never seen you before today.”

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

“Got that right.” Hedge’s gruff voice dropped to a murmur, like he was sharing a secret. “You got a powerful way with the Mist, kid, if you can make all these people think they know you; but you can’t fool me. I’ve

been smelling monster for days now. I knew we had an infiltrator, but you don't smell like a monster. You smell like a half-blood. So—who are you, and where'd you come from?"

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

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

"Great," Hedge muttered. "You're being truthful."

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

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

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

"What are you talking about?"

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

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

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

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

“What director?” Jason said. “What camp?”

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

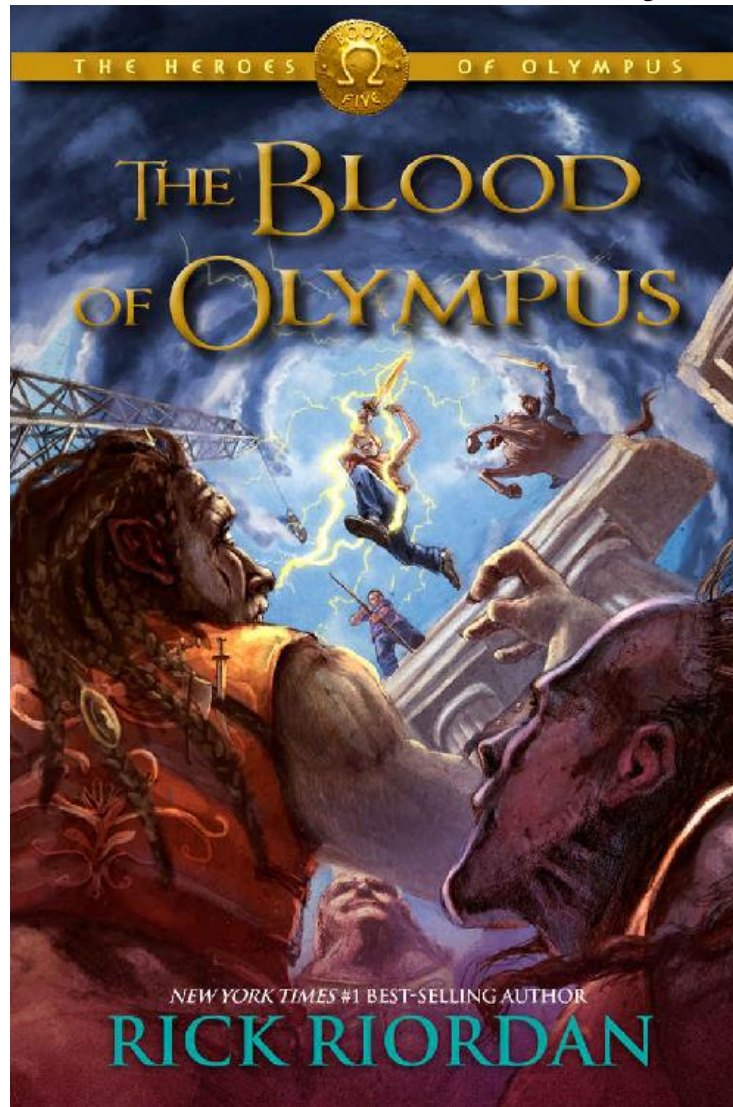
Lightning crackled overhead. The wind picked up with a vengeance. Worksheets flew into the Grand Canyon, and the entire bridge shuddered. Kids screamed, stumbling and grabbing the rails.

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

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

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

Keep reading for a sneak peek at The Heroes of Olympus, Book Five: *The Blood of Olympus*!



JASON

JASON HATED BEING OLD.

His joints hurt. His legs shook. As he tried to climb the hill, his lungs rattled like a box of rocks.

He couldn't see his face, thank goodness, but his fingers were gnarled and bony. Bulging blue veins webbed the backs of his hands.

He even had that old-man smell—mothballs and chicken soup. How was that possible? He'd gone from sixteen to seventy-five in a matter of seconds, but the old-man smell happened instantly, like *boom*. Congratulations! You stink!

"Almost there." Piper smiled at him. "You're doing great."

Easy for her to say. Piper and Annabeth were disguised as lovely Greek serving maidens. Even in their white sleeveless gowns and laced sandals, they had no trouble navigating the rocky path.

Piper's mahogany hair was pinned up in a braided spiral. Silver bracelets adorned her arms. She resembled an ancient statue of her mom, Aphrodite, which Jason found a little intimidating.

Dating a beautiful girl was nerve-racking enough. Dating a girl whose mom was the goddess of love...well, Jason was always afraid he'd do something unromantic, and Piper's mom would frown down from Mount Olympus and change him into a feral hog.

Jason glanced uphill. The summit was still a hundred yards above.

"Worst idea ever." He leaned against a cedar tree and wiped his forehead. "Hazel's magic is too good. If I have to fight, I'll be useless."

"It won't come to that," Annabeth promised. She looked uncomfortable in her serving-maiden outfit. She kept hunching her shoulders to keep the dress from slipping. Her pinned-up blond hair had come undone in the back and dangled like long spider legs. Knowing her hatred of spiders, Jason decided not to mention that.

“We infiltrate the palace,” she said. “We get the information we need, and we get out.”

Piper set down her amphora, the tall ceramic wine jar in which her sword was hidden. “We can rest for a second. Catch your breath, Jason.”

From her waist cord hung her cornucopia—the magic horn of plenty. Tucked somewhere in the folds of her dress was her knife, Katoptris. Piper didn’t look dangerous, but if the need arose, she could dual-wield Celestial bronze blades or shoot her enemies in the face with ripe mangoes.

Annabeth slung her own amphora off her shoulder. She too had a concealed sword; but even without a weapon, she looked deadly. Her stormy gray eyes scanned the surroundings, alert for any threat. If anyone asked Annabeth for a drink, Jason figured she was more likely to kick the guy in the *bifurcum*.

He tried to steady his breathing.

Below them, Afales Bay glittered, the water so blue it might’ve been dyed with food coloring. A few hundred yards offshore, the *Argo II* rested at anchor. Its white sails looked no bigger than postage stamps, its ninety oars like toothpicks. Jason imagined his friends on deck following his progress, taking turns looking through Leo’s spyglass, trying not to laugh as they watched Grandpa Jason hobble uphill.

“Stupid Ithaca,” he muttered.

He supposed the island was pretty enough. A spine of forested hills twisted down its center. Chalky white slopes plunged into the sea. Inlets formed rocky beaches and harbors where red-roofed houses and white stuccoed churches nestled against the shoreline.

The hills were dotted with poppies, crocuses, and wild cherry trees. The air smelled of blooming myrtle. All very nice—except the temperature was

about a hundred and five degrees. The air was as steamy as a Roman bathhouse.

It would've been easy for Jason to control the winds and fly to the top of the hill, but *nooo*. For the sake of stealth, he had to struggle along as an old dude with bad knees and chicken-soup stink.

He thought about his last climb, two weeks ago, when Hazel and he had faced the bandit Sciron on the cliffs of Croatia. At least then Jason had been at full strength. What they were about to face would be much worse than a bandit.

"You sure this is the right hill?" he asked. "Seems kind of—I don't know—*quiet*."

Piper studied the ridgeline. Braided in her hair was a bright blue harpy feather—a souvenir from last night's attack. The feather didn't exactly go with her disguise, but Piper had earned it, defeating an entire flock of demon chicken ladies by herself while she was on duty. She downplayed the accomplishment, but Jason could tell she felt good about it. The feather was a reminder that she wasn't the same girl she'd been last winter, when they'd first arrived at Camp Half-Blood.

"The ruins are up there," she promised. "I saw them in Katoptris's blade. And you heard what Hazel said. 'The biggest—' "

"The biggest gathering of evil spirits I've ever sensed,'" Jason recalled. "Yeah, sounds awesome."

After battling through the underground temple of Hades, the last thing Jason wanted was to deal with more evil spirits. But the fate of the quest was at stake. The crew of the *Argo II* had a big decision to make. If they chose wrong, they would fail, and the entire world would be destroyed.

Piper's blade, Hazel's magical senses, and Annabeth's instincts all agreed—the answer lay here in Ithaca, at the ancient palace of Odysseus,

where a horde of evil spirits had gathered to await Gaea's orders. The trick was to sneak among them, learn what was going on, and decide the best course of action. Then get out, preferably alive.

Annabeth readjusted her golden belt. "I hope our disguises hold up. The suitors were nasty customers when they were living. If they find out we're demigods—"

"Hazel's magic will work," Piper said.

Jason tried to believe that.

The suitors: a hundred of the greediest, vilest cutthroats who'd ever lived. When Odysseus, the Greek king of Ithaca, went missing after the Trojan War, this mob of B-list princes had invaded his palace and refused to leave, each one hoping to marry Queen Penelope and take over the kingdom. Odysseus managed to return in secret and slaughter them all—your basic happy homecoming. But if Piper's visions were right, the suitors were now back, haunting the place where they'd died.

Jason couldn't believe he was about to visit the actual palace of Odysseus—one of the most famous Greek heroes of all time. Then again, this whole quest had been one mind-blowing event after another. Annabeth herself had just come back from the eternal abyss of Tartarus. Given that, Jason decided maybe he shouldn't complain about being an old man.

"Well..." He steadied himself with his walking stick. "If I *look* as old as I feel, my disguise must be perfect. Let's get going."

As they climbed, sweat trickled down his neck. His calves ached. Despite the heat, he began to shiver. And try as he might, he couldn't stop thinking about his recent dreams.

Ever since the House of Hades, they'd gotten more vivid.

Sometimes Jason stood in the underground temple of Epirus, with the giant Clytius looming over him, speaking in a chorus of disembodied

voices: *It took all of you to defeat me. What will you do when the Earth Mother opens her eyes?*

Other times Jason found himself at the crest of Half-Blood Hill. Gaea the Earth Mother rose from the soil—a swirling figure of dirt, leaves, and stones.

Poor child. Her voice resonated across the landscape, shaking the bedrock under Jason's feet. *Your father is first among the gods, yet you are always second best—to your Roman comrades, to your Greek friends, even to your family. How will you prove yourself?*

His worst dream started in the courtyard of the Sonoma Wolf House. Before him stood the goddess Juno, glowing with the radiance of molten silver.

Your life belongs to me, her voice thundered. *An appeasement from Zeus.*

Jason knew he shouldn't look, but he couldn't close his eyes as Juno went supernova, revealing her true godly form. Pain seared Jason's mind. His body burned away in layers like an onion.

Then the scene changed. Jason was still at the Wolf House, but now he was a little boy—no more than two years old. A woman knelt before him, her lemony scent so familiar. Her features were watery and indistinct, but he knew her voice: bright and brittle, like the thinnest layer of ice over a fast stream.

I will be back for you, dearest, she said. *I will see you soon.*

Every time Jason woke up from that nightmare, his face was beaded with sweat. His eyes stung with tears.

Nico di Angelo had warned them: the House of Hades would stir their worst memories, make them see things and hear things from the past. Their ghosts would become restless.

Jason had hoped that *particular* ghost would stay away, but every night the dream got worse. Now he was climbing to the ruins of a palace where an army of ghosts had gathered.

That doesn't mean she'll be there, Jason told himself.

But his hands wouldn't stop trembling. Every step seemed harder than the last.

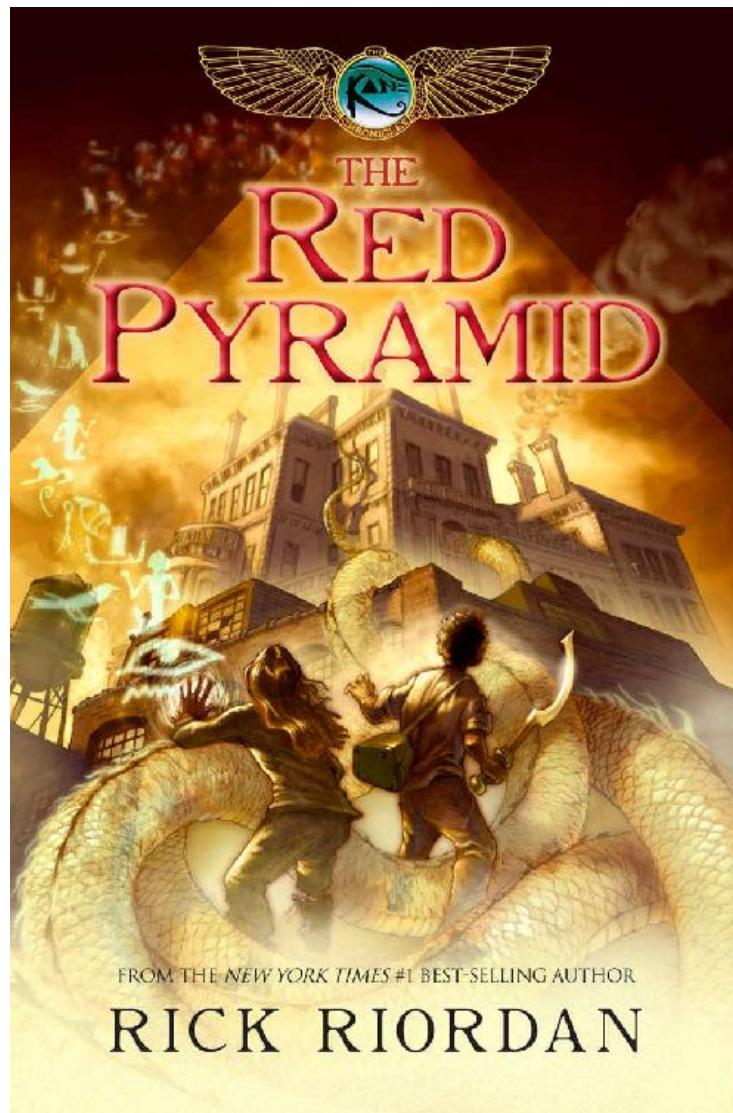
"Almost there," Annabeth said. "Let's—"

BOOM! The hillside rumbled. Somewhere over the ridge, a crowd roared in approval, like spectators in a coliseum. The sound made Jason's skin crawl. Not so long ago, he'd fought for his life in the Roman Colosseum before a cheering ghostly audience. He wasn't anxious to repeat the experience.

"What was that explosion?" he wondered.

"Don't know," Piper said. "But it sounds like they're having fun. Let's go make some dead friends."

And don't miss Rick Riordan's hit series, The Kane Chronicles! Keep reading for a preview of book one in the series, *The Red Pyramid*.





1. A Death at the Needle

C
A
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R

We only have a few hours, so listen carefully.

If you're hearing this story, you're already in danger. Sadie and I might be your only chance.

Go to the school. Find the locker. I won't tell you which school or which locker, because if you're the right person, you'll find it. The combination is 13/32/33. By the time you finish listening, you'll know what those numbers mean. Just remember the story we're about to tell you isn't complete yet. How it ends will depend on you.

The most important thing: when you open the package and find what's inside, *don't* keep it longer than a week. Sure, it'll be tempting. I mean, it will grant you almost unlimited power. But if you possess it too long, it will consume you. Learn its secrets quickly and pass it on. Hide it for the next person, the way Sadie and I did for you. Then be prepared for your life to get very interesting.

Okay, Sadie is telling me to stop stalling and get on with the story. Fine. I guess it started in London, the night our dad blew up the British Museum.

My name is Carter Kane. I'm fourteen and my home is a suitcase.

You think I'm kidding? Since I was eight years old, my dad and I have traveled the world. I was born in L.A. but my dad's an archaeologist, so his work takes him all over. Mostly we go to Egypt, since that's his specialty. Go into a bookstore, find a book about Egypt, there's a pretty good chance it was written by Dr. Julius Kane. You want to know how Egyptians pulled the brains out of mummies, or built the pyramids, or cursed King Tut's tomb? My dad is your man. Of course, there are other reasons my dad moved around so much, but I didn't know his secret back then.

I didn't go to school. My dad homeschooled me, if you can call it "home" schooling when you don't have a home. He sort of taught me whatever he thought was important, so I learned a lot about Egypt and basketball stats and my dad's favorite musicians. I read a lot, too—pretty much anything I could get my hands on, from dad's history books to fantasy novels—because I spent a lot of time sitting around in hotels and airports and dig sites in foreign countries where I didn't know anybody. My dad was always telling me to put the book down and play some ball. You ever try to start a game of pick-up basketball in Aswan, Egypt? It's not easy.

Anyway, my dad trained me early to keep all my possessions in a single suitcase that fits in an airplane's overhead compartment. My dad packed the same way, except he was allowed an extra workbag for his archaeology tools. Rule number one: I was not allowed to look in his workbag. That's a rule I never broke until the day of the explosion.

It happened on Christmas Eve. We were in London for visitation day with my sister, Sadie.

See, Dad's only allowed two days a year with her—one in the winter, one in the summer—because our grandparents hate him. After our mom died, her parents (our grandparents) had this big court battle with Dad. After six lawyers, two fistfights, and a near fatal attack with a spatula (don't ask), they won the right to keep Sadie with them in England. She was only six, two years younger than me, and they couldn't keep us both—at least that was their excuse for not taking me. So Sadie was raised as a British schoolkid, and I traveled around with my dad. We only saw Sadie twice a year, which was fine with me.

[Shut up, Sadie. Yes—I'm getting to that part.]

So anyway, my dad and I had just flown into Heathrow after a couple of delays. It was a drizzly, cold afternoon. The whole taxi ride into the city, my dad seemed kind of nervous.

Now, my dad is a big guy. You wouldn't think anything could make him nervous. He has dark brown skin like mine, piercing brown eyes, a bald head, and a goatee, so he looks like a buff evil scientist. That afternoon he wore his cashmere winter coat and his best brown suit, the one he used for public lectures. Usually he exudes so much confidence that he dominates any room he walks into, but sometimes—like that afternoon—I saw another side to him that I didn't really understand. He kept looking over his shoulder like we were being hunted.

"Dad?" I said as we were getting off the A-40. "What's wrong?"

"No sign of them," he muttered. Then he must've realized he'd spoken aloud, because he looked at me kind of startled. "Nothing, Carter. Everything's fine."

Which bothered me because my dad's a terrible liar. I always knew when he was hiding something, but I also knew no amount of pestering would get the truth out of him. He was probably trying to protect me, though from what I didn't know. Sometimes I wondered if he had some dark secret in his past, some old enemy following him, maybe; but the idea seemed ridiculous. Dad was just an archaeologist.

The other thing that troubled me: Dad was clutching his workbag. Usually when he does that, it means we're in danger. Like the time gunmen stormed our hotel in Cairo. I heard shots coming from the lobby and ran downstairs to check on my dad. By the time I got there, he was just calmly zipping up his workbag while three unconscious gunmen hung by their feet from the chandelier, their robes falling over their heads so you could see their boxer shorts. Dad claimed not to have witnessed anything, and in the end the police blamed a freak chandelier malfunction.

Another time, we got caught in a riot in Paris. My dad found the nearest parked car, pushed me into the backseat, and told me to stay down. I pressed myself against the floorboards and kept my eyes shut tight. I could hear Dad in the driver's seat, rummaging in his bag, mumbling something to himself while the mob yelled and destroyed things outside. A few minutes later he told me it was safe to get up. Every other car on the

block had been overturned and set on fire. Our car had been freshly washed and polished, and several twenty-euro notes had been tucked under the windshield wipers.

Anyway, I'd come to respect the bag. It was our good luck charm. But when my dad kept it close, it meant we were going to need good luck.

We drove through the city center, heading east toward my grandparents' flat. We passed the golden gates of Buckingham Palace, the big stone column in Trafalgar Square. London is a pretty cool place, but after you've traveled for so long, all cities start to blend together. Other kids I meet sometimes say, "Wow, you're so lucky you get to travel so much." But it's not like we spend our time sightseeing or have a lot of money to travel in style. We've stayed in some pretty rough places, and we hardly ever stay anywhere longer than a few days. Most of the time it feels like we're fugitives rather than tourists.

I mean, you wouldn't think my dad's work was dangerous. He does lectures on topics like "Can Egyptian Magic Really Kill You?" and "Favorite Punishments in the Egyptian Underworld" and other stuff most people wouldn't care about. But like I said, there's that other side to him. He's always very cautious, checking every hotel room before he lets me walk into it. He'll dart into a museum to see some artifacts, take a few notes, and rush out again like he's afraid to be caught on security cameras.

One time when I was younger, we raced across the Charles de Gaulle airport to catch a last-minute flight, and Dad didn't relax until the plane was off the ground, I asked him point blank what he was running from, and he looked at me like I'd just pulled the pin out of a grenade. For a second I was scared he might actually tell me the truth. Then he said, "Carter, it's nothing." As if "nothing" were the most terrible thing in the world.

After that, I decided maybe it was better not to ask questions.

My grandparents, the Fausts, lived in a housing development near Canary Wharf, right on the banks of the River Thames. The taxi let us off at the curb, and my dad asked the driver to wait.

We were halfway up the walk when Dad froze. He turned and looked behind us.

“What?” I asked.

Then I saw the man in the trench coat. He was across the street, leaning against a big dead tree. He was barrel shaped, with skin the color of roasted coffee. His coat and black pinstriped suit looked expensive. He had long braided hair and wore a black fedora pulled down low over his dark round glasses. He reminded me of a jazz musician, the kind my dad would always drag me to see in concert. Even though I couldn't see his eyes, I got the impression he was watching us. He might've been an old friend or colleague of Dad's. No matter where we went, Dad was always running into people he knew. But it did seem strange that the guy was waiting here, outside my grandparents'. And he didn't look happy.

“Carter,” my dad said, “go on ahead.”

“But—”

“Get your sister. I'll meet you back at the taxi.”

He crossed the street toward the man in the trench coat, which left me with two choices: follow my dad and see what was going on, or do what I was told.

I decided on the slightly less dangerous path. I went to retrieve my sister.

Before I could even knock, Sadie opened the door.

“Late as usual,” she said.

She was holding her cat, Muffin, who'd been a “going away” gift from Dad six years before. Muffin never seemed to get older or bigger. She had fuzzy yellow-and-black fur like a miniature leopard, alert yellow eyes, and pointy ears that were too tall for her head. A silver Egyptian pendant dangled from her collar. She didn't look anything like a muffin, but Sadie had been little when she named her, so I guess you have to cut her some slack.

Sadie hadn't changed much either since last summer.

[As I'm recording this, she's standing next to me, glaring, so I guess I'd better be careful how I describe her.]

You would never guess she's my sister. First of all, she'd been living in England so long, she has a British accent. Second, she takes after our

mom, who was white, so Sadie's skin is much lighter than mine. She has straight caramel-colored hair, not exactly blond but not brown, which she usually dyes with streaks of bright colors. That day it had red streaks down the left side. Her eyes are blue. I'm serious. *Blue* eyes, just like our mom's. She's only twelve, but she's exactly as tall as me, which is really annoying. She was chewing gum as usual, dressed for her day out with Dad in battered jeans, a leather jacket, and combat boots, like she was going to a concert and was hoping to stomp on some people. She had headphones dangling around her neck in case we bored her.

[Okay, she didn't hit me, so I guess I did an okay job of describing her.]

"Our plane was late," I told her.

She popped a bubble, rubbed Muffin's head, and tossed the cat inside. "Gran, going out!"

From somewhere in the house, Grandma Faust muttered something I couldn't make out, probably "Don't let them in!"

Sadie closed the door and regarded me as if I were a dead mouse her cat had just dragged in. "So, here you are again."

"Yep."

"Come on, then." She sighed. "Let's get on with it."

That's the way she was. No "Hi, how you been the last six months? So glad to see you!" or anything. But that was okay with me. When you only see each other twice a year, it's like you're distant cousins rather than siblings. We had absolutely nothing in common except our parents.

We trudged down the steps. I was thinking how she smelled like a combination of old people's house and bubble gum when she stopped so abruptly, I ran into her.

"Who's that?" she asked.

I'd almost forgotten about the dude in the trench coat. He and my dad were standing across the street next to the big tree, having what looked like a serious argument. Dad's back was turned so I couldn't see his face, but he gestured with his hands like he does when he's agitated. The other guy scowled and shook his head.

"Dunno," I said. "He was there when we pulled up."

“He looks familiar.” Sadie frowned like she was trying to remember. “Come on.”

“Dad wants us to wait in the cab,” I said, even though I knew it was no use. Sadie was already on the move.

Instead of going straight across the street, she dashed up the sidewalk for half a block, ducking behind cars, then crossed to the opposite side and crouched under a low stone wall. She started sneaking toward our dad. I didn’t have much choice but to follow her example, but it made me feel kind of stupid.

“Six years in England,” I muttered, “and she thinks she’s James Bond.”

Sadie swatted me without looking back and kept creeping forward.

A couple more steps and we were right behind the big dead tree. I could hear my dad on the other side, saying, “—have to, Amos. You know it’s the right thing.”

“No,” said the other man, who must’ve been Amos. His voice was deep and even—very insistent. His accent was American. “If *I* don’t stop you, Julius, *they* will. The Per Ankh is shadowing you.”

Sadie turned to me and mouthed the words “Per *what*?”

I shook my head, just as mystified. “Let’s get out of here,” I whispered, because I figured we’d be spotted any minute and get in serious trouble. Sadie, of course, ignored me.

“They don’t know my plan,” my father was saying. “By the time they figure it out—”

“And the children?” Amos asked. The hairs stood up on the back of my neck. “What about them?”

“I’ve made arrangements to protect them,” my dad said. “Besides, if I don’t do this, we’re all in danger. Now, back off.”

“I can’t, Julius.”

“Then it’s a duel you want?” Dad’s tone turned deadly serious. “You never could beat me, Amos.”

I hadn’t seen my dad get violent since the Great Spatula Incident, and I wasn’t anxious to see a repeat of *that*, but the two men seemed to be edging toward a fight.

Before I could react, Sadie popped up and shouted, “Dad!”

He looked surprised when she tackle-hugged him, but not nearly as surprised as the other guy, Amos. He backed up so quickly, he tripped over his own trench coat.

He’d taken off his glasses. I couldn’t help thinking that Sadie was right. He did look familiar—like a very distant memory.

“I—I must be going,” he muttered. He straightened his fedora and lumbered down the road.

Our dad watched him go. He kept one arm protectively around Sadie and one hand inside the workbag slung over his shoulder. Finally, when Amos disappeared around the corner, Dad relaxed. He took his hand out of the bag and smiled at Sadie. “Hello, sweetheart.”

Sadie pushed away from him and crossed her arms. “Oh, now it’s *sweetheart*, is it? You’re late. Visitation Day’s nearly over! And what was that about? Who’s Amos, and what’s the Per Ankh?”

Dad stiffened. He glanced at me like he was wondering how much we’d overheard.

“It’s nothing,” he said, trying to sound upbeat. “I have a wonderful evening planned. Who’d like a private tour of the British Museum?”

Sadie slumped in the back of the taxi between Dad and me.

“I can’t believe it,” she grumbled. “One evening together, and you want to do research.”

Dad tried for a smile. “Sweetheart, it’ll be fun. The curator of the Egyptian collection personally invited—”

“Right, big surprise.” Sadie blew a strand of red-streaked hair out of her face. “Christmas Eve, and we’re going to see some moldy old relics from Egypt. Do you ever think about *anything* else?”

Dad didn’t get mad. He never gets mad at Sadie. He just stared out the window at the darkening sky and the rain.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “I do.”

Whenever Dad got quiet like that and stared off into nowhere, I knew he was thinking about our mom. The last few months, it had been happening a lot. I’d walk into our hotel room and find him with his cell

phone in his hands, Mom's picture smiling up at him from the screen—her hair tucked under a headscarf, her blue eyes startlingly bright against the desert backdrop.

Or we'd be at some dig site. I'd see Dad staring at the horizon, and I'd know he was remembering how he'd met her—two young scientists in the Valley of the Kings, on a dig to discover a lost tomb. Dad was an Egyptologist. Mom was an anthropologist looking for ancient DNA. He'd told me the story a thousand times.

Our taxi snaked its way along the banks of the Thames. Just past Waterloo Bridge, my dad tensed.

"Driver," he said. "Stop here a moment."

The cabbie pulled over on the Victoria Embankment.

"What is it, Dad?" I asked.

He got out of the cab like he hadn't heard me. When Sadie and I joined him on the sidewalk, he was staring up at Cleopatra's Needle.

In case you've never seen it: the Needle is an obelisk, not a needle, and it doesn't have anything to do with Cleopatra. I guess the British just thought the name sounded cool when they brought it to London. It's about seventy feet tall, which would've been really impressive back in Ancient Egypt, but on the Thames, with all the tall buildings around, it looks small and sad. You could drive right by it and not even realize you'd just passed something that was a thousand years older than the city of London.

"God." Sadie walked around in a frustrated circle. "Do we have to stop for *every* monument?"

My dad stared at the top of the obelisk. "I had to see it again," he murmured. "Where it happened..."

A freezing wind blew off the river. I wanted to get back in the cab, but my dad was really starting to worry me. I'd never seen him so distracted.

"What, Dad?" I asked. "What happened here?"

"The last place I saw her."

Sadie stopped pacing. She scowled at me uncertainly, then back at Dad. "Hang on. Do you mean Mum?"

Dad brushed Sadie's hair behind her ear, and she was so surprised, she didn't even push him away.

I felt like the rain had frozen me solid. Mom's death had always been a forbidden subject. I knew she'd died in an accident in London. I knew my grandparents blamed my dad. But no one would ever tell us the details. I'd given up asking my dad, partly because it made him so sad, partly because he absolutely refused to tell me anything. "When you're older" was all he would say, which was the most frustrating response ever.

"You're telling us she died here," I said. "At Cleopatra's Needle? What happened?"

He lowered his head.

"Dad!" Sadie protested. "I go past this *every* day, and you mean to say—all this time—and I didn't even *know*?"

"Do you still have your cat?" Dad asked her, which seemed like a really stupid question.

"Of course I've still got the cat!" she said. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"And your amulet?"

Sadie's hand went to her neck. When we were little, right before Sadie went to live with our grandparents, Dad had given us both Egyptian amulets. Mine was an Eye of Horus, which was a popular protection symbol in Ancient Egypt.



In fact my dad says the modern pharmacist's symbol, Rx, is a simplified version of the Eye of Horus, because medicine is supposed to protect you.

Anyway, I always wore my amulet under my shirt, but I figured Sadie would've lost hers or thrown it away.

To my surprise, she nodded. "'Course I have it, Dad, but don't change the subject. Gran's always going on about how you caused Mum's death. That's not true, is it?"

We waited. For once, Sadie and I wanted exactly the same thing—the truth.

“The night your mother died,” my father started, “here at the Needle —”

A sudden flash illuminated the embankment. I turned, half blind, and just for a moment I glimpsed two figures: a tall pale man with a forked beard and wearing cream-colored robes, and a coppery-skinned girl in dark blue robes and a headscarf—the kind of clothes I’d seen hundreds of times in Egypt. They were just standing there side by side, not twenty feet away, watching us. Then the light faded. The figures melted into a fuzzy afterimage. When my eyes readjusted to the darkness, they were gone.

“Um...” Sadie said nervously. “Did you just see that?”

“Get in the cab,” my dad said, pushing us toward the curb. “We’re out of time.”

From that point on, Dad clammed up.

“This isn’t the place to talk,” he said, glancing behind us. He’d promised the cabbie an extra ten pounds if he got us to the museum in under five minutes, and the cabbie was doing his best.

“Dad,” I tried, “those people at the river—”

“And the other bloke, Amos,” Sadie said. “Are they Egyptian police or something?”

“Look, both of you,” Dad said, “I’m going to need your help tonight. I know it’s hard, but you have to be patient. I’ll explain everything, I promise, after we get to the museum. I’m going to make everything right again.”

“What do you mean?” Sadie insisted. “Make *what* right?”

Dad’s expression was more than sad. It was almost guilty. With a chill, I thought about what Sadie had said: about our grandparents blaming him for Mom’s death. That *couldn’t* be what he was talking about, could it?

The cabbie swerved onto Great Russell Street and screeched to a halt in front of the museum’s main gates.

“Just follow my lead,” Dad told us. “When we meet the curator, act normal.”

I was thinking that Sadie never acted *normal*, but I decided not to say that.

We climbed out of the cab. I got our luggage while Dad paid the driver with a big wad of cash. Then he did something strange. He threw a handful of small objects into the backseat—they looked like stones, but it was too dark for me to be sure. “Keep driving,” he told the cabbie. “Take us to Chelsea.”

That made no sense since we were already out of the cab, but the driver sped off. I glanced at Dad, then back at the cab, and before it turned the corner and disappeared in the dark, I caught a weird glimpse of three passengers in the backseat: a man and two kids.

I blinked. There was no way the cab could’ve picked up another fare so fast. “Dad—”

“London cabs don’t stay empty very long,” he said matter-of-factly. “Come along, kids.”

He marched off through the wrought iron gates. For a second, Sadie and I hesitated.

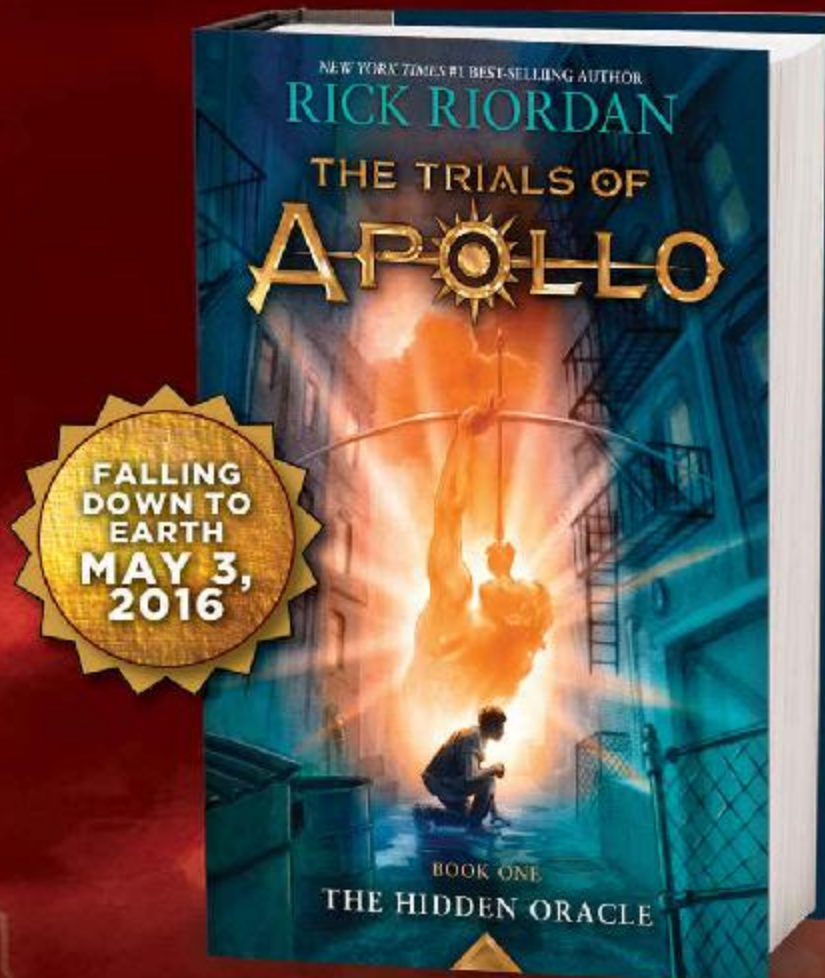
“Carter, *what* is going on?”

I shook my head. “I’m not sure I want to know.”

“Well, stay out here in the cold if you want, but *I’m* not leaving without an explanation.” She turned and marched after our dad.

Looking back on it, I should’ve run. I should’ve dragged Sadie out of there and gotten as far away as possible. Instead I followed her through the gates.

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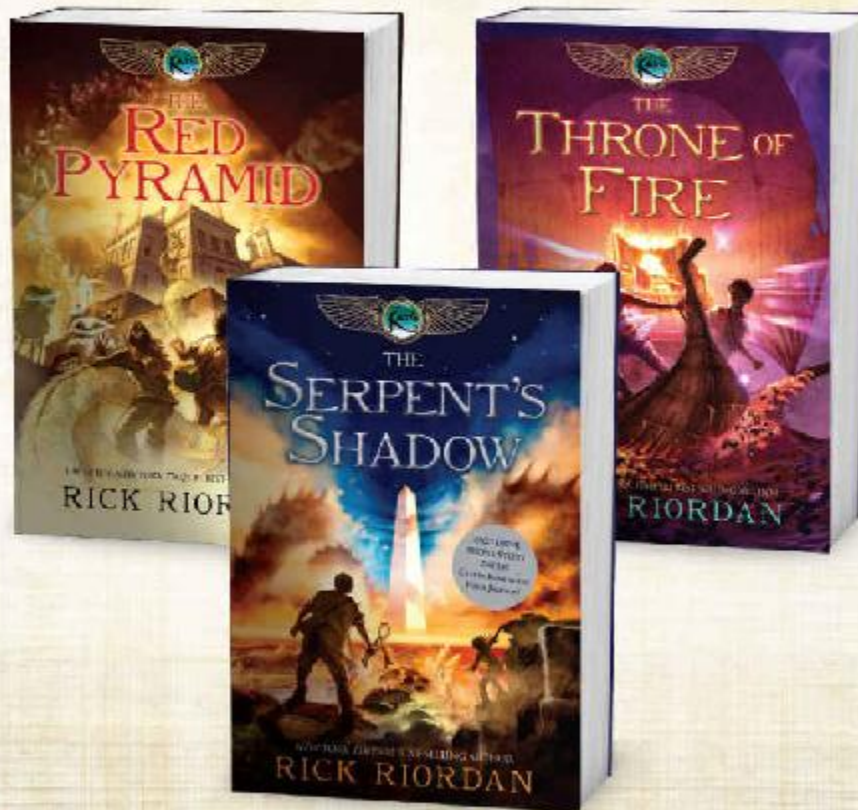


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