

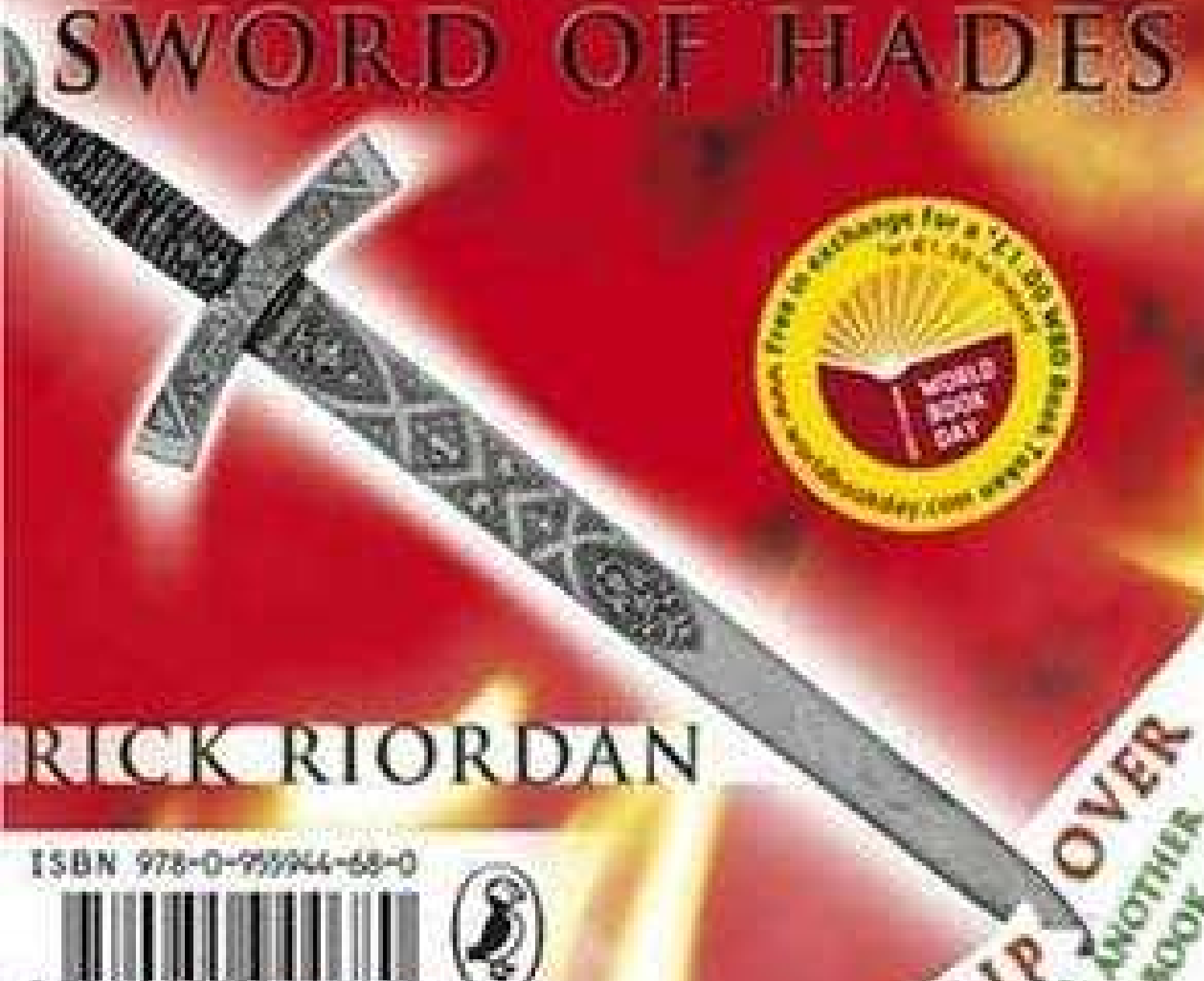
HALF BOY  
+  
HALF GOD  
+  
ALL HERO



# PERCY JACKSON

AND THE

## SWORD OF HADES



RICK RIORDAN

ISBN 978-0-955944-68-0



9 780955 944680



FLIP OVER  
FOR ANOTHER  
FUN BOOK

# Percy Jackson and the Sword of Hades

A Short Story

Released for the World Book Day in UK - Spring 2009

Christmas in the Underworld was NOT my idea.

If I'd known what was coming, I would've called in sick. I could've avoided an army of demons, a fight with a Titan and a trick that almost got my friends and me cast into eternal darkness.

But no, I had to take my stupid English exam. So there I was the last day of the winter semester at Goode High School, sitting in the auditorium with all the other freshmen and trying to finish my I-didn't-read-it-but-I'm-pretending-like-I-did essay on A Tale of Two Cities, when Mrs. O'Leary burst onto the stage, barking like crazy.

Mrs. O'Leary is my pet hellhound. She's a shaggy black monster the size of a Hummer with razor fangs, steel-sharp claws and glowing red eyes. She's really sweet, but usually she stays at Camp Half-Blood, our demigod training camp. I was a little surprised to see her on stage, trampling over the Christmas trees and Santa's elves and the rest of the Winter Wonderland set.

Everyone looked up. I was sure the other kids were going to panic and run for the exits, but they just started snickering and laughing. A couple of the girls said, "Awww, cute!"

Our English teacher, Dr Boring (I'm not kidding; that's his real name), adjusted his glasses and frowned.

"All right," he said. "Whose poodle?"

I sighed in relief. Thank gods for the Mist, the magical veil that keeps humans from seeing things the way they really are. I'd seen it bend reality plenty of times before, but Mrs. O'Leary as a poodle? That was impressive.

"Um... my poodle, sir," I spoke up. "Sorry, it must have followed me."

Somebody behind me started whistling *Mary had a Little Lamb*. More kids cracked up.

"Enough!" Dr. Boring snapped. "Percy Jackson, this is a final exam, I cannot have poodles..."

WOOF!

Mrs. O'Leary's bark shook the auditorium. She wagged her tail knocking over a few more elves. Then she crouched on her front paws and stared at me, like she wanted me to follow.

"Uh... I'll get her out of here, Dr. Boring," I promised. "I'm finished anyway."

I closed my test booklet and ran toward the stage. Mrs. O'Leary bounded for the exit and I followed. The other kids still laughing and calling out behind me, *See ya, poodle boy!*

\*\*\*\*\*

Mrs. O'Leary ran down East 81st Street toward the river.

"Slow down," I yelled. "Where are you going?"

I got some strange looks from pedestrians, but this was New York, so a boy chasing a poodle probably wasn't the weirdest thing they ever seen.

Mrs. O'Leary kept well ahead of me. She turn to bark every once in a while, as if to say, Move it, Slowpoke! She went three blocks north, straight into Carl Shirts Park. By the time I caught up with her, she leaped an iron fence and disappeared into the huge topiary wall of snow-covered bushes.

"Oh, come on," I complained.

I haven't enough chance to grab my coat back at school. I was already freezing but I climbed the fence and plunged into the frozen shrubbery.

On the other side was a clearing, a half-acre of icy grass ringed with berry trees. Mrs. O'Leary was sniffing around, wagging her tail like crazy. I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. In front of me, the steel colored East River flowed sluggishly. White plumes billowed from the rooftops in Queens. Behind me, the Upper East Side loomed cold and silent. I wasn't sure why, but the back of my neck started to tingle. I took out my ballpoint pen, and uncapped it. Immediately it grew into my bronze sword, Riptide, its blade glowing faintly in the winter light.

Mrs. O'Leary lifted her head, her nostrils quivered.

"What is it, girl?" I whispered.

The bushes rustled and a golden deer burst through. When I say gold, I don't mean yellow. This thing had metallic fur and horns that looked like genuine 14 karat. It shimmered with an aura of golden light, making it almost too bright to look at. It was probably the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

Mrs. O'Leary licked her lips like she was thinking, Deer burgers!

Then, the bushes rustled again and a figure in a hooded parka leaped into the clearing, an arrow notched in her bow. I raised my sword. The girl aimed at me, then froze.

"Percy?" She pushed back the silvery hood of her parka. Her black hair was longer than I remembered, but I knew those bright blue eyes, and the silver tiara that marked her as the first lieutenant of Artemis.

"Thalia?" I said. "What are you doing here?"

"Following the golden deer," she said, like that should be obvious. "It's the sacred animal of Artemis. I figured it was some sort of sign and um..." She nodded nervously at Mrs. O'Leary. "You want to tell me what that's doing here?"

"That's my pet. Mrs. O'Leary, no!" Mrs. O'Leary was sniffing the deer and basically, not respecting its personal space. The deer butted the hellhound on the nose. Pretty soon, the two of them were playing a strange game of keep away around the clearing.

"Percy," Thalia frowned, "this can't be a coincidence. You and me ending up in the same place, at the same time?"

She was right. Demigods didn't have coincidences. Thalia was a good friend, but I hadn't seen her in over a year and now suddenly, here we were.

"Some god is messing with us," I guessed, "probably. Good to see you though."

She gave me a grudging smile. "Yeah. We get out of this in one piece, I'll buy you a cheeseburger. How's Annabeth?"

Before I could answer, a cloud passed over the sun. The golden deer shimmered and disappeared, leaving Mrs. O'Leary barking at a pile of leaves. I readied my sword. Thalia drew her bow. Instinctively, we stood back-to-back. A patch of darkness passed over the clearing, and a boy tumbled out of it like he'd been tossed, landing in the grass at our feet.

"Ow!" he muttered.

He brushed off his aviator's jacket. He was about twelve years old with dark hair, jeans, a black t-shirt, and a silver skull ring on his right hand. A sword hung at his side.

"Nico?" I said.

Thalia's eyes widened, "Bianca's little brother?"

Nico scowled. I doubt he liked being announced as Bianca's little brother. His sister, a Hunter of Artemis, had died a couple of years ago and it was still a sore subject for him.

"Why did you bring me here?" he grumbled. "One minute I'm in a New Orleans' graveyard, the next minute... is this New York? What in Hades' name am I doing in New York?"

"We didn't bring you here," I promised. "We were..." A shiver went down my back. "We were brought together. All three of us."

"What are you talking about?" Nico demanded.

"The children of the Big Three," I said. "Zeus, Poseidon, Hades."

Thalia took a sharp breath. "The prophecy. You don't think Kronos..." She didn't finish the thought. We all knew about the big prophecy. A war was coming between the Titans and gods. And the next child of the three major gods who turned sixteen would make a decision that saved or destroyed the world. That meant one of us.

Over the last few years, the Titan Lord Kronos had tried to manipulate each of us separately. Now, could he be plotting something by bringing us all together?

The ground rumbled. Nico drew his own sword, a black blade of Stygian iron. Mrs. O'Leary leaped backward and barked in alarm. Too late. I realized she was trying to warn me. The ground opened underneath Thalia, Nico, and me and we fell into darkness.

\*\*\*\*\*

I expected to keep falling forever or maybe be squashed into a demigod pancake when we hit the bottom. But the next thing I knew, Thalia, Nico and I were standing in a garden. All three of us still screaming in terror, which made me feel pretty silly.

"What? Where are we?" Thalia asked.

The garden was dark. Rows of silver flowers glowed faintly, reflecting off huge gemstones that lined the planting beds: diamonds, sapphires, and rubies — the size of footballs. Trees arched over us. Their branches covered with orange blooms and sweet smelling fruit. The air was cool and damp. But not like a New York winter. More like a cave.

"I'd been here before," I said.

Nico plucked the pomegranate off a tree. "My stepmother Persephone's garden." He made a sour face and dropped the fruit. "Don't eat anything."

He didn't need to tell me twice. One taste of Underworld food and we'd never be able to leave.

"Heads up," Thalia warned.

I turned and found her aiming her bow at a tall woman in a white dress. At first I thought the woman was a ghost. Her dress billowed around her like smoke. Her long

dark hair floated and curled as if it were weightless. Her face was beautiful but definitely pale. Then I realized her dress wasn't white. It was made of all sorts of changing colors: red, blue, and yellow flowers blooming in the fabric. But it was strangely faded. Her eyes were the same way, multi-colored but washed out, like the Underworld has sapped her life force. I have the feeling that in the world above, she'd be beautiful, even brilliant.

"I am Persephone," she said, her voice thin and papery. "Welcome demigods."

Nico squashed the pomegranate under his boot. "Welcome? Huh. After last time you've got the nerve to welcome me?"

I shifted uneasily because talking that way to a god can get you blasted into dust bunnies.

"Um, Nico..."

"It's all right," Persephone said coldly. "We had a little family spat."

"Family spat?" Nico cried. "You turned me into a dandelion!"

Persephone ignored her stepson. "As I was saying, demigods, I welcome you to my garden."

Thalia lowered her bow. "You sent the golden deer?"

"And the hellhound," the goddess admitted. "And the shadow that collected Nico. It was necessary to bring you together."

"Why?" I asked.

Persephone regarded me. And I felt like cold little flowers were blooming in my stomach. "Lord Hades has a problem," she said, "and if you know what's good for you, you will help him."

We sat on the dark veranda overlooking the garden. Persephone's handmaidens brought food and drink which none of us touched. The handmaidens would have been pretty except for the fact that they were dead. They wore yellow dresses with daisy and hemlock wreaths on their heads. Their eyes were hollow and they spoke in jittering bat-like voices of shades.

Persephone sat on a silver throne and studied us. "If this was spring I would be able to greet you properly in the world above. Alas in winter, this is the best I can do." She sounded bitter. After all this millennia, I guess she still resented living with Hades half the year.

She looked so bleached and out of place like an old photograph of springtime. She turned toward me as if reading my thoughts. "Hades is my husband and master, young

one. I would do anything for him but in this case, I need your help. And quickly, it concerns Lord Hades' sword."

Nico frowned. "My father doesn't have a sword. He uses his staff in battle and his helm of terror."

"He didn't have a sword," Persephone corrected.

Thalia sat up. "He's forging a new symbol of power without Zeus' permission?"

The goddess of springtime pointed. Above the table, an image flickered to life. Skeletal weapon smiths worked over a forge of black flames using hammers fashioned like metal skulls to beat a length of iron into a blade.

"War with the Titans is almost upon us," Persephone said. "My Lord Hades must be ready."

"But Zeus and Poseidon would never allow Hades to forge a new weapon," Thalia protested. "It would unbalance their power sharing agreement."

Persephone shook her head. "You mean it would make Hades their equal. Believe me daughter of Zeus, the Lord of the Dead has no designs against his brothers. He knew they would never understand. Which is why he forged the blade in secret."

The image over the table shimmered. A zombie weapon smith raised the blade still glowing hot. Something strange was set on the base. Not a gem, more like...

"Is that a key?" I asked.

Nico made a gagging sound. "The keys of Hades?"

"Wait!" Thalia said. "What are the keys of Hades?"

Nico looked even paler than his stepmother. "Hades has a set of golden keys that can lock or unlock death. At least... that's the legend."

"It's true," Persephone said.

"How do you lock and unlock death?" I asked.

"The keys have the power to imprison a soul in the Underworld," Persephone said, "or to release it."

Nico swallowed. "If one of those keys has been set in the sword..."

"The wielder can raise the dead," Persephone said, "or slay any living thing and send its soul to the Underworld with a mere touch of the blade."

We were all silent. The shadowy fountain gurgled in the corner. Handmaidens floated around us, offering trays of fruit and candy that would keep us in the Underworld forever.

"That's a wicked sword," I said at last.

"It would make Hades unstoppable," Thalia agreed.

"So you see," Persephone said, "why you must help get it back."

I stared at her. "Did you say get it back?"

Persephone's eyes were beautiful and deadly serious like poisonous blooms. "The blade was stolen when it was almost finished. I do not know how but I suspect a demigod, some servant of Kronos. If the blade falls into the Titan Lord's hands..."

Thalia shot to her feet. "You allowed the blade to be stolen! How stupid was that? Kronos probably has it by now!"

Thalia's arrows sprouted into long-stemmed roses. Her bow melted into a honeysuckle vine, dotted with white and gold flowers.

"Take care, Huntress," Persephone warned. "Your father may be Zeus and you may be the lieutenant of Artemis but you do not speak to me with disrespect in my own palace."

Thalia ground her teeth. "Give. Me. Back. My. Bow."

Persephone waived her hand. The bow and arrows changed back to normal. "Now sit and listen. The sword could have not left the Underworld yet. Lord Hades used his remaining keys to shut down the realm. Nothing gets in or out until he finds the sword and he is using all his power to locate the thief."

Thalia sat down reluctantly. "Then what do you need us for?"

"The search for the blade cannot be common knowledge," said the goddess. "We have locked the realm but we have not announced why nor can Hades' servants be used for the search. They cannot know the blade exists until it is finished. Certainly, they can't know it is missing."

"If they thought Hades was in trouble, they might desert him," Nico guessed. "And join the Titans."

Persephone didn't answer. But if a goddess could look nervous, she did. "The thief must be a demigod. No immortal can steal another immortal's weapon directly. Even Kronos must abide by that ancient law. He has a champion down here somewhere. And to catch a demigod, we shall use three."

"Why us?" I said.



"You are the children of the three major gods," Persephone said. "Who could withstand your combined power? Besides when you restore the sword to Hades, you will send a message to Olympus. Zeus and Poseidon will not protest Hades' new weapon if it is given to him by their own children. It will show that you trust Hades."

"But I don't trust him," Thalia said.

"Ditto," I said. "Why should we do anything for Hades, much less give him a super weapon, right Nico?"

Nico stared at the table. His fingers tapped on his black Stygian blade.

"Right, Nico?" I prompted.

It took him a second to focus on me. "I have to do this, Percy. He's my father."

"Oh, no way," Thalia protested. "You can't believe this is a good idea!"

"Would you rather have the sword in Kronos's hands?" He had a point there.

"Time is wasting," Persephone said. "The thief may have accomplices in the Underworld and he would be looking for a way out."

I frowned. "I thought you said the realm was locked."

"No prison is air tight, not even the Underworld. Souls are always finding new ways out faster than Hades can close them. You must retrieve the sword before it leaves our realm. Or all is lost."

"Even if we wanted to," Thalia said, "how would we find this thief?"

A potted plant appeared on the table, a sickly yellow carnation with a few green leaves. The flower listed sideways as if it were trying to find the sun. "This would guide you," the goddess said.

"A magic carnation?" I asked.

"The flower always faces the thief. As your prey gets closer to escaping, the petals will fall off."

Right on cue, a yellow petal turned gray and fluttered onto the dirt. "If all the petals fall off," Persephone said, "the flower dies. This means the thief has reached an exit and you have failed."

I glanced at Thalia. She didn't seem too enthusiastic about the whole track-a-thief-with-a-flower thing. Then I looked at Nico. Unfortunately, I recognized the expression on his face. I knew what it was like wanting to make your dad proud, even if your dad was

hard to love. In this case, really hard to love. Nico was going to do this, with or without us. I couldn't let him go alone.

"One condition," I told Persephone. "Hades would have to swear on the River Styx that he will never use this sword against the gods."

The goddess shrugged. "I am not Lord Hades. But I'm confident he would do this as payment for your help."

Another petal fell off the carnation. I turned to Thalia. "I'll hold the flower while you beat up the thief?"

She sighed. "Fine. Let's go catch this jerk."

\*\*\*\*\*

The Underworld didn't get into the Christmas spirit. As we made our way down the palace road into the Fields of Asphodel, it looked pretty much like it had on my previous visit. Seriously depressing. Yellow grass and stunted black poplar trees rolled on forever. Shades drifted aimlessly across the hills, coming from nowhere and going nowhere, chattering to each other and trying to remember who they were in life. High above us, the cavern ceiling glistened darkly. I carried the carnation which made me feel pretty stupid. Nico led the way, since his blade could clear a path through any crowd of undead. Thalia mostly grumbled that she should've known better than to go on a quest with a couple of boys.

"Did Persephone seem kind of uptight?" I asked.

Nico waded through a mob of ghosts, driving them back with Stygian iron. "She always acts that way when I'm around. She hates me."

"Then why did she include you in the quest?"

"Probably my dad's idea." He sounded like he wanted that to be true but I wasn't so sure. It seems strange to me that Hades hadn't given us the quest himself. If this sword was so important to him, why had he let Persephone explain things? Usually, Hades liked to threaten demigods in person.

Nico forged ahead. No matter how crowded the fields were (and if you've ever seen Times Square on New Year's Eve you have a pretty good idea) the spirits parted before him. "He's handy with zombie crowds," Thalia admitted. "Think I'll take him along next time I go to the mall."

She gripped her bow tight like she was afraid it would turn into honeysuckle vine again. She didn't look any older than she had last year and it suddenly occurred to me that she

would never age, now that she was a Huntress. That meant I was older than she was. Weird.

"So," I said, "how's immortality training you?"

She rolled her eyes. "It's not total immortality, Percy. You know that. We can still die in combat. It's just... we don't ever age or get sick. So we live forever assuming that we don't get sliced into pieces by monsters. Always a danger. Always." She looked around and I realized she was scanning the faces of the dead.

"If you're looking for Bianca," I said quietly so Nico wouldn't hear me, "she'd be in Elysium. She died a hero's death."

"I know that," Thalia snapped. Then she caught herself. "It's not that Percy, I was just... Never mind."

A cold feeling washed over me. I remembered that Thalia's mother had died in a car crash a few years ago. They'd never been close but Thalia had never gotten to say goodbye. If her mother's shade was wandering around right down here, no wonder Thalia looked jumpy.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I wasn't thinking."

Our eyes met and I got the feeling she understood. Her expression softened. "It's okay. Let's just get this over with." Another petal fell off the carnation as we marched on.

I wasn't happy when the flower pointed us toward the Fields of Punishment. I was hoping we'd veer into Elysium and so we could hang out with the beautiful people and party. But no, the flower seemed to like the harshest, evilest part of the Underworld. We jumped over a lava stream and picked our way past scenes of horrible torture. I won't describe them because you'd completely lose your appetite. But I wished I had cotton balls in my ears to shut out the screaming and the 1980's music. The carnation tilted its face toward the hill on our left.

"Up there," I said.

Thalia and Nico stopped. They were covered with soot from trudging through Punishment. I probably I didn't look much better. A loud grinding noise came from the other side of the hill like somebody was dragging a washing machine. Then the hill shook with a BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! And a man yelled curses. Thalia looked at Nico.

"Is that who I think it is?"

"Afraid so," Nico said. "The number one expert on cheating death."

Before I could ask what he meant, he led us to the top of the hill.

The dude on the other side was not pretty and he was not happy. He looked like one of those troll dolls with orange skin, a pot-belly, scrawny legs and arms, and a big loin cloth diaper thing around his waist. His ruddy hair stuck up like a torch. He was hopping around, cursing and kicking a boulder that was twice as big as he was.

"I won't," he screamed, "No, no, no!"

Then he launched into a string of cuss words in several different languages. If I'd had one of those jars where you put a quarter in for each bad word, I would've made around 500 dollars. He started to walk away from the boulder, but after ten feet he lurched backward like some invisible force has pulled him. He staggered back to the boulder and started banging his head against it.

"All right," he screamed, "all right, curse you." He rubbed his head and muttered some more cuss words. "But this is the last time, do you hear me?"

Nico looked at us. "Come on while he's between attempts."

We scrambled down the hill. "Sisyphus," Nico called.

The troll guy looked up in surprise. Then he scrambled behind his rock. "Oh no. You're not fooling me with those disguises. I know you're the Furies."

"We're not the Furies," I said. "We just want a talk."

"Go away," he shrieked. "Flowers won't make it better. It's too late to apologize."

"Look," Thalia said, "we just want..."

"Blah blah blah," he yelled, "I'm not listening."

We played tag with him around the boulder until finally Thalia, who was the quickest, caught the old man by his hair.

"Stop it!" he wailed. "I have rocks to move. Rocks to move."

"I'll move your rock," Thalia offered. "Just shut up and talk to my friends."

Sisyphus stopped fighting. "You? You move my rock?"

"It's better than looking at you." Thalia glanced at me, "Be quick about it." Then she shugged Sisyphus towards us. She put her shoulder against the rock and started pushing it very slowly uphill.

Sisyphus scowled at me distrustfully. He pinched my nose. "Ow!" I said.

"So you're really not a Fury," he said in amazement. "What's the flower for?"

"We're looking for someone," I said. "The flower is helping us find him."

"Persephone!" He spit in the dust. "That's one of her tracking devices, isn't it?"

He leaned forward and I caught an unpleasant whiff of old guy whose been rolling a rock for eternity. "I fooled her once, you know. I fooled them all."

I looked at Nico. "Translation?"

"Sisyphus cheated death," Nico explained. "First, he chained up Thanatos, the Reaper of Souls, so no one could die. Then when Thanatos got free, he was about to kill him. Sisyphus told his wife to do incorrect funeral rites so he wouldn't rest in peace. Sisy here— May I call you Sisy?"

"No!"

"Sisy tricked Persephone into letting him go back to the world to haunt his wife and he didn't come back."

The old man cackled. "I stayed alive another 30 years before they finally tracked me down."

Thalia was half-way up the hill now. She gritted her teeth, pushing the boulder with her back. Her expression said, Hurry up!

"So that was your punishment," I said to Sisyphus, "rolling a boulder up a hill forever. Was it worth it?"

"A temporary setback," Sisyphus cried. "I'll bust out of here soon and when I do, they'll all be sorry!"

"How would you get out of the Underworld?" Nico asked. "It's lock down, you know."

Sisyphus grinned wickedly. "That's what the other one asked."

My stomach tightened. "Someone else asked your advice?"

"An angry young man," Sisyphus recalled. "Not very polite. He hold a sword to my throat, didn't offer to roll my boulder at all."

"What did you tell him?" Nico said. "Who was he?"

Sisyphus massaged his shoulders. He glanced up at Thalia, who was almost up to the top hill. Her face was bright red and drenched in sweat.

"Oh, it's hard to say," Sisyphus said. "Never seen him before. He carried a long package all wrapped up in black cloth. Skis maybe, or shovel. Maybe if you wait here, I can go look for him."

"What did you tell him?" I demanded.

"Can't remember."

Nico drew his sword. The Stygian iron was so cold; it steamed in the hot dry air of punishment. "Try harder."

The old man winced. "What kind of person carries a sword like that?"

"The son of Hades," Nico said. "Now, answer me!"

The color drained from Sisyphus' face. "I told him to talk to Melinoe. She always has a way out."

Nico lowered his sword. I could tell the name Melinoe bothered him. "Are you crazy?" he said. "That's suicide."

The old man shrugged. "I've cheated death before. I could do it again. "

"What does this demigod look like?"

"Um... He had a nose," Sisyphus said, "a mouth and one eye and—"

"One eye?" I interrupted. "Did he have an eye patch?"

"Oh, maybe," Sisyphus said. "He had hair on his head and..." He gasped and looked over my shoulder. "There he is!"

We fell for it. As soon as we turned, Sisyphus took off down the hill. "I'm free! I'm free! I'm... ow."

Ten feet from the hill, he hit the end of his invisible leash and fell on his back. Nico and I grabbed his arms and hauled him up the hill.

"Curse you!" He let loose with bad words in Ancient Greek, Latin, English, French and several other languages I didn't recognize. "I'll never help you! Go to Hades!"

"Already there," Nico muttered.

"Incoming!" Thalia shouted.

I looked up and might have used a few cuss words myself. The boulder was bouncing straight towards us. Nico jumped one way, I jumped the other.

Sisyphus yelled, "Nooo!", as the thing plaud into him. Somehow, he braced himself and stopped it before it could run him over. I guess he'd had a lot of practice.

"Take it again!" He wailed. "Please, I can't hold it."

"Not again," Thalia gasped, "you are on your own."

He treated us to a lot more colorful language. It was clear he wasn't going to help us any further so we left him into his punishment.

"Melinoe's cave is this way." Nico said.

"If this thief guy really has one eye," I said, "that could be Ethan Nakamura, son of Nemesis. He's the one who freed Kronos."

"I remember," Nico said darkly, "but if we're dealing with Melinoe, we've got bigger problems. Come on!"

As we walked away, Sisyphus was yelling, "All right! But this is the last time! Do you hear me? The last time!"

Thalia shuddered.

"You okay?" I asked her.

"I guess," she hesitated, "Percy, the scary thing is when I got to the top, I thought I had it. I thought, *This isn't so hard*. I can get the rock to stay and as it rolled down, I was almost tempted to try it again. I figured I could get it the second time."

She looked back wistfully. "Come on!" I told her, "The sooner we're out of here, the better."

\*\*\*\*\*

We walked for what seemed like eternity. Three more petals withered from the carnation which meant it is now officially half-dead. The flower pointed toward the range of jagged gray hills that looked like teeth. So we charged in that direction, over a plain of volcanic rock.

"Nice day for a stroll," Thalia muttered. "The Hunters are probably feasting in some forest glade right about now."

I wondered what my family was doing. My mom and stepdad, Paul, would be worried when I didn't come home from school. But it wasn't the first time this had happened. They'd figure it out pretty quickly that I'm on some quest. My mom would be pacing back and forth in the living room, wondering if I was going to make it back to unwrap my presents.

"So who is this Melinoe?" I asked, trying to take my mind off home.

"Long story," Nico said. "Long very scary story."

I was about to ask what he meant when Thalia dropped to a crouch. "Weapons!"

I drew Riptide. I'm sure I look terrifying with potted carnation in the other hand so I put it down. Nico drew his sword. We stood back-to-back. Thalia notched an arrow.

"What is it?" I whispered.

She seemed to be listening. Then her eyes widened. A ring of a dozen daimones materialized around us. They were part humanoid female, part bat. Their faces were pug-nosed and furry, with fangs and bulging eyes. Matted gray fur and piecemeal armor covered their bodies. They had shriveled arms with claws for hands, leathery wings that sprouted from their backs, and stubby bowed legs. They would've looked funny except for the murderous glow in their eyes.

"Keres," Nico said.

"What?" I asked.

"Battlefield spirits. They feed on violent death."

"Oh, wonderful," Thalia said.

"Get back!" Nico ordered the daimones. "The son of Hades commands you."

The Keres hissed. Their mouths foamed. They glanced apprehensively at our weapons, but I got the feeling the Keres weren't impressed by Nico's command.

"Soon Hades will be defeated," one of them snarled, "Our new master shall give us free reign."

Nico blinked, "New master?"

The lead daimon lunged. Nico was so surprised it might slashed him to bits, but Thalia shot an arrow point-blank into his ugly bat face and the creature disintegrated. The rest of them charged. Thalia dropped her bow and drew her knives.

I ducked as Nico's sword whistled over my head, cutting a daimon in half. I sliced and jabbed and three or four Keres exploded around me but more just kept coming.

"Iapetus shall crush you," one shouted.

"Who?" I asked. Then I ran her through with my sword. Note to self: If you vaporized monsters, they can't answer your questions.



Nico was also cutting an arc through the Keres. His black sword absorbed their essence like a vacuum cleaner and the more he destroy, the colder the air become around him.

Thalia flipped a daimon on his back, stabbed it and impaled another one with her second knife without even turning around.

"Die in pain, mortal!"

Before I could raise my sword for defense another daimon's claws ripped my shoulder. If I have been wearing armor, no problem. But I was still on my school uniform.

The thing's talons sliced open my shirt and tore into my skin. My whole left side seem to explode in pain. Nico kicked the monster away and stabbed it. All I could was to collapse and curl into a ball, trying to endure the horrible burning.

The sound of battle died. Thalia and Nico rushed to my side. "Hold still, Percy," Thalia said. "You'll be fine." But quiver in her voice told me the wound was bad.

Nico touched it and I yelled in pain. "Nectar," he said. "I'm pouring nectar on it."

He uncorked the bottle of the godly drink and tricked it across my shoulder. This was dangerous. Just a sip of this stuff is almost demigods could stand but immediately the pain eased. Together, Nico and Thalia dressed the wound and I passed out only a few times.

I couldn't judge how much time went by, but the next thing I remember I was propped up with my back against a rock. My shoulder was bandaged. Thalia was feeding me tiny squares of chocolate-flavored ambrosia.

"The Keres?" I muttered.

"Gone for now," she said. "You have me worried for a second, Percy. But I think you'll make it."

Nico crouched next to us. He was holding the potted carnation. Only five petals still clung to the flower. "The Keres will be back," he warned. He looked at my shoulder with concern. "That wound. The Keres are spirits of disease and pestilence as well as violence. We could slow down the infection but eventually you'll need serious healing. I mean, a god's power, otherwise..." He didn't finish the thought.

"I'll be fine," I tried to sit up and immediately felt nauseous.

"Slow," Thalia said. "You need rest before you could move."

"There's no time," I looked at the carnation. "One of the daimones mentioned Iapetus. Am I remembering right? That's a Titan."

Thalia nodded uneasily. "The brother of Kronos, father of Atlas. He was known as the Titan of the West. His name means The Piercer because that's what he likes to do to his enemies. He was cast into Tartarus along with his brothers. He was supposed to be down there."

"But if the sword of Hades can unlock death?" I asked.

"Then maybe," Nico said, "it could also summon the damned out of Tartarus. We can't let them try."

"We still do not know who they are," Thalia said.

"The half-blood working for Kronos," I said. "Probably Ethan Nakamura. And he's starting to recruit some of Hades' minions to his side like the Keres."

"The daimones think that if Kronos wins the war, they'll get more chaos and evil out of the deal."

"They are probably right," Nico said. "My father tries to keep the balance. He reins in the more violent spirits. If Kronos appoints one of his brothers to be the Lord of the Underworld—"

"Like this Iapetus dude," I said.

"—then the Underworld will get a lot worse," Nico said. "The Keres would like that so would Melinoe."

"You still haven't told us who Melinoe is."

Nico chewed his lip. "She's the goddess of ghosts, one of my father's servants. She oversees the restless dead that walk the earth. Every night, she rises from the Underworld to terrify mortals."

"She has her own path into the Upperworld?"

Nico nodded. "I doubt it would be blocked. Normally, no one would even think about trespassing in her cave. But if this demigod thief is brave enough to make a deal with her..."

"He could get back to the world," Thalia supplied, "and bring the sword to Kronos."

"Who would use it to raise his brothers from Tartarus," I guessed, "and we be in big trouble."

I struggled to my feet. A wave of nausea almost made me blacked out but Thalia grabbed me.

"Percy," she said, "you're in no condition."

"I have to be."

I watched as another petal withered and fell off the carnation. Four left before doomsday.

"Give me the potted plant. We have to find the cave of Melinoe."

\*\*\*\*\*

As we walked, I tried to think about positive things — my favorite basketball players, my last conversation with Annabeth, what my mom would make for Christmas dinner. Anything but the pain. Still, it felt like a saber-toothed tiger was chewing on my shoulder.

I wasn't going to be much good on a fight and I cursed myself for letting down my guard. I should have never gotten hurt. Now Thalia and Nico would have to haul my useless butt through rest of the mission.

I was so busy feeling sorry for myself; I didn't notice the sound of roaring water until Nico said, "Uh-oh."

About fifty feet ahead of us, a dark river churned through a gorge of volcanic rock. I'd seen the Styx and this didn't look like the same river. It was narrow and fast. The water was black as ink. Even the foam churned black. The far bank was only thirty feet across but that was too far to jump and there was no bridge.

"The River Lethe!" Nico cursed in Ancient Greek. "We'll never make it across."

The flower was pointing to the other side, toward a gloomy mountain and a path leading up to a cave. Beyond the mountain, the walls of the Underworld loomed like a dark granite sky.

I hadn't considered that the Underworld might have an outer rim, but this appeared to be it. "There's got to be a way across," I said.

Thalia knelt next to the bank.

"Careful," Nico said, "This is the river of forgetfulness. If one drop of that water gets on you, you'll start to forget who you are."

Thalia backed up. "I know this place. Luke told me about it once. Souls come here if they choose to be reborn, so they totally forget their former lives."

Nico nodded. "Swim in that water and your mind will be wiped clean. You'll be like a new born baby."

Thalia studied the opposite bank. "I could shoot an arrow across. Maybe anchor a line to one of those rocks."

"You want to trust your weight to a line that isn't tied off?" Nico asked.

Thalia frowned. "Yeah right. Works on the movies, but no. Could you summon some dead people to help us?"

"I could but they would only appear on my side of the river. Running water acts as barrier against the dead. They can't cross it."

I winced. "What kind of stupid rule was that?"

"Hey, I didn't make it up." He studied my face. "You look terrible, Percy. You should sit down."

"I can't. You need me for this."

"For what?" Thalia asked. "You can barely stand."

"It's water, isn't it? I'll have to control it. Maybe I can redirect the flow long enough to get us across."

"In your condition?" Nico said. "No way. I'd feel safer with the arrow idea."

I staggered to the edge of the river. I didn't know if I could do this. I was the child of Poseidon so controlling salt water was no problem. Regular river, maybe. If the river spirits were feeling cooperative. Magical Underworld rivers? I had no idea.

"Stand back," I said. I concentrated on the current, the raging black water rushing past. I imagined that it was part of my own body. I could control the flow, make it respond to my will. I wasn't sure but I felt the water churned and bubbled more violently as if it could sense my presence. I knew I couldn't stop the river altogether. The current would back up and flood the whole valley, exploding all over us as soon as I let it go. But there was another solution.

"Here goes nothing," I muttered.

I raised my arms like I was lifting something over my head. My bad shoulder burned like lava but I tried to ignore it. The river rose. It surged out of its banks, flowing up and then down again in a great arc — a raging black rainbow of water twenty feet high. The riverbed in front of us turned into a drying mud — a tunnel under the river just wide enough for two people to walk side-by-side.

Thalia and Nico stared at me in amazement. "Go," I said. "I can't hold this for long."

Yellow spots danced in front of my eyes. My wounded shoulder merely screamed in pain. Thalia and Nico scrambled into the riverbed and made their way across the sticky mud.

Not a single drop. I can't let a single drop of water touch them. The River Lethe fought me. It didn't want to be forced out of its bank. It wanted to crash down to my friends, wipe their minds clean, and drown them. But I held the arc.

Thalia climbed the opposite bank and turned to help Nico. "Come on, Percy," she said. "Walk."

My knees were shaking; my arms trembled. I took a step forward and almost fell. The water arc quivered. "I can't make it," I called.

"Yes, you can," Thalia said. "We need you."

Somehow I managed to climb down into the riverbed. One step, then another. The water surged above me. My boots squished in the mud. Half-way across, I stumbled. I heard Thalia scream, "NO!" And my concentration broke.

As the River Lethe crashed down at me, I had time for one last desperate thought: *Dry*. I heard the roar and felt the crash of tons of water as the river fell back on its natural course but...

I opened my eyes. I was surrounded in darkness. I was completely dry. A layer of air covered me like a second skin, shielding me from the effects of the water. I struggled to my feet. Even the small effort to stay dry, something I'd done many times in normal water, was almost more than I could handle. I slugged forward to the black current, blind and doubled over with pain.

I climbed out of the River Lethe, surprising Thalia and Nico who jumped back a good five feet. I staggered forward, collapsed in front of my friends and passed out cold.

\*\*\*\*\*

The taste of nectar brought me around. My shoulder felt better but I had an uncomfortable buzz in my ears. My eyes felt hot like I have a fever.

"We can't risk any more nectar," Thalia was saying. "He'll burst into flames."

"Percy," Nico said, "Can you hear me?"

"Flames," I murmured. "Got it."

I sat up slowly. My shoulder was newly bandaged. It still hurt but I was able to stand.

"We're close," Nico said. "Can you walk?"

The mountain loomed above us. A dusty trail snaked up a few hundred feet to the mouth of a cave. The path was lined with human bones for that extra cozy feel.

"Ready," I said.

"I don't like this," Thalia murmured.

She cradled the carnation which was pointing toward the cave. The flower now had two petals left like very sad bunny ears.

"A creepy cave," I said. "The goddess of ghosts. What's not to like?"

As if in response, a hissing sound echoed down the mountain. White mist billowed from the cave like someone had turned on a dry ice machine. In the fog, an image appeared — a tall woman with disheveled blonde hair. She wore a pink bathrobe and had a wine glass in her hand. Her face was stern and disapproving. I could see right through her so I knew she was a spirit of some kind but her voice sounded real enough.

"Now you come back," she growled. "Well, it's too late."

I looked at Nico and whispered, "Melinoe?"

Nico didn't answer. He stood frozen, staring at the spirit.

Thalia lowered her bow, "Mother?" Her eyes teared up. Suddenly she looked about seven years old.

The spirit threw down her wine glass. It shattered and dissolved into the fog.

"That's right, girl. Doomed to walk the earth, and it's your fault! Where were you when I died? Why did you run away when I needed you?"

"I— I—"

"Thalia," I said. "It's just a shade, it can't hurt you."

"I'm more than that," the spirit growled, "and Thalia knows it."

"But you abandoned me," Thalia said.

"You wretched girl! Ungrateful runaway!"

"Stop," Nico stepped forward with the sword drawn but the spirit changed form and faced him.

This ghost was harder to see. She was a woman in an old fashioned black velvet dress with a matching hat. She wore string of pearls and white gloves and her dark hair was tied back. Nico stopped in his tracks.

"No."

"My son," the ghost said, "you were taken from me so young. I died of grief, wondering what had happened to you and your sister. "

"Mama?"

"No, it's my mother," Thalia murmured as if she still saw the first image.

My friends were helpless. The fog began thickening around their feet, twining around their legs like vines. The color seemed to fade from their clothes and faces as if they too are becoming shades.

"Enough," I said but my voice hardly worked. Despite the pain, I lifted my sword and stepped toward the ghost. "You're not anybody's mama."

The ghost turned toward me. The image flickered and I saw the goddess of ghosts in her true form.

You think after a while I would stop getting freaked out by the appearance of Greek ghoulies but Melinoe caught me by surprise. Her right half was pale chalky white like she'd been drained of blood. Her left half was pitch black and hardened like mummy skin. She wore a golden dress and a golden shawl. Her eyes were empty black voids and when I looked into them, I felt as if I'm seeing my own death.

"Where are your ghosts?" she demanded in irritation.

"My— I don't know. I don't have any."

She snarled. "Everyone has ghosts — deaths you regret. Guilt. Fear. Why can I not see yours?"

Thalia and Nico were still entranced, staring at the goddess as if she were their long lost mother. I thought of other friends I'd seen die: Bianca di Angelo, Zoë Nightshade, Lee Fletcher to name a few.

"I've made peace with them," I said. "They've passed on. They're not ghosts. Now, let my friends go!"

I slashed at Melinoe with my sword. She backed up quickly, growling in frustration. The fog dissipated around my friends. They stood blinking at the goddess as if it they were just seeing how hideous she was.

"What is that?" Thalia said. "Where—"

"It was a trick," Nico said. "She fooled us."

"You are too late, demigods," Melinoe said. Another petal fell off my carnation, leaving only one. "The deal has been struck."

"What deal?" I demanded.

Melinoe made a hissing sound and I realized it was her way of laughing. "So many ghosts, my young demigod. They long to be unleashed. When Kronos rules the world, I shall be free to walk among mortals both night and day, sewing terror as they deserve."

"Where's the sword of Hades?" I demanded. "Where's Ethan?"

"Close," Melinoe promised. "I will not stop you. I would not need to. Soon, Percy Jackson, you will have many ghosts and you will remember me."

Thalia notched an arrow and aimed it at the goddess. "If you open a path to the world, do you really think Kronos will reward you? He'll cast you into Tartarus along with the rest of Hades' servants."

Melinoe bared her teeth. "Your mother was right, Thalia. You are an angry girl. Good at running away, not much else."

The arrow flew but as it touched Melinoe she dissolved into fog, leaving nothing but the hiss of her laughter. Thalia's arrow hit the rocks and shattered harmlessly.

"Stupid ghost," she muttered. I could tell she was really shaken up. Her eyes were rimmed with red; her hands trembled.

Nico looked just as stunned like someone had smacked him between the eyes. "The thief?" he managed.

"Probably in the cave. We have to stop him before—" Just then the last petal fell off the carnation. The flower turned black and wilted. "Too late," I said.

A man's laughter echoed down the mountain. "You're right about that," a voice boomed.

At the mouth of the cave stood two people — a boy with an eye patch and ten-foot-tall man in tattered prison jumpsuit. The boy I recognize, Ethan Nakamura, son of Nemesis. In his hands was an unfinished sword — a double edged blade of black Stygian iron with skeletal designs etched in silver. It had no hilt but set in the base of the blade was a golden key, just like I'd seen in Persephone's image.

The giant man next to him had eyes of pure silver. His face was covered with a scraggly beard and his gray hair stuck out wildly. He looked thin and haggard in his rip prison clothes as though he'd spent the last few thousand years at a bottom of a pit. But even



in this weakened state he looked plenty scary. He held out his hand and a giant spear appeared.

I remembered what Thalia had said about Iapetus. His name means The Piercer because that's what he likes to do to his enemies. The Titan smiled cruelly.

"And now I will destroy you."

"Master," Ethan interrupted. He was dressed in combat fatigues with a backpack slung over his shoulder. His eye patch was crooked, his face smeared with soot and sweat. "We have the sword, we should—"

"Yes, yes," the Titan said impatiently. "You've done well, Noaka."

"It's Nakamura, Master."

"Whatever. I'm sure my brother Kronos will reward you. But now, we have killing to attend to."

"My lord," Ethan persisted. "You're not at full power. We should ascend and summon your brothers from the Upperworld. Our orders were to flee."

The Titan growled on him. "Flee? Did you say flee?"

The ground rumbled. Ethan fell on his butt and scrambled backward. The unfinished sword of Hades clattered to the rocks.

"Ma-ma-master, please."

"Iapetus does not flee. I have waited three eons to be summoned from the pit. I want revenge! And I will start by killing these weaklings."

He leveled his spear at me and charged. If he'd be at full strength I have no doubt he would have pierced me right to the middle. Even weakened and just out of pit, the guy was fast. He moved like a tornado, slashing so quickly I barely had time to dodge the strike before the spear impaled the rock where I'd been standing. I was so dizzy; I could barely hold my sword. Iapetus yanked the spear out of the ground but as he turned to face me, Thalia shot his flank full of arrows from his shoulder to his knee. He roared and turned on her, looking more angry than wounded. Ethan Nakamura tried to draw his own sword but Nico yelled, "I don't think so!"

The ground erupted in front of Ethan. Three armored skeletons climbed out and engaged him, pushing him back. The sword of Hades still lay on the rocks. If I could only get to it. Iapetus slashed with his spear and Thalia leaped out of the way. She dropped her bow so she could draw her knives but she wouldn't last long in close combat. Nico left Ethan to the skeletons and charged Iapetus. I was already ahead of him. It felt like my shoulder is going to explode but I lunged myself at the Titan and stabbed downward with Riptide, impaling the blade in the Titan's calf.

"Uhh-ah..." Golden ichor gushed from the wound. Iapetus whirled and the shaft of his spear slammed into me, sending me flying. I crashed into the rocks, right next to the River Lethe.

"You die first!" Iapetus roared as he hobbled toward me. Thalia tries to get his attention by zapping with an arc of electricity from her knives but she might as well have been a mosquito. Nico stabbed through his sword but Iapetus knocked him aside without even looking.

"I will kill you all! Then I will cast your souls into the eternal darkness of Tartarus."

My eyes were full of spots. I could barely move. Another inch and I would fall into the river head first. The river. I swallowed, hoping my voice still worked.

"You're— you're even uglier than your son," I taunted the Titan. "I can see where Atlas gets his stupidity from."

Iapetus snarled. He limped forward, raising his spear. I didn't know if I have the strength, but I had to try. Iapetus brought down the spear and I lurched sideways. The shaft impaled the ground right next to me. I reached up and grabbed his shirt collar, counting on the fact that he was off balance as well as hurt. He tried to regain his footing but I pulled him forward with all my body weight. He stumbled and fell, grabbing my arms in a panic and together pitched into the Lethe.

FROOM! I was immersed in black water. I prayed to Poseidon that my protection would hold. And as I sink to the bottom, I realized that I was still dry. I knew my own name and still had the Titan by the shirt collar. The current should have ripped him out of my hands but somehow the river was channeling itself around me, leaving us alone. With my last bit of strength I climbed out of the river, dragging Iapetus with my good arm. We collapsed at the river bank — me perfectly dry; the Titan dripping wet. His pure silver eyes were as big as moons. Thalia and Nico stood over me in amazement. Up by the cave, Ethan Nakamura was just cutting down the last skeleton. He turned and froze when he saw his Titan ally spread eagle on the ground.

"My-my lord," he called. Iapetus sat up and stared at him. Then he looked at me and smiled.

"Hello," he said. "Who am I?"

"You're my friend," I blurted out. "You're... Bob."

That seemed to please him greatly. "I am your friend Bob!" Clearly, Ethan could tell things were not going his way. He glanced at the sword of Hades lying in the dirt but before he could lunge for it, a silver arrow sprouted on the ground at his feet.

"Not today, kid," Thalia warned. "One more step and I'll pin your feet to the rocks."

Ethan ran straight into the cave of Melinoe. Thalia took aim at his back but I said, "No, let him go." She frowned but lowered her bow.

I wasn't sure why I wanted to spare Ethan. I guess we'd have enough fighting for one day and in truth, I felt sorry for the kid. He would be in enough trouble when he reported back to Kronos.

Nico picked up the sword of Hades reverently. "We did it. We actually did it."

"We did?" Iapetus asked. "Did I help?"

I managed a weak smile. "Yeah, Bob. You did great."

\*\*\*\*\*

We got an express ride back to the palace of Hades. Nico sent word ahead, thanks to some ghost he'd summoned out of the ground. And within a few minutes, the three Furies themselves arrived to ferry us back. They weren't thrilled about logging Bob the Titan too, but I didn't have the heart to leave him behind especially after he noticed my shoulder wound and said "Owie" and healed it with a touch.

Anyway by the time we arrived in the throne room of Hades, I was feeling great. The Lord of Dead sat on his throne of bones, glowering at us and stroking his black beard like he was contemplating the best way to torture us. Persephone sat next to him, not saying a word as Nico explained about our adventure. Before we gave back the sword, I insisted that Hades take an oath not to use it against the gods. His eyes flared like he wanted to incinerate me but finally he made a promise through clenched teeth.

Nico laid the sword at his father's feet and bowed, waiting for a reaction. Hades looked at his wife. "You defied my direct orders."

I wasn't sure what he was talking about but Persephone didn't react even under his withering gaze. Hades turned back to Nico, his gaze softened just a little. Like rock soft rather than steel. "You will speak of this to no one."

"Yes, lord," Nico agreed.

The god glared at me. "And if your friends do not hold their tongues, I will cut them out."

"You're welcome," I said.

Hades stared at the sword. His eyes were full of anger and something else — something like hunger. He snapped his fingers. The Furies fluttered down from the top of his throne. "Return the blade to the forges," he told them. "Stay with the smiths until it is finished and then return it to me."

The Furies swirled into the air with the weapon and I wondered how soon I would be regretting this day. There are ways around oaths and I imagine Hades would be looking for one.

"You are wise, my lord," Persephone said.

"If I were wise," he growled. "I would lock you in your chambers, if you ever disobey me again."

He let the threat hung in the air. Then he snapped his fingers and vanished into darkness.

Persephone looked paler than usual. She took a moment to smooth her dress and turned toward us.

"You have done well, demigods." She waved her hand and three red roses appeared at our feet. "Crush these and they will return you to the world of the living. You have my lord's thanks."

"I could tell," Thalia muttered.

"Making the sword was your idea," I realized. "That's why Hades wasn't there when you gave us the mission. Hades didn't know the sword was missing; he didn't even know it existed."

"Nonsense," the goddess said.

Nico clenched his fists. "Percy's right. You wanted Hades to make a sword. He told you no, he knew it was too dangerous. The other gods would never trust him. It would undue the balance of power."

"Then it got stolen," Thalia said. "You shut down the Underworld. Not Hades. You couldn't tell him what had happened and you need us to get the sword back before Hades found out. You used us."

Persephone moistened her lips. "The important thing is that Hades has now accepted the sword. He will have it finished and my husband will become as powerful as Zeus or Poseidon. Our realm will be protected against Kronos or any others who try to threaten us."

"And we're responsible," I said miserably.

"You've been very helpful," Persephone agreed. "Perhaps a reward for your silence."

"Get lost," I said, "before I carry you down to the Lethe and throw you in. Bob will help me. Won't you, Bob?"

"Bob will help you," Iapetus agreed cheerfully.

Persephone's eyes widened and she disappeared in a shower of daisies.

\*\*\*\*\*

Nico, Thalia, and I said our goodbyes on a balcony overlooking Asphodel. Bob the Titan sat inside building a toy house out of bones and laughing every time it collapsed.

"I'll watch him," Nico said. "He's harmless now. Maybe... I don't know. Maybe we could retrain him to do something good."

"Are you sure you want to stay here?" I asked. "Persephone will make your life miserable."

"I have to," he insisted. "I have to get close to my dad. He needs a better adviser."

I couldn't argue with that. "Well, if you need anything..."

"I'll call," he promised.

He shook hands with Thalia and me. He turned to leave but he looked at me one more time. "Percy, you haven't forgotten my offer."

A shiver went down my spine. "I'm still thinking about it."

Nico nodded. "Well... Whenever you're ready."

After he was gone, Thalia said, "What offer?"

"Something he told me last summer," I said. "A possible way to fight Kronos. It's dangerous and I have enough danger for one day."

Thalia nodded. "In that case, still up for dinner?"

I couldn't help but smile. "After all that, you're hungry?"

"Hey," she said, "even immortals have to eat. I'm thinking cheeseburgers at McHale's."

And together we crushed the roses that will return us to the world.