





# 1

*There is no food here*

*Meg ate all the Swedish Fish*

*Please get off my hearse*

## **I BELIEVE IN RETURNING DEAD BODIES.**

It seems like a simple courtesy, doesn't it? A warrior dies, you should do what you can to get their body back to their people for funerary rites. Maybe I'm old-fashioned. (I *am* over four thousand years old.) But I find it rude not to properly dispose of corpses.

Achilles during the Trojan War, for instance. *Total pig.* He chariot-dragged the body of the Trojan champion Hector around the walls of the city for days. Finally I convinced Zeus to pressure the big bully into returning Hector's body to his parents so he could have a decent burial. I mean, *come on.* Have a little respect for the people you slaughter.

Then there was Oliver Cromwell's corpse. I wasn't a fan of the man, but please. First, the English bury him with honours. Then they decide they hate him, so they dig him up and 'execute' his body. Then his head falls off the pike where it's been impaled for decades and gets passed around from collector to collector for almost three centuries like a disgusting souvenir snow globe. Finally, in

1960, I whispered in the ears of some influential people, *Enough, already. I am the god Apollo, and I order you to bury that thing. You're grossing me out.*

When it came to Jason Grace, my fallen friend and half-brother, I wasn't going to leave anything to chance. I would personally escort his coffin to Camp Jupiter and see him off with full honours.

That turned out to be a good call. What with the ghouls attacking us and everything.

Sunset turned San Francisco Bay into a cauldron of molten copper as our private plane landed at Oakland Airport. I say *our* private plane; the chartered trip was actually a parting gift from our friend Piper McLean and her movie-star father. (Everyone should have at least one friend with a movie-star parent.)

Waiting for us beside the runway was another surprise the McLeans must have arranged: a gleaming black hearse.

Meg McCaffrey and I stretched our legs on the tarmac while the ground crew sombrely removed Jason's coffin from the Cessna's storage bay. The polished mahogany box seemed to glow in the evening light. Its brass fixtures glistened red. I hated how beautiful it was. Death shouldn't be beautiful.

The crew loaded it into the hearse, then transferred our luggage to the back seat. We didn't have much: Meg's backpack and mine, my bow and quiver and ukulele, and a couple of sketchbooks and a poster-board diorama we'd inherited from Jason.

I signed some paperwork, accepted the flight crew's

condolences, then shook hands with a nice undertaker who handed me the keys to the hearse and walked away.

I stared at the keys, then at Meg McCaffrey, who was chewing the head off a Swedish Fish. The plane had been stocked with half a dozen tins of the squishy red candy. Not any more. Meg had single-handedly brought the Swedish Fish ecosystem to the brink of collapse.

'I'm supposed to drive?' I wondered. 'Is this a rental hearse? I'm pretty sure my New York junior driver's licence doesn't cover this.'

Meg shrugged. During our flight, she'd insisted on sprawling on the Cessna's sofa, so her dark pageboy haircut was flattened against the side of her head. One rhinestone-studded point of her cat-eye glasses poked through her hair like a disco shark fin.

The rest of her outfit was equally disreputable: floppy red high-tops, threadbare yellow leggings, and the well-loved knee-length green frock she'd got from Percy Jackson's mother. By *well-loved*, I mean the frock had been through so many battles, been washed and mended so many times, it looked less like a piece of clothing and more like a deflated hot-air balloon. Around Meg's waist was the pièce de résistance: her multi-pocketed gardening belt, because children of Demeter never leave home without one.

'I don't have a driver's licence,' she said, as if I needed a reminder that my life was presently being controlled by a twelve-year-old. 'I call shotgun.'

'Calling shotgun' didn't seem appropriate for a hearse. Nevertheless, Meg skipped to the passenger's side and climbed in. I got behind the wheel. Soon we were out of the

airport and cruising north on I-880 in our rented black grief-mobile.

Ah, the Bay Area . . . I'd spent some happy times here. The vast misshapen geographic bowl was jam-packed with interesting people and places. I loved the green-and-golden hills, the fog-swept coastline, the glowing lacework of bridges, and the crazy zigzag of neighbourhoods shouldered up against one another like subway passengers at rush hour.

Back in the 1950s, I played with Dizzy Gillespie at Bop City in the Fillmore. During the Summer of Love, I hosted an impromptu jam session in Golden Gate Park with the Grateful Dead. (Lovely bunch of guys, but did they *really* need those fifteen-minute-long solos?) In the 1980s, I hung out in Oakland with Stan Burrell – otherwise known as MC Hammer – as he pioneered pop rap. I can't claim credit for Stan's music, but I *did* advise him on his fashion choices. Those gold lamé parachute pants? My idea. You're welcome, fashionistas.

Most of the Bay Area brought back good memories. But as I drove, I couldn't help glancing to the northwest – towards Marin County and the dark peak of Mount Tamalpais. We gods knew the place as Mount Othrys, seat of the Titans. Even though our ancient enemies had been cast down, their palace destroyed, I could still feel the evil pull of the place – like a magnet trying to extract the iron from my now-mortal blood.

I did my best to shake the feeling. We had other problems to deal with. Besides, we were going to Camp Jupiter – friendly territory on this side of the bay. I had Meg

for backup. I was driving a hearse. What could possibly go wrong?

The Nimitz Freeway snaked through the East Bay flatlands, past warehouses and docklands, strip malls and rows of dilapidated bungalows. To our right rose downtown Oakland, its small cluster of high-rises facing off against its cooler neighbour San Francisco across the bay as if to proclaim: *We are Oakland! We exist, too!*

Meg reclined in her seat, propped her red high-tops up on the dashboard and cracked open her window.

'I like this place,' she decided.

'We just got here,' I said. 'What is it you like? The abandoned warehouses? That sign for Bo's Chicken 'N' Waffles?'

'Nature.'

'Concrete counts as nature?'

'There's trees, too. Plants flowering. Moisture in the air. The eucalyptus smells good. It's not like . . .'

She didn't need to finish her sentence. Our time in Southern California had been marked by scorching temperatures, extreme drought and raging wildfires – all thanks to the magical Burning Maze controlled by Caligula and his hate-crazed sorceress bestie, Medea. The Bay Area wasn't experiencing any of those problems. Not at the moment, anyway.

We'd killed Medea. We'd extinguished the Burning Maze. We'd freed the Erythraean Sibyl and brought relief to the mortals and withering nature spirits of Southern California.

But Caligula was still very much alive. He and his co-emperors in the Triumvirate were still intent on controlling all means of prophecy, taking over the world and writing the future in their own sadistic image. Right now, Caligula's fleet of evil luxury yachts was making its way towards San Francisco to attack Camp Jupiter. I could only imagine what sort of hellish destruction the emperor would rain down on Oakland and Bo's Chicken 'N' Waffles.

Even if we somehow managed to defeat the Triumvirate, there was still that greatest Oracle, Delphi, under the control of my old nemesis Python. How I could defeat him in my present form as a sixteen-year-old weakling, I had no idea.

But, hey. Except for that, everything was fine. The eucalyptus smelled nice.

Traffic slowed at the I-580 interchange. Apparently, California drivers didn't follow that custom of yielding to hearses out of respect. Perhaps they figured at least one of our passengers was already dead, so we weren't in a hurry.

Meg toyed with her window control, raising and lowering the glass. *Reeee. Reeee. Reeee.*

'You know how to get to Camp Jupiter?' she asked.

'Of course.'

'Cause you said that about Camp Half-Blood.'

'We got there! Eventually.'

'Frozen and half dead.'

'Look, the entrance to camp is right over there.' I waved vaguely at the Oakland Hills. 'There's a secret passage in the Caldecott Tunnel or something.'

'Or something?'

‘Well, I haven’t actually ever *driven* to Camp Jupiter,’ I admitted. ‘Usually I descend from the heavens in my glorious sun chariot. But I know the Caldecott Tunnel is the main entrance. There’s probably a sign. Perhaps a *demigods only* lane.’

Meg peered at me over the top of her glasses. ‘You’re the dumbest god ever.’ She raised her window with a final *reeee SHLOOMP!* – a sound that reminded me uncomfortably of a guillotine blade.

We turned northeast onto Highway 24. The congestion eased as the hills loomed closer. The elevated lanes soared past neighbourhoods of winding streets and tall conifers, white stucco houses clinging to the sides of grassy ravines.

A road sign promised CALDECOTT TUNNEL ENTRANCE, 2 MI. That should have comforted me. Soon, we’d pass through the borders of Camp Jupiter into a heavily guarded, magically camouflaged valley where an entire Roman legion could shield me from my worries, at least for a while.

Why, then, were the hairs on the back of my neck quivering like sea worms?

Something was wrong. It dawned on me that the uneasiness I’d felt since we landed might not be the distant threat of Caligula or the old Titan base on Mount Tamalpais, but something more immediate . . . something malevolent, and getting closer.

I glanced in the rear-view mirror. Through the back window’s gauzy curtains, I saw nothing but traffic. But then, in the polished surface of Jason’s coffin lid, I caught the reflection of movement from a dark shape outside – as if a human-size object had just flown past the hearse.



‘Oh, Meg?’ I tried to keep my voice even. ‘Do you see anything unusual behind us?’

‘Unusual like what?’

*THUMP.*

The hearse lurched as if we’d been hitched to a trailer full of scrap metal. Above my head, two foot-shaped impressions appeared in the upholstered ceiling.

‘Something just landed on the roof,’ Meg deduced.

‘Thank you, Sherlock McCaffrey! Can you get it off?’

‘Me? How?’

That was an annoyingly fair question. Meg could turn the rings on her middle fingers into wicked gold swords, but if she summoned them in close quarters, like the interior of the hearse, she a) wouldn’t have room to wield them, and b) might end up impaling me and/or herself.

*CREAK. CREAK.* The footprint impressions deepened as the thing adjusted its weight like a surfer on a board. It must have been immensely heavy to sink into the metal roof.

A whimper bubbled in my throat. My hands trembled on the steering wheel. I yearned for my bow and quiver in the back seat, but I couldn’t have used them. DWSPW, driving while shooting projectile weapons, is a big no-no, kids.

‘Maybe you can open the window,’ I said to Meg. ‘Lean out and tell it to go away.’

‘Um, no.’ (Gods, she was stubborn.) ‘What if you try to shake it off?’

Before I could explain that this was a terrible idea while travelling at fifty miles an hour on a highway, I heard a sound like a pop-top aluminium can opening – the crisp, pneumatic hiss of air through metal. A claw punctured the ceiling – a

grimy white talon the size of a drill bit. Then another. And another. And another, until the upholstery was studded with ten pointy white spikes – just the right number for two very large hands.

‘Meg?’ I yelped. ‘Could you –?’

I don’t know how I might have finished that sentence. *Protect me? Kill that thing? Check in the back to see if I have any spare undies?*

I was rudely interrupted by the creature ripping open our roof like we were a birthday present.

Staring down at me through the ragged hole was a withered, ghoulish humanoid, its blue-black hide glistening like the skin of a housefly, its eyes filmy white orbs, its bared teeth dripping saliva. Around its torso fluttered a loincloth of greasy black feathers. The smell coming off it was more putrid than any dumpster – and, believe me, I’d fallen into a few.

‘FOOD!’ it howled.

‘Kill it!’ I yelled at Meg.

‘Swerve!’ she countered.

One of the many annoying things about being incarcerated in my puny mortal body: I was Meg McCaffrey’s servant. I was bound to obey her direct commands. So when she yelled, ‘Swerve,’ I yanked the steering wheel hard to the right. The hearse handled beautifully. It careened across three lanes of traffic, barrelled straight through the guardrail and plummeted into the canyon below.



## 2

*Dude, this isn't cool*

*Dude just tried to eat my dude*

*That's my dead dude, dude*

**I LIKE FLYING CARS.** I prefer it when the car is actually capable of flight, however.

As the hearse achieved zero gravity, I had a few microseconds to appreciate the scenery below – a lovely little lake edged with eucalyptus trees and walking trails, and a small beach on the far shore, where a cluster of evening picnickers relaxed on blankets.

*Oh, good, some small part of my brain thought. Maybe we'll at least land in the water.*

Then we dropped – not towards the lake, but towards the trees.

A sound like Luciano Pavarotti's high C in *Don Giovanni* issued from my throat. My hands glued themselves to the wheel.

As we plunged into the eucalypti, the ghoul disappeared from our roof – almost as if the tree branches had purposefully swatted it away. Other branches seemed to bend around the hearse, slowing our fall, dropping us from one leafy cough-drop-scented bough to another until we hit the ground on all four wheels with a jarring *thud*. Too late to do

any good, the airbags deployed, shoving my head against the backrest.

Yellow amoebas danced in my eyes. The taste of blood stung my throat. I clawed for the door handle, squeezed my way out between the airbag and the seat, and tumbled onto a bed of cool soft grass.

'Blergh,' I said.

I heard Meg retching somewhere nearby. At least that meant she was still alive. About ten feet to my left, water lapped at the shore of the lake. Directly above me, near the top of the largest eucalyptus tree, our ghoulish blue-black friend was snarling and writhing, trapped in a cage of branches.

I struggled to sit up. My nose throbbed. My sinuses felt like they were packed with menthol rub. 'Meg?'

She staggered into view around the front of the hearse. Ring-shaped bruises were forming around her eyes – no doubt courtesy of the passenger-side airbag. Her glasses were intact but askew. 'You suck at swerving.'

'Oh my gods!' I protested. 'You *ordered* me to –' My brain faltered. 'Wait. How are we alive? Was that *you* who bent the tree branches?'

'Duh.' She flicked her hands, and her twin golden *sica* blades flashed into existence. Meg used them like ski poles to steady herself. 'They won't hold that monster much longer. Get ready.'

'What?' I yelped. 'Wait. No. Not ready!'

I pulled myself to my feet with the driver's-side door.

Across the lake, the picnickers had risen from their blankets. I suppose a hearse falling from the sky had got

their attention. My vision was blurry, but something seemed odd about the group . . . Was one of them wearing armour? Did another have goat legs?

Even if they were friendly, they were much too far away to help.

I limped to the back door and yanked it open. Jason's coffin appeared safe and secure in the rear bay. I grabbed my bow and quiver. My ukulele had vanished somewhere under the back seat. I would have to do without it.

Above, the creature howled, thrashing in its branch cage.

Meg stumbled. Her forehead was beaded with sweat. Then the ghoul broke free and hurtled downward, landing only a few yards away. I hoped the creature's legs might break on impact, but no such luck. It took a few steps, its feet punching wet craters in the grass, before it straightened and snarled, its pointy white teeth like tiny mirror-image picket fences.

'KILL AND EAT!' it screamed.

What a lovely singing voice. The ghoul could've fronted any number of Norwegian death-metal groups.

'Wait!' My voice was shrill. 'I – I know you.' I wagged my finger, as if that might crank-start my memory. Clutched in my other hand, my bow shook. The arrows rattled in my quiver. 'H-hold on, it'll come to me!'

The ghoul hesitated. I've always believed that most sentient creatures like to be recognized. Whether we are gods, people or slaving ghouls in vulture-feather loincloths, we enjoy others knowing who we are, speaking our names, appreciating that we exist.

Of course, I was just trying to buy time. I hoped Meg would catch her breath, charge the creature and slice it into putrid-ghoul pappardelle. At the moment, though, it didn't seem that she was capable of using her swords for anything but crutches. I supposed controlling gigantic trees could be tiring, but honestly, couldn't she have waited to run out of steam until *after* she killed Vulture Diaper?

Wait. Vulture Diaper . . . I took another look at the ghoul: its strange mottled blue-and-black hide, its milky eyes, its oversize mouth and tiny nostril slits. It smelled of rancid meat. It wore the feathers of a carrion eater . . .

'I *do* know you,' I realized. 'You're a *eurynomos*.'

I dare you to try saying *You're a eurynomos* when your tongue is leaden, your body is shaking from terror, and you've just been punched in the face by a hearse's airbag.

The ghoul's lips curled. Silvery strands of saliva dripped from its chin. 'YES! FOOD SAID MY NAME!'

'B-but you're a corpse-eater!' I protested. 'You're supposed to be in the Underworld, working for Hades!'

The ghoul tilted its head as if trying to remember the words *Underworld* and *Hades*. It didn't seem to like them as much as *kill* and *eat*.

'HADES GAVE ME OLD DEAD!' it shouted. 'THE MASTER GIVES ME FRESH!'

'The master?'

'THE MASTER!'

I really wished Vulture Diaper wouldn't scream. It didn't have any visible ears, so perhaps it had poor volume control. Or maybe it just wanted to spray that gross saliva over as large a radius as possible.

‘If you mean Caligula,’ I ventured, ‘I’m sure he’s made you all sorts of promises, but I can tell you, Caligula is *not* –’

‘HA! STUPID FOOD! CALIGULA IS NOT THE MASTER!’

‘Not the master?’

‘NOT THE MASTER!’

‘MEG!’ I shouted. Ugh. Now *I* was doing it.

‘Yeah?’ Meg wheezed. She looked fierce and warlike as she granny-walked towards me with her sword-crutches. ‘Gimme. Minute.’

It was clear she would not be taking the lead in this particular fight. If I let Vulture Diaper anywhere near her, it would kill her, and I found that idea ninety-five percent unacceptable.

‘Well, eurynomos,’ I said, ‘whoever your master is, you’re not killing and eating anyone today!’

I whipped an arrow from my quiver. I nocked it in my bow and took aim, as I had done literally millions of times before – but it wasn’t quite as impressive with my hands shaking and my knees wobbling.

Why do mortals tremble when they’re scared, anyway? It seems so counterproductive. If *I* had created humans, I would have given them steely determination and super-human strength during moments of terror.

The ghoul hissed, spraying more spit.

‘SOON THE MASTER’S ARMIES WILL RISE AGAIN!’ it bellowed. ‘WE WILL FINISH THE JOB! I WILL SHRED FOOD TO THE BONE, AND FOOD WILL JOIN US!’

*Food will join us?* My stomach experienced a sudden loss of cabin pressure. I remembered why Hades loved these eurynomoi so much. The slightest cut from their claws caused a wasting disease in mortals. And when those mortals died, they rose again as what the Greeks called *vrykolakai* – or, in TV parlance, zombies.

That wasn't the worst of it. If a eurynomos managed to devour the flesh from a corpse, right down to the bones, that skeleton would reanimate as the fiercest, toughest kind of undead warrior. Many of them served as Hades's elite palace guards, which was a job I did *not* want to apply for.

'Meg?' I kept my arrow trained on the ghoul's chest. 'Back away. Do not let this thing scratch you.'

'But –'

'Please,' I begged. 'For once, trust me.'

Vulture Diaper growled. 'FOOD TALKS TOO MUCH! HUNGRY!'

It charged me.

I shot.

The arrow found its mark – the middle of the ghoul's chest – but it bounced off like a rubber mallet against metal. The Celestial bronze point must have hurt, at least. The ghoul yelped and stopped in its tracks, a steaming, puckered wound on its sternum. But the monster was still very much alive. Perhaps if I managed twenty or thirty shots at that exact same spot, I could do some real damage.

With trembling hands, I nocked another arrow. 'Th-that was just a warning!' I bluffed. 'The next one will kill!'

Vulture Diaper made a gurgling noise deep in its throat.



I hoped it was a delayed death rattle. Then I realized it was only laughing. 'WANT ME TO EAT DIFFERENT FOOD FIRST? SAVE YOU FOR DESSERT?'

It uncurled its claws, gesturing towards the hearse.

I didn't understand. I refused to understand. Did it want to eat the airbags? The upholstery?

Meg got it before I did. She screamed in rage.

The creature was an eater of the dead. We were driving a hearse.

'NO!' Meg shouted. 'Leave him alone!'

She lumbered forward, raising her swords, but she was in no shape to face the ghoul. I shouldered her aside, putting myself between her and the eurynomos, and fired my arrows again and again.

They sparked off the monster's blue-black hide, leaving steaming, annoyingly non-lethal wounds. Vulture Diaper staggered towards me, snarling in pain, its body twitching from the impact of each hit.

It was five feet away.

Two feet away, its claws splayed to shred my face.

Somewhere behind me, a female voice shouted, 'HEY!'

The sound distracted Vulture Diaper just long enough for me to fall courageously on my butt. I scrambled away from the ghoul's claws.

Vulture Diaper blinked, confused by its new audience. About ten feet away, a ragtag assortment of fauns and dryads, perhaps a dozen in total, were all attempting to hide behind one gangly pink-haired young woman in Roman legionnaire armour.

The girl fumbled with some sort of projectile weapon.

Oh, dear. A *manubalista*. A Roman heavy crossbow. Those things were *awful*. Slow. Powerful. Notoriously unreliable. The bolt was set. She cranked the handle, her hands shaking as badly as mine.

Meanwhile, to my left, Meg groaned in the grass, trying to get back on her feet. 'You *pushed* me,' she complained, by which I'm sure she meant, *Thank you, Apollo, for saving my life*.

The pink-haired girl raised her *manubalista*. With her long, wobbly legs, she reminded me of a baby giraffe. 'G-get away from them,' she ordered the ghoul.

Vulture Diaper treated her to its trademark hissing and spitting. 'MORE FOOD! YOU WILL ALL JOIN THE KING'S DEAD!'

'Dude.' One of the fauns nervously scratched his belly under his PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BERKELEY T-shirt. 'That's not cool.'

'Not cool,' several of his friends echoed.

'YOU CANNOT OPPOSE ME, ROMAN!' the ghoul snarled. 'I HAVE ALREADY TASTED THE FLESH OF YOUR COMRADES! AT THE BLOOD MOON, YOU WILL JOIN THEM –'

THWUNK.

An Imperial gold crossbow bolt materialized in the centre of Vulture Diaper's chest. The ghoul's milky eyes widened in surprise. The Roman legionnaire looked just as stunned.

'Dude, you hit it,' said one of the fauns, as if this offended his sensibilities.

The ghoul crumbled into dust and vulture feathers. The bolt clunked to the ground.

Meg limped to my side. 'See? *That's* how you're supposed to kill it.'

'Oh, shut up,' I grumbled.

We faced our unlikely saviour.

The pink-haired girl frowned at the pile of dust, her chin quivering as if she might cry. She muttered, 'I *hate* those things.'

'Y-you've fought them before?' I asked.

She looked at me like this was an insultingly stupid question.

One of the fauns nudged her. 'Lavinia, dude, ask who these guys are.'

'Um, right.' Lavinia cleared her throat. 'Who are you?'

I struggled to my feet, trying to regain some composure. 'I am Apollo. This is Meg. Thank you for saving us.'

Lavinia stared. 'Apollo, as in –'

'It's a long story. We're transporting the body of our friend, Jason Grace, to Camp Jupiter for burial. Can you help us?'

Lavinia's mouth hung open. 'Jason Grace . . . is dead?'

Before I could answer, from somewhere across Highway 24 came a wail of rage and anguish.

'Um, hey,' said one of the fauns, 'don't those ghoulish things usually hunt in pairs?'

Lavinia gulped. 'Yeah. Let's get you guys to camp. Then we can talk about –' she gestured uneasily at the hearse – 'who is dead, and why.'



### 3

*I cannot chew gum  
And run with a coffin at  
The same time. Sue me.*

**HOW MANY NATURE SPIRITS** does it take to carry a coffin?

The answer is unknowable, since all the dryads and fauns except one scattered into the trees as soon as they realized work was involved. The last faun would have deserted us, too, but Lavinia grabbed his wrist.

‘Oh, no, you don’t, Don.’

Behind his round rainbow-tinted glasses, Don the faun’s eyes looked panicky. His goatee twitched – a facial tic that made me nostalgic for Grover the satyr.

(In case you’re wondering, fauns and satyrs are virtually the same. Fauns are simply the Roman version, and they’re not quite as good at . . . well, anything, really.)

‘Hey, I’d love to help,’ Don said. ‘It’s just I remembered this appointment –’

‘Fauns don’t make appointments,’ Lavinia said.

‘I double-parked my car –’

‘You don’t have a car.’

‘I need to feed my dog –’

‘Don!’ Lavinia snapped. ‘You *owe* me.’

‘Okay, okay.’ Don tugged his wrist free and rubbed it, his expression aggrieved. ‘Look, just because I said Poison Oak *might* be at the picnic doesn’t mean, you know, I *promised* she would be.’

Lavinia’s face turned terracotta red. ‘That’s not what I meant! I’ve covered for you, like, a thousand times. Now you need to help me with *this*.’

She gestured vaguely at me, the hearse, the world in general. I wondered if Lavinia was new to Camp Jupiter. She seemed uncomfortable in her legionnaire armour. She kept shrugging her shoulders, bending her knees, tugging at the silver Star of David pendant that hung from her long, slender neck. Her soft brown eyes and tuft of pink hair only accentuated my first impression of her – a baby giraffe that had wobbled away from her mother for the first time and was now examining the savannah as if thinking, *Why am I here?*

Meg stumbled up next to me. She grabbed my quiver for balance, garrotting me with its strap in the process. ‘Who’s Poison Oak?’

‘Meg,’ I chided, ‘that’s none of our business. But if I had to guess, I’d say Poison Oak is a dryad whom Lavinia here is interested in, just like you were interested in Joshua back at Palm Springs.’

Meg barked, ‘I was *not* interested –’

Lavinia chorused, ‘I am *not* interested –’

Both girls fell silent, scowling at each other.

‘Besides,’ Meg said, ‘isn’t Poison Oak . . . like, poisonous?’

Lavinia splayed her fingers to the sky as if thinking, *Not*

*that question again.* ‘Poison Oak is gorgeous! Which is not to say I’d definitely go out with her –’

Don snorted. ‘Whatever, dude.’

Lavinia glared crossbow bolts at the faun. ‘But I’d *think* about it – if there was chemistry or whatever. Which is why I was willing to sneak away from my patrol for this *picnic*, where Don assured me –’

‘Whoa, hey!’ Don laughed nervously. ‘Aren’t we supposed to be getting these guys to camp? How about that hearse? Does it still run?’

I take back what I said about fauns not being good at anything. Don was quite adept at changing the subject.

Upon closer inspection, I saw how badly damaged the hearse was. Aside from numerous eucalyptus-scented dents and scratches, the front end had crumpled going through the guardrail. It now resembled Flaco Jiménez’s accordion after I took a baseball bat to it. (Sorry, Flaco, but you played so well I got jealous, and the accordion had to die.)

‘We can carry the coffin,’ Lavinia suggested. ‘The four of us.’

Another angry screech cut through the evening air. It sounded closer this time – somewhere just north of the highway.

‘We’ll never make it,’ I said, ‘not climbing all the way back up to the Caldecott Tunnel.’

‘There’s another way,’ Lavinia said. ‘Secret entrance to camp. A lot closer.’

‘I like close,’ Meg said.

‘Thing is,’ said Lavinia, ‘I’m supposed to be on guard

duty right now. My shift is about to end. I'm not sure how long my partner can cover for me. So when we get to the camp, let me do the talking about where and how we met.'

Don shuddered. 'If anyone finds out Lavinia skipped sentry duty again –'

'Again?' I asked.

'Shut up, Don,' Lavinia said.

On one hand, Lavinia's troubles seemed trivial compared to, say, dying and getting eaten by a ghoul. On the other hand, I knew that Roman-legion punishments could be harsh. They often involved whips, chains and rabid live animals, much like an Ozzy Osbourne concert circa 1980.

'You must really like this Poison Oak,' I decided.

Lavinia grunted. She scooped up her manubalista bolt and shook it at me threateningly. 'I help you, you help me. That's the deal.'

Meg spoke for me: 'Deal. How fast can we run with a coffin?'

Not very fast, as it turned out.

After grabbing the rest of our things from the hearse, Meg and I took the back end of Jason's coffin. Lavinia and Don took the front. We did a clumsy pallbearer jog along the shoreline, me glancing nervously at the treetops, hoping no more ghouls would rain from the sky.

Lavinia promised us that the secret entrance was just across the lake. The problem was, it was *across the lake*, which meant that, not being able to pall-bear on water, we had to lug Jason's casket roughly a quarter of a mile around the shore.

'Oh, come on,' Lavinia said when I complained. 'We ran over here from the beach to help you guys. The least you can do is run back with us.'

'Yes,' I said, 'but this coffin is heavy.'

'I'm with him,' Don agreed.

Lavinia snorted. 'You guys should try marching twenty miles in full legionnaire gear.'

'No, thanks,' I muttered.

Meg said nothing. Despite her drained complexion and laboured breathing, she shouldered her side of the coffin without complaint – probably just to make me feel bad.

Finally we reached the picnic beach. A sign at the trailhead read:

LAKE TEMESCAL  
SWIM AT YOUR OWN RISK

Typical of mortals: they warn you about drowning, but not about flesh-devouring ghouls.

Lavinia marched us to a small stone building that offered restrooms and a changing area. On the exterior back wall, half hidden behind blackberry bushes, stood a nondescript metal door, which Lavinia kicked open. Inside, a concrete shaft sloped down into the darkness.

'I suppose the mortals don't know about this,' I guessed.

Don giggled. 'Nah, dude, they think it's a generator room or something. Even most of the legionnaires don't know about it. Only the cool ones like Lavinia.'

'You're not getting out of helping, Don,' said Lavinia. 'Let's set down the coffin for a second.'



I said a silent prayer of thanks. My shoulders ached. My back was slick with sweat. I was reminded of the time Hera made me lug a solid-gold throne around her Olympian living room until she found exactly the right spot for it. Ugh, that goddess.

Lavinia pulled a pack of bubblegum from the pocket of her jeans. She stuffed three pieces in her mouth, then offered some to me and Meg.

‘No, thanks,’ I said.

‘Sure,’ said Meg.

‘Sure!’ said Don.

Lavinia jerked the bubblegum pack out of his reach. ‘Don, you know bubblegum doesn’t agree with you. Last time, you were hugging the toilet for days.’

Don pouted. ‘But it *tastes* good.’

Lavinia peered into the tunnel, her jaw working furiously at the gum. ‘It’s too narrow to carry the coffin with four people. I’ll lead the way. Don, you and Apollo –’ she frowned as if she still couldn’t believe that was my name – ‘each take one end.’

‘Just the two of us?’ I protested.

‘What he said!’ Don agreed.

‘Just carry it like a sofa,’ said Lavinia, as if that was supposed to mean something to me. ‘And you – what’s your name? Peg?’

‘Meg,’ said Meg.

‘Is there anything you don’t need to bring?’ asked Lavinia. ‘Like . . . that poster-board thing under your arm – is that a school project?’

Meg must have been incredibly tired, because she didn’t

scowl or hit Lavinia or cause geraniums to grow out of her ears. She just turned sideways, shielding Jason's diorama with her body. 'No. This is important.'

'Okay.' Lavinia scratched her eyebrow, which, like her hair, was frosted pink. 'Just stay at the back, I guess. Guard our retreat. This door can't be locked, which means –'

As if on cue, from the far side of the lake came the loudest howl yet, filled with rage, as if the ghoul had discovered the dust and vulture diaper of its fallen comrade.

'Let's go!' Lavinia said.

I began to revise my impression of our pink-haired friend. For a skittish baby giraffe, she could be *very* bossy.

We descended single-file into the passage, me carrying the back of the coffin, Don the front.

Lavinia's gum scented the stale air, so the tunnel smelled like mouldy candy floss. Every time Lavinia or Meg popped a bubble, I flinched. My fingers quickly began to ache from the weight of the casket.

'How much further?' I asked.

'We're barely inside the tunnel,' Lavinia said.

'So . . . not far, then?'

'Maybe a quarter of a mile.'

I tried for a grunt of manly endurance. It came out as more of a snivel.

'Guys,' Meg said behind me, 'we need to move faster.'

'You see something?' Don asked.

'Not yet,' Meg said. 'Just a feeling.'

Feelings. I hated those.

Our weapons provided the only light. The gold fittings of the manubalista slung across Lavinia's back cast a ghostly

halo around her pink hair. The glow of Meg's swords threw our elongated shadows across either wall, so we seemed to be walking in the midst of a spectral crowd. Whenever Don looked over his shoulder, his rainbow-tinted lenses seemed to float in the dark like patches of oil on water.

My hands and forearms burned from strain, but Don didn't seem to be having any trouble. I was determined not to weep for mercy before the faun did.

The path widened and levelled out. I chose to take that as a good sign, though neither Meg nor Lavinia offered to help carry the casket.

Finally, my hands couldn't take any more. 'Stop.'

Don and I managed to set down Jason's coffin a moment before I would've dropped it. Deep red gouges marred my fingers. Blisters were beginning to form on my palms. I felt like I'd just played a nine-hour set of duelling jazz guitar with Pat Metheny, using a six-hundred-pound iron Fender Stratocaster.

'Ow,' I muttered, because I was once the god of poetry and have great descriptive powers.

'We can't rest long,' Lavinia warned. 'My sentry shift must have ended by now. My partner's probably wondering where I am.'

I almost wanted to laugh. I'd forgotten we were supposed to be worried about Lavinia playing hooky along with all our other problems. 'Will your partner report you?'

Lavinia stared into the dark. 'Not unless she has to. She's my centurion, but she's cool.'

'Your *centurion* gave you permission to sneak off?' I asked.

'Not exactly.' Lavinia tugged at her Star of David pendant. 'She just kinda turned a blind eye, you know? She gets it.'

Don chuckled. 'You mean having a crush on someone?'

'No!' Lavinia said. 'Like, just *standing* on guard duty for five hours straight. Ugh. I can't do it! Especially after all that's happened recently.'

I considered the way Lavinia fiddled with her necklace, viciously chewed her bubblegum, wobbled constantly about on her gangly legs. Most demigods have some form of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. They are hardwired to be in constant movement, jumping from battle to battle. But Lavinia definitely put the *H* in *ADHD*.

'When you say "all that's happened recently . . ."' I prompted, but before I could finish the question, Don's posture stiffened. His nose and goatee quivered. I'd spent enough time in the Labyrinth with Grover Underwood to know what that meant.

'What do you smell?' I demanded.

'Not sure . . .' He sniffed. 'It's close. And funky.'

'Oh.' I blushed. 'I did shower this morning, but when I exert myself, this mortal body sweats –'

'It's not that. Listen!'

Meg faced the direction we'd come from. She raised her swords and waited. Lavinia unslung her manubalista and peered into the shadows ahead of us.

Finally, over the pounding of my own heartbeat, I heard the clink of metal and the echo of footsteps on stone. Someone was running towards us.

'They're coming,' Meg said.

‘No, wait,’ said Lavinia. ‘It’s her!’

I got the feeling Meg and Lavinia were talking about two different things, and I wasn’t sure I liked either one.

‘Her who?’ I demanded.

‘Them where?’ Don squeaked.

Lavinia raised her hand and shouted, ‘I’m here!’

‘Shhhh!’ Meg said, still facing the way we’d come. ‘Lavinia, what are you *doing*?’

Then, from the direction of Camp Jupiter, a young woman jogged into our circle of light.

She was about Lavinia’s age, maybe fourteen or fifteen, with dark skin and amber eyes. Curly brown hair fell around her shoulders. Her legionnaire greaves and breastplate glinted over jeans and a purple T-shirt. Affixed to her breastplate was the insignia of a centurion, and strapped to her side was a *spatha* – a cavalry sword. Ah, yes . . . I recognized her from the crew of the *Argo II*.

‘Hazel Levesque,’ I said. ‘Thank the gods.’

Hazel stopped in her tracks, no doubt wondering who I was, how I knew her, and why I was grinning like a fool. She glanced at Don, then Meg, then the coffin. ‘Lavinia, what’s going on?’

‘Guys,’ Meg interrupted. ‘We have company.’

She did not mean Hazel. Behind us, at the edge of the light from Meg’s swords, a dark form prowled, its blue-black skin glistening, its teeth dripping saliva. Then another, identical ghoul emerged from the gloom behind it.

Just our luck. The eurynomoi were having a *kill one, get two free* special.



## 4

*Ukulele song?*

*No need to remove my guts*

*A simple 'no' works*

**'OH,' DON SAID IN A SMALL VOICE.** *'That's what smells.'*

'I thought you said they travel in pairs,' I complained.

'Or threes,' the faun whimpered. 'Sometimes in threes.'

The eurynomoi snarled, crouching just out of reach of Meg's blades. Behind me, Lavinia hand-cranked her manubalista – *click, click, click* – but the weapon was so slow to prime that she wouldn't be ready to fire until sometime next Thursday. Hazel's spatha rasped as she slid the blade from its scabbard. That, too, wasn't a great weapon for fighting at close quarters.

Meg seemed unsure whether she should charge, stand her ground or drop from exhaustion. Bless her stubborn little heart, she still had Jason's diorama wedged under her arm, which would not help her in battle.

I fumbled for a weapon and came up with my ukulele. Why not? It was only slightly more ridiculous than a spatha or a manubalista.

My nose might have been busted from the hearse's airbag, but my sense of smell was sadly unaffected. The

combination of ghoulish stench with the scent of bubblegum made my nostrils burn and my eyes water.

‘FOOD,’ said the first ghoul.

‘FOOD!’ agreed the second.

They sounded delighted, as if we were favourite meals they hadn’t been served in ages.

Hazel spoke, calm and steady. ‘Guys, we fought these things in the battle. Don’t let them scratch you.’

The way she said *the battle* made it sound like there could only be one horrible event to which she might be referring. I flashed back to what Leo Valdez had told us in Los Angeles – that Camp Jupiter had suffered major damage, lost good people in their last fight. I was beginning to appreciate how bad it must have been.

‘No scratches,’ I agreed. ‘Meg, hold them at bay. I’m going to try a song.’

My idea was simple: strum a sleepy tune, lull the creatures into a stupor, then kill them in a leisurely, civilized fashion.

I underestimated the eurytomoi’s hatred of ukuleles. As soon as I announced my intentions, they howled and charged.

I shuffled backwards, sitting down hard on Jason’s coffin. Don shrieked and cowered. Lavinia kept cranking her manubalista. Hazel yelled, ‘Make a hole!’ Which in the moment made no sense to me.

Meg burst into action, slicing an arm off one ghoul, swiping at the legs of the other, but her movements were sluggish and, with the diorama under one arm, she could only use a single sword effectively. If the ghouls had been interested in killing her, she would’ve been overwhelmed.

Instead, they shoved past her, intent on stopping me before I could strum a chord.

*Everyone is a music critic.*

'FOOD!' screamed the one-armed ghoul, lunging at me with its five remaining claws.

I tried to suck in my gut. I really did.

But, oh, cursed flab! If I had been in my godly form, the ghoul's claws never would have connected. My hammered-bronze abs would have scoffed at the monster's attempt to reach them. Alas, Lester's body failed me yet again.

The eurynomos raked its hand across my midsection, just below my ukulele. The tip of its middle finger – barely, just barely – found flesh. Its claw sliced through my shirt and across my belly like a dull razor.

I tumbled sideways off Jason's coffin, warm blood trickling into the waistline of my trousers.

Hazel Levesque yelled in defiance. She vaulted over the coffin and drove her spatha straight through the eurynomos's clavicle, creating the world's first ghoul-on-a-stick.

The eurynomos screamed and lurched backwards, ripping the spatha from Hazel's grip. The wound smoked where the Imperial gold blade had entered. Then – there is no delicate way to put it – the ghoul burst into steaming, crumbling chunks of ash. The spatha clanged to the stone floor.

The second ghoul had stopped to face Meg, as one does when one has been slashed across the thighs by an annoying twelve-year-old, but when its comrade cried out it spun to face us. This gave Meg an opening, but, instead of striking, she pushed past the monster and ran straight to my side, her blades retracting back into her rings.



‘You okay?’ she demanded. ‘Oh, NO. You’re bleeding. You *said* don’t get scratched. You *got* scratched!’

I wasn’t sure whether to be touched by her concern or annoyed by her tone. ‘I didn’t *plan* it, Meg.’

‘Guys!’ yelled Lavinia.

The ghoul stepped forward, positioning itself between Hazel and her fallen spatha. Don continued to cower like a champ. Lavinia’s manubalista remained only half primed. Meg and I were now wedged side by side next to Jason’s coffin.

That left Hazel, empty-handed, as the only obstacle between the eurynomos and a five-course meal.

The creature hissed, ‘You cannot win.’

Its voice changed. Its tone became deeper, its volume modulated. ‘You will join your comrades in my tomb.’

Between my throbbing head and my aching gut, I had trouble following the words, but Hazel seemed to understand.

‘Who are you?’ she demanded. ‘How about you stop hiding behind your creatures and show yourself!’

The eurynomos blinked. Its eyes turned from milky white to a glowing purple, like iodine flames. ‘Hazel Levesque. You of all people should understand the fragile boundary between life and death. But don’t be afraid. I will save a special place for you at my side, along with your beloved Frank. You will make glorious skeletons.’

Hazel clenched her fists. When she glanced back at us, her expression was almost as intimidating as the ghoul’s. ‘Back up,’ she warned us. ‘As far as you can.’

Meg half dragged me to the front end of the coffin. My

gut felt like it had been stitched with a molten-hot zip. Lavinia grabbed Don by his T-shirt collar and pulled him to a safer cowering spot.

The ghoul chuckled. 'How will you defeat me, Hazel? With this?' It kicked the spatha further away behind him. 'I have summoned more undead. They will be here soon.'

Despite my pain, I struggled to get up. I couldn't leave Hazel by herself. But Lavinia put a hand on my shoulder.

'Wait,' she murmured. 'Hazel's got this.'

That seemed ridiculously optimistic, but, to my shame, I stayed put. More warm blood soaked into my underwear. At least I hoped it was blood.

The eurynomos wiped drool from its mouth with one clawed finger. 'Unless you intend to run and abandon that lovely coffin, you might as well surrender. We are strong underground, daughter of Pluto. Too strong for you.'

'Oh?' Hazel's voice remained steady, almost conversational. 'Strong underground. That's good to know.'

The tunnel shook. Cracks appeared in the walls, jagged fissures branching up the stone. Beneath the ghoul's feet, a column of white quartz erupted, skewering the monster against the ceiling and reducing it to a cloud of vulture-feather confetti.

Hazel faced us as if nothing remarkable had happened. 'Don, Lavinia, get this . . .' She looked uneasily at the coffin. 'Get this out of here. You –' she pointed at Meg – 'help your friend, please. We have healers at camp who can deal with that ghoul scratch.'

'Wait!' I said. 'Wh-what just happened? Its voice –'

'I've seen that happen before with a ghoul,' Hazel said

grimly. 'I'll explain later. Right now, get going. I'll follow in a sec.'

I started to protest, but Hazel stopped me with a shake of her head. 'I'm just going to pick up my sword and make sure no more of those things can follow us. Go!'

Rubble trickled from new cracks in the ceiling. Perhaps leaving wasn't such a bad idea.

Leaning on Meg, I managed to stagger further down the tunnel. Lavinia and Don lugged Jason's coffin. I was in so much pain I didn't even have the energy to yell at Lavinia to carry it like a couch.

We'd gone perhaps fifty feet when the tunnel behind us rumbled even more strongly than before. I looked back just in time to get hit in the face by a billowing cloud of debris.

'Hazel?' Lavinia called into the swirling dust.

A heartbeat later, Hazel Levesque emerged, coated from head to toe in glittering powdered quartz. Her sword glowed in her hand.

'I'm fine,' she announced. 'But nobody's going to be sneaking out that way any more. Now –' she pointed at the coffin – 'somebody want to tell me who's in there?'

I really didn't.

Not after I'd seen how Hazel skewered her enemies.

Still . . . I owed it to Jason. Hazel had been his friend.

I steeled my nerves, opened my mouth to speak, and was beaten to the punchline by Hazel herself.

'It's Jason,' she said, as if the information had been whispered in her ear. 'Oh, gods.'

She ran to the coffin. She fell to her knees and threw her arms across the lid. She let out a single devastated sob. Then she lowered her head and shivered in silence. Strands of her hair sketched through the quartz dust on the polished wood surface, leaving squiggly lines like the readings of a seismograph.

Without looking up, she murmured, 'I had nightmares. A boat. A man on a horse. A . . . a spear. How did it happen?'

I did my best to explain. I told her about my fall into the mortal world, my adventures with Meg, our fight aboard Caligula's yacht, and how Jason had died saving us. Recounting the story brought back all the pain and terror. I remembered the sharp ozone smell of the wind spirits swirling around Meg and Jason, the bite of zip-tie handcuffs around my wrists, Caligula's pitiless, delighted boast: *You don't walk away from me alive!*

It was all so awful, I momentarily forgot about the agonizing cut across my belly.

Lavinia stared at the floor. Meg did her best to staunch my bleeding with one of the extra dresses from her backpack. Don watched the ceiling, where a new crack was zigzagging over our heads.

'Hate to interrupt,' said the faun, 'but maybe we should continue this outside?'

Hazel pressed her fingers against the coffin lid. 'I'm so angry with you. Doing this to Piper. To us. Not letting us be there for you. What were you thinking?'

It took me a moment to realize she wasn't talking to us. She was speaking to Jason.

Slowly, she stood. Her mouth trembled. She straightened,

as if summoning internal columns of quartz to brace her skeletal system.

‘Let me carry one side,’ she said. ‘Let’s bring him home.’

We trudged along in silence, the sorriest pallbearers ever. All of us were covered in dust and monster ash. At the front of the coffin, Lavinia squirmed in her armour, occasionally glancing over at Hazel, who walked with her eyes straight ahead. She didn’t even seem to notice the random vulture feather fluttering from her shirtsleeve.

Meg and Don carried the back of the casket. Meg’s eyes were bruising up nicely from the car crash, making her look like a large, badly dressed raccoon. Don kept twitching, tilting his head to the left as if he wanted to hear what his shoulder was saying.

I stumbled after them, Meg’s spare dress pressed against my gut. The bleeding seemed to have stopped, but the cut still burned and needled. I hoped Hazel was right about her healers being able to fix me. I did not relish the idea of becoming an extra for *The Walking Dead*.

Hazel’s calmness made me uneasy. I would almost have preferred it if she’d screamed and thrown things at me. Her misery was like the cold gravity of a mountain. You could stand next to that mountain and close your eyes, and, even if you couldn’t see it or hear it, you *knew* it was there – unspeakably heavy and powerful, a geological force so ancient it made even immortal gods feel like gnats. I feared what would happen if Hazel’s emotions turned volcanically active.

At last we emerged into the open air. We stood on a rock promontory about halfway up a hillside, with the valley

of New Rome spread out below. In the twilight, the hills had turned violet. The cool breeze smelled of wood smoke and lilacs.

'Wow,' said Meg, taking in the view.

Just as I remembered, the Little Tiber wended its way across the valley floor, making a glittering curlicue that emptied into a blue lake where the camp's belly button might have been. On the north shore of that lake rose New Rome itself, a smaller version of the original imperial city.

From what Leo had said about the recent battle, I'd expected to see the place levelled. At this distance, though, in the waning light, everything looked normal – the gleaming white buildings with red-tiled roofs, the domed Senate House, the Circus Maximus and the Colosseum.

The lake's south shore was the site of Temple Hill, with its chaotic assortment of shrines and monuments. On the summit, overshadowing everything else, was my father's impressively ego-tastic Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. If possible, his Roman incarnation, Jupiter, was even more insufferable than his original Greek personality of Zeus. (And, yes, we gods have multiple personalities, because you mortals keep changing your minds about what we're like. It's exasperating.)

In the past, I'd always hated looking at Temple Hill, because my shrine wasn't the largest. Obviously, it *should* have been the largest. Now I hated looking at the place for a different reason. All I could think of was the diorama Meg was carrying, and the sketchbooks in her backpack – the designs for Temple Hill as Jason Grace had reimagined it. Compared to Jason's poster-board display, with its

handwritten notes and glued-on Monopoly tokens, the real Temple Hill seemed an unworthy tribute to the gods. It could never mean as much as Jason's goodness, his fervent desire to honour *every* god and leave no one out.

I forced myself to look away.

Directly below, about half a mile from our ledge, stood Camp Jupiter itself. With its picketed walls, watchtowers and trenches, its neat rows of barracks lining two principal streets, it could have been any Roman legion camp, anywhere in the old empire, at any time during Rome's many centuries of rule. Romans were so consistent about how they built their forts – whether they meant to stay there for a night or a decade – that, if you knew one camp, you knew them all. You could wake up in the dead of night, stumble around in total darkness, and know exactly where everything was. Of course, when I visited Roman camps, I usually spent all my time in the commander's tent, lounging and eating grapes like I used to do with Commodus . . . Oh, gods, why was I torturing myself with such thoughts?

'Okay.' Hazel's voice shook me out of my reverie. 'When we get to camp, here's the story: Lavinia, you went to Temescal on my orders, because you saw the hearse go over the railing. I stayed on duty until the next shift arrived, then I rushed down to help you, because I thought you might be in danger. We fought the ghouls, saved these guys, et cetera. Got it?'

'So, about that . . . ' Don interrupted, 'I'm sure you guys can manage from here, right? Seeing as you might get in trouble or whatever. I'll just be slipping off –'

Lavinia gave him a hard stare.

‘Or I can stick around,’ he said hastily. ‘You know, happy to help.’

Hazel shifted her grip on the coffin’s handle. ‘Remember, we’re an honour guard. No matter how bedraggled we look, we have a duty. We’re bringing home a fallen comrade. Understood?’

‘Yes, Centurion,’ Lavinia said sheepishly. ‘And, Hazel? Thanks.’

Hazel winced, as if regretting her soft heart. ‘Once we get to the *principia* –’ her eyes settled on me – ‘our visiting god can explain to the leadership what happened to Jason Grace.’





## 5

*Hi, everybody,  
Here's a little tune I call  
'All the Ways I Suck'*

**THE LEGION SENTRIES SPOTTED US** from a long way off, as legion sentries are supposed to do.

By the time our small band arrived at the fort's main gates, a crowd had gathered. Demigods lined either side of the street and watched in curious silence as we carried Jason's coffin through the camp. No one questioned us. No one tried to stop us. The weight of all those eyes was oppressive.

Hazel led us straight down the Via Praetoria.

Some legionnaires stood on the porches of their barracks – their half-polished armour temporarily forgotten, guitars set aside, card games unfinished. Glowing purple *Lares*, the house gods of the legion, milled about, drifting through walls or people with little regard for personal space. Giant eagles whirled overhead, eyeing us like potentially tasty rodents.

I began to realize how *sparse* the crowd was. The camp seemed . . . not deserted, exactly, but only half full. A few young heroes walked on crutches. Others had arms in casts. Perhaps some of them were just in their barracks, or in the sick bay, or on an extended march, but I didn't like the

haunted, grief-stricken expressions of the legionnaires who watched us.

I remembered the gloating words of the eurynomos at Lake Temescal: *I HAVE ALREADY TASTED THE FLESH OF YOUR COMRADES! AT THE BLOOD MOON, YOU WILL JOIN THEM.*

I wasn't sure what a blood moon was. Lunar things were more my sister's department. But I didn't like the sound of it. I'd had quite enough of blood. From the looks of the legionnaires, so had they.

Then I thought about something else the ghoul had said: *YOU WILL ALL JOIN THE KING'S DEAD.* I thought about the words of the prophecy we'd received in the Burning Maze, and a troubling realization started to form in my head. I did my best to suppress it. I'd already had my full day's quota of terror.

We passed the storefronts of merchants who were allowed to operate inside the fort's walls – only the most essential services, like a chariot dealership, an armoury, a gladiator supply store and a coffee bar. In front of the coffee place stood a two-headed barista, glowering at us with both faces, his green apron stained with latte foam.

Finally we reached the main intersection, where two roads came to a T in front of the principia. On the steps of the gleaming white headquarters building, the legion's praetors waited for us.

I almost didn't recognize Frank Zhang. The first time I'd seen him, back when I was a god and he was a legion newbie, Frank had been a baby-faced, heavy-set boy with dark flat-top hair and an adorable fixation on archery. He'd

had this idea that I might be his father. He prayed to me all the time. Honestly, he was so cute I would've been happy to adopt him but, alas, he was one of Mars's.

The second time I saw Frank, during his voyage on the *Argo II*, he'd had a growth spurt or a magical testosterone injection or something. He'd grown taller, stronger, more imposing – though still in an adorable, cuddly, grizzly-bear sort of way.

Now, as I'd often noticed happening with young men still coming into their own, Frank's weight had begun to catch up with his growth spurt. He was once again a big, girthy guy with baby cheeks you just wanted to pinch, only now he was larger and more muscular. He'd apparently fallen out of bed and scrambled to meet us, despite it being just early evening. His hair stuck up on top like a breaking wave. One of his jean cuffs was tucked into his sock. His top was a yellow silk nightshirt decorated with eagles and bears – a fashion statement he was doing his best to cover with his purple praetor's cloak.

One thing that hadn't changed was his bearing – that slightly awkward stance, that faint perplexed frown, as if he were constantly thinking, *Am I really supposed to be here?*

That feeling was understandable. Frank had climbed the ranks from *probatio* to centurion to praetor in record time. Not since Julius Caesar had a Roman officer risen so rapidly and brightly. That wasn't a comparison I would have shared with Frank, though, given what had happened to my man Julius.

My gaze drifted to the young woman at Frank's side: Praetor Reyna Avila Ramírez-Arellano . . . and I remembered.

A bowling ball of panic formed in my heart and rolled into my lower intestines. It was a good thing I wasn't carrying Jason's coffin or I would have dropped it.

How can I explain this to you?

Have you ever had an experience so painful or embarrassing you *literally* forgot it happened? Your mind dissociates, scuttles away from the incident yelling *Nope, nope, nope*, and refuses to acknowledge the memory ever again?

That was me with Reyna Avila Ramírez-Arellano.

Oh, yes, I knew who she was. I was familiar with her name and reputation. I was fully aware we were destined to run into her at Camp Jupiter. The prophecy we'd deciphered in the Burning Maze had told me as much.

But my fuzzy mortal brain had completely refused to make the most important connection: that this Reyna was *that* Reyna, the one whose face I had been shown long ago by a certain annoying goddess of love.

*That's her!* my brain screamed at me, as I stood before her in my flabby and acne-spotted glory, clutching a bloody dress to my gut. *Oh, wow, she's beautiful!*

Now you recognize her? I mentally screamed back. *Now you want to talk about her? Can't you please forget again?*

*But, like, remember what Venus said?* my brain insisted. *You're supposed to stay away from Reyna or –*

*Yes, I remember! Shut up!*

You have conversations like this with your brain, don't you? It's completely normal, right?

Reyna was indeed beautiful and imposing. Her Imperial gold armour was cloaked in a mantle of purple. Military medals twinkled on her chest. Her dark ponytail swept

over her shoulder like a horsewhip, and her obsidian eyes were every bit as piercing as those of the eagles that circled above us.

I managed to wrest my eyes from her. My face burned with humiliation. I could still hear the other gods laughing after Venus made her proclamation to me, her dire warnings if I should ever dare –

*PING!* Lavinia's manubalista chose that moment to crank itself another half-notch, mercifully diverting everyone's attention to her.

'Uh, s-so,' she stammered, 'we were on duty when I saw this hearse go flying over the guardrail –'

Reyna raised her hand for silence.

'Centurion Levesque.' Reyna's tone was guarded and weary, as if we weren't the first battered procession to tote a coffin into camp. 'Your report, please.'

Hazel glanced at the other pallbearers. Together, they gently lowered the casket.

'Praetors,' Hazel said, 'we rescued these travellers at the borders of camp. This is Meg.'

'Hi,' said Meg. 'Is there a bathroom? I need to pee.'

Hazel looked flustered. 'Er, in a sec, Meg. And this . . .' She hesitated, as if she couldn't believe what she was about to say. 'This is Apollo.'

The crowd murmured uneasily. I caught snatches of their conversations:

*'Did she say –?'*

*'Not actually –'*

*'Dude, obviously not –'*

*'Named after –?'*

*'In his dreams –'*

'Settle down,' Frank Zhang ordered, pulling his purple mantle tighter around his pyjama top. He studied me, perhaps looking for any sign that I was in fact Apollo, the god he'd always admired. He blinked as if the concept had short-circuited his brain.

'Hazel, can you . . . explain that?' he pleaded. 'And, erm, the coffin?'

Hazel locked her golden eyes on me, giving me a silent command: *Tell them.*

I didn't know how to start.

I was not a great orator like Julius or Cicero. I wasn't a weaver of tall tales like Hermes. (Boy, that guy can tell some whoppers.) How could I explain the many months of horrifying experiences that had led to Meg and me standing here, with the body of our heroic friend?

I looked down at my ukulele.

I thought of Piper McLean aboard Caligula's yachts – how she'd burst into singing 'Life of Illusion' in the midst of a gang of hardened mercenaries. She had rendered them helpless, entranced by her serenade about melancholy and regret.

I wasn't a charmspeaker like Piper. But I *was* a musician, and surely Jason deserved a tribute.

After what had happened with the eurynomoi, I felt skittish about my ukulele, so I began to sing a *cappella*.

For the first few bars, my voice quavered. I had no idea what I was doing. The words simply billowed up from deep inside me like the clouds of debris from Hazel's collapsed tunnel.

I sang of my fall from Olympus – how I had landed in New York and become bound to Meg McCaffrey. I sang of our time at Camp Half-Blood, where we'd discovered the Triumvirate's plot to control the great Oracles and thus the future of the world. I sang of Meg's childhood, her terrible years of mental abuse in the household of Nero, and how we'd finally driven that emperor from the Grove of Dodona. I sang of our battle against Commodus at the Waystation in Indianapolis, of our harrowing journey into Caligula's Burning Maze to free the Sibyl of Erythraea.

After each verse, I sang a refrain about Jason: his final stand on Caligula's yacht, courageously facing death so that we could survive and continue our quest. Everything we had been through led to Jason's sacrifice. Everything that might come next, if we were lucky enough to defeat the Triumvirate and Python at Delphi, would be possible because of *him*.

The song wasn't really about me at all. (I know. I could hardly believe it, either.) It was 'The Fall of Jason Grace'. In the last verses, I sang of Jason's dream for Temple Hill, his plan to add shrines until every god and goddess, no matter how obscure, was properly honoured.

I took the diorama from Meg, lifted it to show the assembled demigods, then set it on Jason's coffin like a soldier's flag.

I'm not sure how long I sang. When I finished the last line, the sky was fully dark. My throat felt as hot and dry as a spent bullet cartridge.

The giant eagles had gathered on the nearby rooftops. They stared at me with something like respect.