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I MY RESCUE OPERATION GOES VERY WRONG

The Friday before winter break, my mom packed me an overnight bag and a few deadly weapons, and took me to a new boarding school. We picked up my friends Annabeth and Thalia on the way.

It was an eight-hour drive from New York to Bar Harbor, Maine. Sleet and snow pounded the highway. Annabeth, Thalia and I hadn't seen each other in months, but between the blizzard and the thought of what we were about to do, we were too nervous to talk much. Except for my mom. She talks *more* when she's nervous. By the time we finally got to Westover Hall, it was getting dark, and she'd told Annabeth and Thalia every embarrassing baby story there was to tell about me.

Thalia wiped the fog off the car window and peered outside. 'Oh, yeah. This'll be fun.'

Westover Hall looked like an evil knight's castle. It was all black stone, with towers and slit windows and a big set of wooden double doors. It stood on a snowy cliff overlooking this big frosty forest on one side and the grey churning ocean on the other.

'Are you sure you don't want me to wait?' my mother asked.

'No, thanks, Mom,' I said. 'I don't know how long it will take. We'll be okay.'

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‘But how will you get back? I’m worried, Percy.’

I hoped I wasn’t blushing. It was bad enough I had to depend on my mom to drive me to my battles.

‘It’s okay, Ms Jackson.’ Annabeth smiled reassuringly. Her blonde hair was tucked into a ski cap and her grey eyes were the same colour as the ocean. ‘We’ll keep him out of trouble.’

My mom seemed to relax a little. She thinks Annabeth is the most level-headed demigod ever to hit eighth grade. She’s sure Annabeth often keeps me from getting killed. She’s right, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.

‘All right, dears,’ my mom said. ‘Do you have everything you need?’

‘Yes, Ms Jackson,’ Thalia said. ‘Thanks for the ride.’

‘Extra sweaters? You have my cell phone number?’

‘Mom —’

‘Your ambrosia and nectar, Percy? And a golden drachma in case you need to contact camp?’

‘Mom, seriously! We’ll be fine. Come on, guys.’

She looked a little hurt, and I was sorry about that, but I was ready to be out of that car. If my mom told one more story about how cute I looked in the bath when I was three years old, I was going to burrow into the snow and freeze myself to death.

Annabeth and Thalia followed me outside. The wind blew straight through my coat like ice daggers.

Once my mother’s car was out of sight, Thalia said, ‘Your mom is so cool, Percy.’

‘She’s pretty okay,’ I admitted. ‘What about you? You ever get in touch with your mom?’

As soon as I said that, I wished I hadn’t. Thalia was great

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at giving evil looks, what with the punk clothes she always wears – the ripped-up army jacket, black leather trousers and chain jewellery, the black eyeliner and those intense blue eyes. But the look she gave me now was a perfect evil ‘ten’. ‘If that was any of your business, Percy –’

‘We’d better get inside,’ Annabeth interrupted. ‘Grover will be waiting.’

Thalia looked at the castle and shivered. ‘You’re right. I wonder what he found here that made him send the distress call.’

I stared up at the dark towers of Westover Hall. ‘Nothing good,’ I guessed.

The oak doors groaned open, and the three of us stepped into the entry hall in a swirl of snow.

All I could say was, ‘Whoa.’

The place was huge. The walls were lined with battle flags and weapon displays: antique rifles, battleaxes and a bunch of other stuff. I mean, I knew Westover was a military school and all, but the decorations seemed like overkill. Literally.

My hand went to my pocket, where I kept my lethal ballpoint pen, Riptide. I could already sense something wrong in this place. Something dangerous. Thalia was rubbing her silver bracelet, her favourite magic item. I knew we were thinking the same thing. A fight was coming.

Annabeth started to say, ‘I wonder where –’

The doors slammed shut behind us.

‘Oo-kay,’ I mumbled. ‘Guess we’ll stay a while.’

I could hear music echoing from the other end of the hall. It sounded like a

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We stashed our overnight bags behind a pillar and started down the hall. We hadn't gone very far when I heard footsteps on the stone floor, and a man and woman marched out of the shadows to intercept us.

They both had short grey hair and black military-style uniforms with red trim. The woman had a wispy moustache, and the guy was clean-shaven, which seemed kind of backwards to me. They both walked stiffly, like they had broomsticks taped to their spines.

'Well?' the woman demanded. 'What are you doing here?'

'Um . . .' I realized I hadn't planned for this. I'd been so focused on getting to Grover and finding out what was wrong, I hadn't considered that someone might question three kids sneaking into the school at night. We hadn't talked at all in the car about how we would get inside. I said, 'Ma'am, we're just —'

'Ha!' the man snapped, which made me jump. 'Visitors are not allowed at the dance! You shall be *eee-jected!*'

He had an accent — French, maybe. He pronounced his *J* like in *Jacques*. He was tall, with a hawkish face. His nostrils flared when he spoke, which made it really hard not to stare up his nose, and his eyes were two different colours — one brown, one blue — like an alley cat's.

I figured he was about to toss us into the snow, but then Thalia stepped forward and did something very weird.

She snapped her fingers. The sound was sharp and loud. Maybe it was just my imagination, but I felt a gust of wind ripple out from her hand, across the room. It washed over all of us, making the banners rustle on the walls.

'Oh, but what are you doing, **Copyrighted Material** Thalia said. 'We go to

school here. You remember: I'm Thalia. And this is Annabeth and Percy. We're in the eighth grade.'

The male teacher narrowed his two-coloured eyes. I didn't know what Thalia was thinking. Now we'd probably get punished for lying *and* thrown into the snow. But the man seemed to be hesitating.

He looked at his colleague. 'Ms Gottschalk, do you know these students?'

Despite the danger we were in, I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing. A teacher named *Got Chalk?* He had to be kidding.

The woman blinked, like someone had just woken her up from a trance. 'I . . . yes. I believe I do, sir.' She frowned at us. 'Annabeth. Thalia. Percy. What are you doing away from the gymnasium?'

Before we could answer, I heard more footsteps, and Grover ran up, breathless. 'You made it! You —'

He stopped short when he saw the teachers. 'Oh, Mrs Gottschalk. Dr Thorn! I, uh —'

'What *is* it, Mr Underwood?' said the man. His tone made it clear that he detested Grover. 'What do you mean they made it? These students live here.'

Grover swallowed. 'Yes, sir. Of course, Dr Thorn. I just meant I'm so glad they made . . . the punch for the dance! The punch is great. And they made it!'

Dr Thorn glared at us. I decided one of his eyes had to be fake. The brown one? The blue one? He looked like he wanted to pitch us off the castle's highest tower, but then Mrs Gottschalk said dreamily, 'Yes, the punch is excellent. Now run along, all of you. You are not to leave the gymnasium again.'

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We didn't wait to be told twice. We left with a lot of 'Yes, ma'ams' and 'Yes, sirs' and a couple of salutes, just because it seemed like the thing to do.

Grover hustled us down the hall in the direction of the music.

I could feel the teachers' eyes on my back, but I walked closely to Thalia and asked in a low voice, 'How did you do that finger-snap thing?'

'You mean the Mist? Hasn't Chiron shown you how to do that yet?'

An uncomfortable lump formed in my throat. Chiron was our head trainer at camp, but he'd never shown me anything like that. Why had he shown Thalia and not me?

Grover hurried us to a door that had GYM written on the glass. Even with my dyslexia, I could read that much.

'That was close!' Grover said. 'Thank the gods you got here!'

Annabeth and Thalia both hugged Grover. I gave him a big high five.

It was good to see him after so many months. He'd got a little taller and had sprouted a few more whiskers, but otherwise he looked like he always did when he passed for human – a red cap on his curly brown hair to hide his goat horns, baggy jeans and trainers with fake feet to hide his furry legs and hooves. He was wearing a black T-shirt that took me a few seconds to read. It said WESTOVER HALL: GRUNT. I wasn't sure whether that was, like, Grover's rank or maybe just the school motto.

'So what's the emergency?' I asked.

Grover took a deep breath. 'I found two.'

'Two half-bloods?' I asked, puzzled. 'Here?'

Grover nodded.

Finding one half-blood was rare enough. This year, Chiron had put the satyrs on emergency overtime and sent them all over the country, scouring schools from fourth grade through high school for possible recruits. These were desperate times. We were losing campers. We needed all the new fighters we could find. The problem was, there just weren't that many demigods out there.

'A brother and a sister,' he said. 'They're ten and twelve. I don't know their parentage, but they're strong. We're running out of time, though. I need help.'

'Monsters?'

'One.' Grover looked nervous. 'He suspects. I don't think he's positive yet, but this is the last day of term. I'm sure he won't let them leave campus without finding out. It may be our last chance! Every time I try to get close to them, he's always there, blocking me. I don't know what to do!'

Grover looked at Thalia desperately. I tried not to feel upset by that. Grover used to look to me for answers, but Thalia had seniority. Not just because her dad was Zeus. Thalia had more experience than any of us with fending off monsters in the real world.

'Right,' she said. 'These half-bloods are at the dance?'

Grover nodded.

'Then let's dance,' Thalia said. 'Who's the monster?'

'Oh,' Grover said, and looked around nervously. 'You just met him. The vice-principal, Dr Thorn.'

Weird thing about military schools: the kids go absolutely nuts when there's a special event and they get to be out of

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uniform. I guess it's because everything's so strict the rest of the time, they feel like they've got to overcompensate or something.

There were black and red balloons all over the gym floor, and guys were kicking them in each other's faces, or trying to strangle each other with the crêpe-paper streamers taped to the walls. Girls moved around in football huddles, the way they always do, wearing lots of makeup and spaghetti-strap tops and brightly coloured trousers and shoes that looked like torture devices. Every once in a while they'd surround some poor guy like a pack of piranhas, shrieking and giggling, and when they finally moved on, the guy would have ribbons in his hair and a bunch of lipstick graffiti all over his face. Some of the older guys looked more like me – uncomfortable, hanging out at the edges of the gym and trying to hide, like any minute they might have to fight for their lives. Of course, in my case, it was true . . .

'There they are.' Grover nodded towards a couple of younger kids arguing in the bleachers. 'Bianca and Nico di Angelo.'

The girl wore a floppy green cap, like she was trying to hide her face. The boy was obviously her little brother. They both had dark silky hair and olive skin, and they used their hands a lot as they talked. The boy was shuffling some kind of trading cards. His sister seemed to be scolding him about something. She kept looking around like she sensed something was wrong.

Annabeth said, 'Do they . . . I mean, have you told them?'

Grover shook his head. 'I don't know how it is. That could

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put them in more danger. Once they realize who they are, their scent becomes stronger.’

He looked at me, and I nodded. I’d never really understood what half-bloods ‘smell’ like to monsters and satyrs, but I knew that your scent could get you killed. And the more powerful a demigod you became, the more you smelled like a monster’s lunch.

‘So let’s grab them and get out of here,’ I said.

I started forward, but Thalia put her hand on my shoulder. The vice-principal, Dr Thorn, had slipped out of a doorway near the bleachers and was standing near the di Angelo siblings. He nodded coldly in our direction. His blue eye seemed to glow.

Judging from his expression, I guessed Thorn hadn’t been fooled by Thalia’s trick with the Mist after all. He suspected who we were. He was just waiting to see why we were here.

‘Don’t look at the kids,’ Thalia ordered. ‘We have to wait for a chance to get them. We need to pretend we’re not interested in them. Throw him off the scent.’

‘How?’

‘We’re three powerful half-bloods. Our presence should confuse him. Mingle. Act natural. Do some dancing. But keep an eye on those kids.’

‘Dancing?’ Annabeth asked.

Thalia nodded. She cocked her ear to the music and made a face. ‘Ugh. Who chose the Jesse McCartney?’

Grover looked hurt. ‘I did.’

‘Oh my gods, Grover. That is so lame. Can’t you play, like, Green Day or something?’

‘Green who?’ **Copyrighted Material**

‘Never mind. Let’s dance.’

‘But I can’t dance!’

‘You can if I’m leading,’ Thalia said. ‘Come on, goat boy.’

Grover yelped as Thalia grabbed his hand and led him onto the dance floor.

Annabeth smiled.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘Nothing. It’s just cool to have Thalia back.’

Annabeth had grown taller than me since last summer, which I found kind of disturbing. She used to wear no jewellery except for her Camp Half-Blood bead necklace, but now she wore little silver earrings shaped like owls – the symbol of her mother, Athena. She pulled off her ski cap, and her long blonde hair tumbled down her shoulders. It made her look older, for some reason.

‘So . . .’ I tried to think of something to say. *Act natural*, Thalia had told us. When you’re a half-blood on a dangerous mission, what the heck is natural? ‘Um, design any good buildings lately?’

Annabeth’s eyes lit up, the way they always did when she talked about architecture. ‘Oh my gods, Percy. At my new school, I get to take 3-D design, and there’s this cool computer program . . .’

She went on to explain how she’d designed this huge monument that she wanted to build at Ground Zero in Manhattan. She talked about structural supports and facades and stuff, and I tried to listen. I knew she wanted to be a super architect when she grew up – she loves maths and historical buildings and all that – but I hardly understood a word she was saying.

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The truth was I was kind of disappointed to hear that she liked her new school so much. It was the first time she'd gone to school in New York. I'd been hoping to see her more often. It was a boarding school in Brooklyn, which she and Thalia were both attending, close enough to Camp Half-Blood that Chiron could help if they got into any trouble. Because it was an all-girls school, and I was going to MS-54 in Manhattan, I hardly ever saw them.

'Yeah, uh, cool,' I said. 'So you're staying there the rest of the year, huh?'

Her face got dark. 'Well, maybe, if I don't —'

'Hey!' Thalia called to us. She was slow dancing with Grover, who was tripping all over himself, kicking Thalia in the shins, and looking like he wanted to die. At least his feet were fake. Unlike me, he had an excuse for being clumsy.

'Dance, you guys!' Thalia ordered. 'You look stupid just standing there.'

I looked nervously at Annabeth, then at the groups of girls who were roaming the gym.

'Well?' Annabeth said.

'Um, who should I ask?'

She punched me in the gut. '*Me*, Seaweed Brain.'

'Oh. Oh, right.'

So we went onto the dance floor, and I looked over to see how Thalia and Grover were doing things. I put one hand on Annabeth's hip, and she clasped my other hand like she was about to judo throw me.

'I'm not going to bite,' she told me. 'Honestly, Percy. Don't you guys have dances at your school?'

I didn't answer. **Copyrighted Material** But I'd never,

like, actually *danced* at one. I was usually one of the guys playing basketball in the corner.

We shuffled around for a few minutes. I tried to concentrate on little things, like the crêpe-paper streamers and the punch bowl – anything but the fact that Annabeth was taller than me, and my hands were sweaty and probably gross, and I kept stepping on her toes.

‘What were you saying earlier?’ I asked. ‘Are you having trouble at school or something?’

She pursed her lips. ‘It’s not that. It’s my dad.’

‘Uh-oh.’ I knew Annabeth had a rocky relationship with her father. ‘I thought it was getting better with you two. Is it your stepmom again?’

Annabeth sighed. ‘He decided to move. Just when I was getting settled in New York, he took this stupid new job researching for a World War I book. In *San Francisco*.’

She said this the same way she might say *Fields of Punishment* or *Hades’s gym shorts*.

‘So he wants you to move out there with him?’ I asked.

‘To the other side of the country,’ she said miserably. ‘And half-bloods can’t live in San Francisco. He should know that.’

‘What? Why not?’

Annabeth rolled her eyes. Maybe she thought I was kidding. ‘You know. It’s right *there*.’

‘Oh,’ I said. I had no idea what she was talking about, but I didn’t want to sound stupid. ‘So . . . you’ll go back to living at camp or what?’

‘It’s more serious than that, Percy. I . . . I probably should tell you something.’

Suddenly she froze. They’re gone.

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‘What?’

I followed her gaze. The bleachers. The two half-blood kids, Bianca and Nico, were no longer there. The door next to the bleachers was wide open. Dr Thorn was nowhere in sight.

‘We have to get Thalia and Grover!’ Annabeth looked around frantically. ‘Oh, where’d they dance off to? Come on!’

She ran through the crowd. I was about to follow when a mob of girls got in my way. I manoeuvred round them to avoid getting the ribbon-and-lipstick treatment, and by the time I was free Annabeth had disappeared. I turned, looking for her or Thalia and Grover. Instead, I saw something that chilled my blood.

About fifteen metres away, lying on the gym floor, was a floppy green cap just like the one Bianca di Angelo had been wearing. Near it were a few scattered trading cards. Then I caught a glimpse of Dr Thorn. He was hurrying out a door at the opposite end of the gym, steering the di Angelo kids by the scruffs of their necks, like kittens.

I still couldn’t see Annabeth, but I knew she’d be heading the other way, looking for Thalia and Grover.

I almost ran after her, and then I thought, *Wait.*

I remembered what Thalia had said to me in the entry hall, looking at me all puzzled when I asked about the finger-snap trick: *Hasn’t Chiron shown you how to do that yet?* I thought about the way Grover had turned to her, expecting her to save the day.

Not that I resented Thalia. She was cool. It wasn’t her fault her dad was Zeus and she got all the attention . . . Still, I didn’t need **Copyrighted Material** every problem.

Besides, there wasn't time. The di Angelos were in danger. They might be long gone by the time I found my friends. I knew monsters. I could handle this myself.

I took Riptide out of my pocket and ran after Dr Thorn.

The door led into a dark hallway. I heard sounds of scuffling up ahead, then a painful grunt. I uncapped Riptide.

The pen grew in my hands until I held a bronze Greek sword about a metre long with a leather-bound grip. The blade glowed faintly, casting a golden light on the rows of lockers.

I jogged down the corridor, but when I got to the other end, no one was there. I opened a door and found myself back in the main entry hall. I had gone full circle. I didn't see Dr Thorn anywhere, but there on the opposite side of the room were the di Angelo kids. They stood frozen in horror, staring right at me.

I advanced slowly, lowering the tip of my sword. 'It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you.'

They didn't answer. Their eyes were full of fear. What was wrong with them? Where was Dr Thorn? Maybe he'd sensed the presence of Riptide and retreated. Monsters hated celestial bronze weapons.

'My name's Percy,' I said, trying to keep my voice level. 'I'm going to take you out of here, get you somewhere safe.'

Bianca's eyes widened. Her fists clenched. Only too late did I realize what her look meant. She wasn't afraid of me. She was trying to warn me.

I whirled round and something **Copyrighted Material** WHIIISH! Pain

exploded in my shoulder. A force like a huge hand yanked me backwards and slammed me to the wall.

I slashed with my sword but there was nothing to hit.

A cold laugh echoed through the hall.

‘Yes, Perseus *Jackson*,’ Dr Thorn said. His accent mangled the *J* in my last name. ‘I know who you are.’

I tried to free my shoulder. My coat and shirt were pinned to the wall by some kind of spike – a black daggerlike projectile about half a metre long. It had grazed the skin of my shoulder as it passed through my clothes, and the cut burned. I’d felt something like this before. Poison.

I forced myself to concentrate. I would *not* pass out.

A dark silhouette now moved towards us. Dr Thorn stepped into the dim light. He still looked human, but his face was ghoulish. He had perfect white teeth and his brown/blue eyes reflected the light of my sword.

‘Thank you for coming out of the gym,’ he said. ‘I hate middle-school dances.’

I tried to swing my sword again, but he was just out of reach.

WHIIISH! A second projectile shot from somewhere behind Dr Thorn. He didn’t appear to move. It was as if someone invisible were standing behind him, throwing knives.

Next to me, Bianca yelped. The second thorn impaled itself in the stone wall, a millimetre from her face.

‘All three of you will come with me,’ Dr Thorn said. ‘Quietly. Obediently. If you make a single noise, if you call out for help or try to fight, I will show you just how accurately I can

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2 THE VICE-PRINCIPAL GETS A MISSILE LAUNCHER

I didn't know what kind of monster Dr Thorn was, but he was fast.

Maybe I could defend myself if I could get my shield activated. All that it would take was a touch of my wristwatch. But defending the di Angelo kids was another matter. I needed help, and there was only one way I could think to get it.

I closed my eyes.

'What are you doing, Jackson?' hissed Dr Thorn. 'Keep moving!'

I opened my eyes and kept shuffling forward. 'It's my shoulder,' I lied, trying to sound miserable, which wasn't hard. 'It burns.'

'Bah! My poison causes pain. It will not kill you. Walk!'

Thorn herded us outside, and I tried to concentrate. I pictured Grover's face. I focused on my feelings of fear and danger. Last summer, Grover had created an empathy link between us. He'd sent me visions in my dreams to let me know when he was in trouble. As far as I knew, we were still linked, but I'd never tried to contact Grover before. I didn't even know if it would work while Grover was awake.

Hey, Grover! I thought. Thorn's kidnapping us! He's a poisonous spike-throwing maniac! Help!

Thorn marched us into the woods. We took a snowy

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path dimly lit by old-fashioned lamplights. My shoulder ached. The wind blowing through my ripped clothes was so cold that I felt like a Percysicle.

‘There is a clearing ahead,’ Thorn said. ‘We will summon your ride.’

‘What ride?’ Bianca demanded. ‘Where are you taking us?’

‘Silence, you insufferable girl!’

‘Don’t talk to my sister that way!’ Nico said. His voice quavered, but I was impressed that he had the guts to say anything at all.

Dr Thorn made a growling sound that definitely wasn’t human. It made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, but I forced myself to keep walking and pretend I was being a good little captive. Meanwhile, I projected my thoughts like crazy – anything to get Grover’s attention: Grover! Apples! Tin cans! Get your furry goat behind out here and bring some heavily armed friends!

‘Halt,’ Thorn said.

The woods had opened up. We’d reached a cliff overlooking the sea. At least, I *sensed* the sea was down there, about a hundred metres below. I could hear the waves churning and I could smell the cold salty froth. But all I could see was mist and darkness.

Dr Thorn pushed us towards the edge. I stumbled, and Bianca caught me.

‘Thanks,’ I murmured.

‘What *is* he?’ she whispered. ‘How do we fight him?’

‘I . . . I’m working on it.’

‘I’m scared,’ Nico mumbled. He was fiddling with something – a little metal toy soldier or some kind.

‘Stop talking!’ Dr Thorn said. ‘Face me!’

We turned.

Thorn’s two-tone eyes glittered hungrily. He pulled something from under his coat. At first I thought it was a switchblade, but it was only a phone. He pressed the side button and said, ‘The package – it is ready to deliver.’

There was a garbled reply, and I realized Thorn was in walkie-talkie mode. This seemed way too modern and creepy – a monster using a cell phone.

I glanced behind me, wondering how far the drop was.

Dr Thorn laughed. ‘By all means, Son of Poseidon. *Jump!* There is the sea. Save yourself.’

‘What did he call you?’ Bianca muttered.

‘I’ll explain later,’ I said.

‘You do have a plan, right?’

Grover! I thought desperately. Come to me!

Maybe I could get both the di Angelos to jump with me into the ocean. If we survived the fall, I could use the water to protect us. I’d done things like that before. If my dad was in a good mood, and listening, he might help. Maybe.

‘I would kill you before you ever reached the water,’ Dr Thorn said, as if reading my thoughts. ‘You do not realize who I am, do you?’

A flicker of movement behind him, and another missile whistled so close to me that it nicked my ear. Something had sprung up behind Dr Thorn – like a catapult, but more flexible . . . almost like a tail.

‘Unfortunately,’ Thorn said, ‘you are wanted alive, if possible. Otherwise you would already be dead.’

‘Who wants us?’ Bianca demanded. ‘Because if you think you’ll get a ransom for your son, you’d better have any family.’

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Nico and I . . . Her voice broke a little. ‘We’ve got no one but each other.’

‘Aww,’ Dr Thorn said. ‘Do not worry, little brats. You will be meeting my employer soon enough. Then you will have a brand-new family.’

‘Luke,’ I said. ‘You work for Luke.’

Dr Thorn’s mouth twisted with distaste when I said the name of my old enemy – a former friend who’d tried to kill me several times. ‘You have no idea what is happening, Perseus Jackson. I will let the General enlighten you. You are going to do him a great service tonight. He is looking forward to meeting you.’

‘The General?’ I asked. Then I realized I’d said it with a French accent. ‘I mean . . . who’s the General?’

Thorn looked towards the horizon. ‘Ah, here we are. Your transportation.’

I turned and saw a light in the distance, a searchlight over the sea. Then I heard the chopping of helicopter blades getting louder and closer.

‘Where are you taking us?’ Nico said.

‘You should feel honoured, my boy. You will have the opportunity to join a great army! Just like that silly game you play with cards and dolls.’

‘They’re not dolls! They’re figurines! And you can take your great army and –’

‘Now, now,’ Dr Thorn warned. ‘You will change your mind about joining us, my boy. And, if you do not, well . . . there are other uses for half-bloods. We have many monstrous mouths to feed. The Great Stirring is underway.’

‘The Great what?’ I asked. Anything to keep him talking while I tried to figure out what was going on.

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‘The stirring of monsters.’ Dr Thorn smiled evilly. ‘The worst of them, the most powerful, are now waking. Monsters that have not been seen in thousands of years. They will cause death and destruction the likes of which mortals have never known. And soon we shall have the most important monster of all – the one that shall bring about the downfall of Olympus!’

‘Okay,’ Bianca whispered to me. ‘He’s completely nuts.’

‘We have to jump off the cliff,’ I told her quietly. ‘Into the sea.’

‘Oh, super idea. You’re completely nuts, too.’

I never got the chance to argue with her, because just then an invisible force slammed into me.

Looking back on it, Annabeth’s move was brilliant. Wearing her cap of invisibility, she ploughed into the di Angelos and me, knocking us to the ground. For a split second, Dr Thorn was taken by surprise, so his first volley of missiles zipped harmlessly over our heads. This gave Thalia and Grover a chance to advance from behind – Thalia wielding her magic shield, Aegis.

If you’ve never seen Thalia run into battle, you have never been truly frightened. She uses a huge spear that expands from this collapsible Mace canister she carries in her pocket, but that’s not the scary part. Her shield is modelled on one her dad Zeus uses – also called Aegis – a gift from Athena. The shield has the head of the gorgon Medusa moulded into the bronze, and even though it won’t turn you to stone it’s so horrible most people will panic and run at the sight of it.

Even Dr Thorn, who’d been grinning when he saw it.

Thalia moved in with her spear. 'For Zeus!'

I thought Dr Thorn was a goner. Thalia jabbed at his head, but he snarled and swatted the spear aside. His hand changed into an orange paw with enormous claws that sparked against Thalia's shield as he slashed. If it hadn't been for Aegis, Thalia would've been sliced like a loaf of bread. As it was, she managed to roll backwards and land on her feet.

The sound of the helicopter was getting louder behind me, but I didn't dare look.

Dr Thorn launched another volley of missiles at Thalia, and this time I could see how he did it. He had a tail – a leathery, scorpionlike tail that bristled with spikes at the tip. The missiles deflected off Aegis, but the force of their impact knocked Thalia down.

Grover sprang forward. He put his reed pipes to his lips and began to play – a frantic jig that sounded like something pirates would dance to. Grass broke through the snow. Within seconds, rope-thick weeds were wrapping round Dr Thorn's legs, entangling him.

Dr Thorn roared and began to change. He grew larger until he was in his true form – his face still human, but his body that of a huge lion. His leathery, spiky tail whipped deadly thorns in all directions.

'A manticore!' Annabeth said, now visible. Her magical New York Yankees cap had come off when she'd ploughed into us.

'Who *are* you people?' Bianca di Angelo demanded. 'And what is *that*?'

'A manticore?' Nico gasped. 'He's got three thousand attack power and ~~power to destroy~~

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I didn't know what he was talking about, but I didn't have time to worry about it. The manticore clawed Grover's magic weeds to shreds then turned towards us with a snarl.

'Get down!' Annabeth pushed the di Angelos flat into the snow. At the last second, I remembered my own shield. I hit my wristwatch, and metal plating spiralled out into a thick bronze shield. Not a moment too soon. The thorns impacted against it with such force they dented the metal. The beautiful shield, a gift from my brother, was badly damaged. I wasn't sure it would even stop a second volley.

I heard a *thwack* and a yelp, and Grover landed next to me with a thud.

'Yield!' the monster roared.

'Never!' Thalia yelled from across the field. She charged the monster and, for a second, I thought she would run him through. But then there was a thunderous noise and a blaze of light from behind us. The helicopter appeared out of the mist, hovering just beyond the cliffs. It was a sleek black military-style gunship, with attachments on the sides that looked like laser-guided rockets. The helicopter had to be manned by mortals, but what was it doing here? How could mortals be working with a monster? The searchlights blinded Thalia, and the manticore swatted her away with its tail. Her shield flew off into the snow. Her spear flew in the other direction.

'No!' I ran out to help her. I parried away a spike just before it would've hit her chest. I raised my shield over us, but I knew it wouldn't be enough.

Dr Thorn laughed. 'Now do you see how hopeless it is? Yield, little **Copyrighted Material**

We were trapped between a monster and a fully armed helicopter. We had no chance.

Then I heard a clear, piercing sound: the call of a hunting horn blowing in the woods.

The manticore froze. For a moment, no one moved. There was only the swirl of snow and wind and the chopping of the helicopter blades.

‘No,’ Dr Thorn said. ‘It cannot be –’

His sentence was cut short when something shot past me like a streak of moonlight. A glowing silver arrow sprouted from Dr Thorn’s shoulder.

He staggered backwards, wailing in agony.

‘Curse you!’ Thorn cried. He unleashed his spikes, dozens of them at once, into the woods where the arrow had come from, but just as fast, silvery arrows shot back in reply. It almost looked like the arrows had intercepted the thorns in mid-air and sliced them in two, but my eyes must’ve been playing tricks on me. No one, not even Apollo’s kids at camp, could shoot with that much accuracy.

The manticore pulled the arrow out of his shoulder with a howl of pain. His breathing was heavy. I tried to swipe at him with my sword, but he wasn’t as injured as he looked. He dodged my attack and slammed his tail into my shield, knocking me aside.

Then the archers came from the woods. They were girls, about a dozen of them. The youngest was maybe ten. The oldest, about fourteen, like me. They wore silvery ski parkas and jeans, and they were all armed with bows. They advanced on the manticore with determined expressions.

‘The Hunters’

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Next to me, Thalia muttered, 'Oh, wonderful.'

I didn't have a chance to ask what she meant.

One of the older archers stepped forward with her bow drawn. She was tall and graceful with coppery coloured skin. Unlike the other girls, she had a silver circlet braided into the top of her long dark hair, so she looked like some kind of Persian princess. 'Permission to kill, my lady?'

I couldn't tell who she was talking to, because she kept her eyes on the manticore.

The monster wailed. 'This is not fair! Direct interference! It is against the Ancient Laws.'

'Not so,' another girl said. This one was a little younger than me, maybe twelve or thirteen. She had auburn hair gathered back in a ponytail and strange eyes, silvery yellow like the moon. Her face was so beautiful it made me catch my breath, but her expression was stern and dangerous. 'The hunting of all wild beasts is within my sphere. And you, foul creature, are a wild beast.' She looked at the older girl with the circlet. 'Zoë, permission granted.'

The manticore growled. 'If I cannot have these alive, I shall have them dead!'

He lunged at Thalia and me, knowing we were weak and dazed.

'No!' Annabeth yelled, and she charged at the monster.

'Get back, half-blood!' the girl with the circlet said. 'Get out of the line of fire!'

But Annabeth leaped onto the monster's back and drove her knife into his mane. The manticore howled, turning in circles with his tail flailing as Annabeth hung on for dear life.

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‘Fire!’ Zoë ordered.

‘No!’ I screamed.

But the Hunters let their arrows fly. The first caught the manticore in the neck. Another hit his chest. The manticore staggered backwards, wailing, ‘This is not the end, Huntress! You shall pay!’

And before anyone could react, the monster, with Annabeth still on his back, leaped over the cliff and tumbled into the darkness.

‘Annabeth!’ I yelled.

I started to run after her, but our enemies weren’t done with us. There was a *snap-snap-snap* from the helicopter – the sound of gunfire.

Most of the Hunters scattered as tiny holes appeared in the snow at their feet, but the girl with auburn hair just looked up calmly at the helicopter.

‘Mortals,’ she announced, ‘are not allowed to witness my hunt.’

She thrust out her hand, and the helicopter exploded into dust – no, not dust. The black metal dissolved into a flock of birds – ravens, which scattered into the night.

The Hunters advanced on us.

The one called Zoë stopped short when she saw Thalia. ‘You,’ she said with distaste.

‘Zoë Nightshade.’ Thalia’s voice trembled with anger. ‘Perfect timing, as usual.’

Zoë scanned the rest of us. ‘Four half-bloods and a satyr, my lady.’

‘Yes,’ the younger girl said. ‘Some of Chiron’s campers, I see.’

‘Annabeth!’ I yelled. **Copyrighted Material** ‘I’ll save her!’