Helping your children choose books they will love

I ♥ reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

The House of Hades

Written by

Rick Riordan

Published by

Puffin Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

I

HAZEL

During the third attack, Hazel almost ate a boulder. She was peering into the fog, wondering how it could be so difficult to fly across one stupid mountain range, when the ship's alarm bells sounded.

'Hard to port!' Nico yelled from the foremast of the flying ship.

Back at the helm, Leo yanked the wheel. The *Argo II* veered left, its aerial oars slashing through the clouds like rows of knives.

Hazel made the mistake of looking over the rail. A dark spherical shape hurtled towards her. She thought, *Why is the moon coming at us?* Then she yelped and hit the deck. The huge rock passed so close overhead it blew her hair out of her face.

CRACK!

The foremast collapsed – sail, spars and Nico all crashing to the deck. The boulder, roughly the size of a pickup truck,

Text copyright (c) Rick Riordan. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

tumbled off into the fog like it had important business elsewhere.

'Nico!' Hazel scrambled over to him as Leo brought the ship level.

'I'm fine,' Nico muttered, kicking folds of canvas off his legs.

She helped him up, and they stumbled to the bow. Hazel peeked over more carefully this time. The clouds parted just long enough to reveal the top of the mountain below them: a spearhead of black rock jutting from mossy green slopes. Standing at the summit was a mountain god – one of the *numina montanum*, Jason had called them. Or *ourae*, in Greek. Whatever you called them, they were nasty.

Like the others they had faced, this one wore a simple white tunic over skin as rough and dark as basalt. He was about twenty feet tall and extremely muscular, with a flowing white beard, scraggly hair and a wild look in his eyes, like a crazy hermit. He bellowed something Hazel didn't understand, but it obviously wasn't welcoming. With his bare hands, he prised another chunk of rock from his mountain and began shaping it into a ball.

The scene disappeared in the fog, but when the mountain god bellowed again other *numina* answered in the distance, their voices echoing through the valleys.

'Stupid rock gods!' Leo yelled from the helm. 'That's the *third* time I've had to replace that mast! You think they grow on trees?'

Nico frowned. 'Masts *are* from trees.'

Text copyright (c) Rick Riordan. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

'That's not the point!' Leo snatched up one of his controls, rigged from a Nintendo Wii stick, and spun it in a circle. A few feet away, a trapdoor opened in the deck. A Celestial bronze cannon rose. Hazel just had time to cover her ears before it discharged into the sky, spraying a dozen metal spheres that trailed green fire. The spheres grew spikes in midair, like helicopter blades, and hurtled away into the fog.

A moment later, a series of explosions crackled across the mountains, followed by the outraged roars of mountain gods.

'Ha!' Leo yelled.

Unfortunately, Hazel guessed, judging from their last two encounters, Leo's newest weapon had only annoyed the *numina*.

Another boulder whistled through the air off to their starboard side.

Nico yelled, 'Get us out of here!'

Leo muttered some unflattering comments about *numina*, but he turned the wheel. The engines hummed. Magical rigging lashed itself tight, and the ship tacked to port. The *Argo II* picked up speed, retreating north-west, as they'd been doing for the past two days.

Hazel didn't relax until they were out of the mountains. The fog cleared. Below them, morning sunlight illuminated the Italian countryside – rolling green hills and golden fields not too different from those in northern California. Hazel could almost imagine she was sailing home to Camp Jupiter.

The thought weighed on her chest. Camp Jupiter had only been her home for nine months, since Nico had brought her

Text copyright (c) Rick Riordan. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

back from the Underworld. But she missed it more than her birthplace of New Orleans, and *definitely* more than Alaska, where she'd died back in 1942.

She missed her bunk in the Fifth Cohort barracks. She missed dinners in the mess hall, with wind spirits whisking platters through the air and legionnaires joking about the war games. She wanted to wander the streets of New Rome, holding hands with Frank Zhang. She wanted to experience just being a regular girl for once, with an actual sweet, caring boyfriend.

Most of all, she wanted to feel safe. She was tired of being scared and worried all the time.

She stood on the quarterdeck as Nico picked mast splinters out of his arms and Leo punched buttons on the ship's console.

'Well, *that* was sucktastic,' Leo said. 'Should I wake the others?'

Hazel was tempted to say yes, but the other crew members had taken the night shift and had earned their rest. They were exhausted from defending the ship. Every few hours, it seemed, some Roman monster had decided the *Argo II* looked like a tasty treat.

A few weeks ago, Hazel wouldn't have believed that anyone could sleep through a *numina* attack, but now she imagined her friends were still snoring away belowdecks. Whenever *she* got a chance to crash, she slept like a coma patient.

'They need rest,' she said. 'We'll have to figure out another way on our own.'

Text copyright (c) Rick Riordan. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

'Huh.' Leo scowled at his monitor. In his tattered work shirt and grease-splattered jeans, he looked like he'd just lost a wrestling match with a locomotive.

Ever since their friends Percy and Annabeth had fallen into Tartarus, Leo had been working almost non-stop. He'd been acting angrier and even more driven than usual.

Hazel worried about him. But part of her was relieved by the change. Whenever Leo smiled and joked, he looked *too* much like Sammy, his great-grandfather . . . Hazel's first boyfriend, back in 1942.

Ugh, why did her life have to be so complicated?

'Another way,' Leo muttered. 'Do you see one?'

On his monitor glowed a map of Italy. The Apennine Mountains ran down the middle of the boot-shaped country. A green dot for the *Argo II* blinked on the western side of the range, a few hundred miles north of Rome. Their path should have been simple. They needed to get to a place called Epirus in Greece and find an old temple called the House of Hades (or Pluto, as the Romans called him; or as Hazel liked to think of him: the World's Worst Absent Father).

To reach Epirus, all they had to do was go straight east – over the Apennines and across the Adriatic Sea. But it hadn't worked out that way. Each time they tried to cross the spine of Italy, the mountain gods attacked.

For the past two days they'd skirted north, hoping to find a safe pass, with no luck. The *numina montanum* were sons of Gaia, Hazel's least favourite goddess. That made them *very* determined enemies. The *Argo II* couldn't fly high enough to

Text copyright (c) Rick Riordan. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

avoid their attacks and, even with all its defences, the ship couldn't make it across the range without being smashed to pieces.

'It's our fault,' Hazel said. 'Nico's and mine. The *numina* can sense us.'

She glanced at her half-brother. Since they'd rescued him from the giants, he'd started to regain his strength, but he was still painfully thin. His black shirt and jeans hung off his skeletal frame. Long dark hair framed his sunken eyes. His olive complexion had turned a sickly greenish white, like the colour of tree sap.

In human years, he was barely fourteen, just a year older than Hazel, but that didn't tell the whole story. Like Hazel, Nico di Angelo was a demigod from another era. He radiated a kind of *old* energy – a melancholy that came from knowing he didn't belong in the modern world.

Hazel hadn't known him very long, but she understood, even shared, his sadness. The children of Hades (Pluto – whichever) rarely had happy lives. And, judging from what Nico had told her the night before, their biggest challenge was yet to come when they reached the House of Hades – a challenge he'd implored her to keep secret from the others.

Nico gripped the hilt of his Stygian iron sword. 'Earth spirits don't like children of the Underworld. That's true. We get under their skin – *literally*. But I think the *numina* could sense this ship anyway. We're carrying the Athena Parthenos. That thing is like a magical beacon.'

Hazel shivered, thinking of the massive statue that took up most of the hold. They'd sacrificed so much saving it from

Text copyright (c) Rick Riordan. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

the cavern under Rome, but they had no idea what to do with it. So far the only thing it seemed to be good for was alerting more monsters to their presence.

Leo traced his finger down the map of Italy. 'So crossing the mountains is out. Thing is they go a long way in either direction.'

'We could go by sea,' Hazel suggested. 'Sail around the southern tip of Italy.'

'That's a long way,' Nico said. 'Plus, we don't have . . .' His voice cracked. 'You know . . . our sea expert, Percy.'

The name hung in the air like an impending storm.

Percy Jackson, son of Poseidon . . . probably the demigod Hazel admired most. He'd saved her life so many times on their quest to Alaska, but when he had needed Hazel's help in Rome she'd failed him. She'd watched, powerless, as he and Annabeth had plunged into that pit.

Hazel took a deep breath. Percy and Annabeth were still alive. She knew that in her heart. She could *still* help them if she could get to the House of Hades, if she could survive the challenge Nico had warned her about . . .

'What about continuing north?' she asked. 'There *has* to be a break in the mountains, or something.'

Leo fiddled with the bronze Archimedes sphere that he'd installed on the console – his newest and most dangerous toy. Every time Hazel looked at the thing, her mouth went dry. She worried that Leo would turn the wrong combination on the sphere and accidentally eject them all from the deck, or blow up the ship, or turn the *Argo II* into a giant toaster.

Text copyright (c) Rick Riordan. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

Fortunately, they got lucky. The sphere grew a camera lens and projected a 3-D image of the Apennine Mountains above the console.

'I dunno.' Leo examined the hologram. 'I don't see any good passes to the north. But I like that idea better than backtracking south. I'm done with Rome.'

No one argued with that. Rome had not been a good experience.

'Whatever we do,' Nico said, 'we have to hurry. Every day that Annabeth and Percy are in Tartarus . . .'

He didn't need to finish. They had to hope Percy and Annabeth could survive long enough to find the Tartarus side of the Doors of Death. Then, assuming the *Argo II* could reach the House of Hades, they *might* be able to open the Doors on the mortal side, save their friends and seal the entrance, stopping Gaia's forces from being reincarnated in the mortal world over and over.

Yes . . . nothing could go wrong with *that* plan.

Nico scowled at the Italian countryside below them. 'Maybe we *should* wake the others. This decision affects us all.'

'No,' Hazel said. 'We can find a solution.'

She wasn't sure why she felt so strongly about it, but since leaving Rome the crew had started to lose its cohesion. They'd been learning to work as a team. Then *bam* . . . their two most important members had fallen into Tartarus. Percy had been their backbone. He'd given them confidence as they sailed across the Atlantic and into the Mediterranean. As for Annabeth – she'd been the de facto leader of the quest. She'd

Text copyright (c) Rick Riordan. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

recovered the Athena Parthenos single-handedly. She was the smartest of the seven, the one with the answers.

If Hazel woke up the rest of the crew every time they had a problem, they'd just start arguing again, feeling more and more hopeless.

She had to make Percy and Annabeth proud of her. She had to take the initiative. She couldn't believe her only role in this quest would be what Nico had warned her about – removing the obstacle waiting for them in the House of Hades. She pushed the thought aside.

'We need some creative thinking,' she said. 'Another way to cross those mountains, or a way to hide ourselves from the *numina*.'

Nico sighed. 'If I was on my own, I could shadow-travel. But that won't work for an entire ship. And, honestly, I'm not sure I have the strength to even transport *myself* any more.'

'I could maybe rig some kind of camouflage,' Leo said, 'like a smoke screen to hide us in the clouds.' He didn't sound very enthusiastic.

Hazel stared down at the rolling farmland, thinking about what lay beneath it – the realm of her father, lord of the Underworld. She'd only met Pluto once, and she hadn't even realized who he was. She certainly had never expected help from him – not when she was alive the first time, not during her time as a spirit in the Underworld, not since Nico had brought her back to the world of the living.

Her dad's servant Thanatos, god of death, had suggested that Pluto might be doing Hazel a favour by ignoring her.

Text copyright (c) Rick Riordan. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

After all, she wasn't supposed to be alive. If Pluto took notice of her, he might have to return her to the land of the dead.

Which meant calling on Pluto would be a very bad idea. And yet . . .

Please, Dad, she found herself praying. *I* have *to find a way to your temple in Greece – the House of Hades. If you're down there, show me what to do.*

At the edge of the horizon, a flicker of movement caught her eye – something small and beige racing across the fields at incredible speed, leaving a vapour trail like a plane's.

Hazel couldn't believe it. She didn't dare hope, but it *had* to be . . . 'Arion.'

'What?' Nico asked.

Leo let out a happy whoop as the dust cloud got closer. 'It's her horse, man! You missed that whole part. We haven't seen him since Kansas!'

Hazel laughed – the first time she'd laughed in days. It felt so good to see her old friend.

About a mile to the north, the small beige dot circled a hill and stopped at the summit. He was difficult to make out, but when the horse reared and whinnied the sound carried all the way to the *Argo II*. Hazel had no doubt – it was Arion.

'We have to meet him,' she said. 'He's here to help.'

'Yeah, okay.' Leo scratched his head. 'But, uh, we talked about not landing the ship on the ground any more, remember? You know, with Gaia wanting to destroy us and all.'

'Just get me close, and I'll use the rope ladder.' Hazel's heart was pounding. 'I think Arion wants to tell me something.'

Text copyright (c) Rick Riordan. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd