THE TRIALS OF APOLLO

THE BURNING MAZE

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The Dark Prophecy

The words that memory wrought are set to fire,
Ere new moon rises o'er the Devil's Mount.
The changeling lord shall face a challenge dire,
Till bodies fill the Tiber beyond count.

Yet southward must the sun now trace its course,
Through mazes dark to lands of scorching death
To find the master of the swift white horse
And wrest from him the crossword speaker's breath.

To westward palace must the Lester go;
Demeter's daughter finds her ancient roots.
The cloven guide alone the way does know,
To walk the path in thine own enemy's boots.

When three are known and Tiber reached alive,
'Tis only then Apollo starts to jive.

1

Once was Apollo
Now a rat in the Lab'rinth
Send help. And cronuts

NO.

I refuse to share this part of my story. It was the lowest, most humiliating, most awful week in my four-thousand-plus years of life. Tragedy. Disaster. Heartbreak. I will not tell you about it.

Why are you still here? Go away!

But, alas, I suppose I have no choice. Doubtless, Zeus *expects* me to tell you the story as part of my punishment.

It's not enough that he turned me, the once-divine Apollo, into a mortal teenager with acne, flab and the alias Lester Papadopoulos. It's not enough that he sent me on a dangerous quest to liberate five great ancient Oracles from a trio of evil Roman emperors. It's not even enough that he enslaved me – his *formerly favourite son* – to a pushy twelve-year-old demigod named Meg!

On top of all that, Zeus wants me to record my shame for posterity.

Very well. But I have warned you. In these pages, only suffering awaits.

Where to begin?

With Grover and Meg, of course.

For two days, we had travelled the Labyrinth – across pits of darkness and around lakes of poison, through dilapidated shopping malls with only discount Halloween stores and questionable Chinese food buffets.

The Labyrinth could be a bewildering place. Like a web of capillaries beneath the skin of the mortal world, it connected basements, sewers and forgotten tunnels around the globe with no regard to the rules of time and space. One might enter the Labyrinth through a manhole in Rome, walk ten feet, open a door and find oneself at a training camp for clowns in Buffalo, Minnesota. (Please don't ask. It was traumatic.)

I would have preferred to avoid the Labyrinth altogether. Sadly, the prophecy we'd received in Indiana had been quite specific: *Through mazes dark to lands of scorching death.* Fun! *The cloven guide alone the way does know.*

Except that our cloven guide, the satyr Grover Underwood, did not seem to know the way.

'You're lost,' I said, for the fortieth time.

'Am not!' he protested.

He trotted along in his baggy jeans and green tie-dyed T-shirt, his goat hooves wobbling in his specially modified New Balance 520s. A red Rasta cap covered his curly hair. Why he thought this disguise helped him better pass for human, I couldn't say. The bumps of his horns were clearly visible beneath the hat. His shoes popped off his hooves

several times a day, and I was getting tired of being his sneaker retriever.

He stopped at a T in the corridor. In either direction, rough-hewn stone walls marched into darkness. Grover tugged his wispy goatee.

'Well?' Meg asked.

Grover flinched. Like me, he had quickly come to fear Meg's displeasure.

Not that Meg McCaffrey *looked* terrifying. She was small for her age, with traffic-light-coloured clothes – green dress, yellow leggings, red high-tops – all torn and dirty thanks to our many crawls through narrow tunnels. Cobwebs streaked her dark pageboy haircut. The lenses of her cat-eye glasses were so grimy I couldn't imagine how she could see. In all, she looked like a kindergartner who had just survived a vicious playground brawl for possession of a tyre swing.

Grover pointed to the tunnel on the right. 'I – I'm pretty sure Palm Springs is that way.'

'Pretty sure?' Meg asked. 'Like last time, when we walked into a bathroom and surprised a Cyclops on the toilet?'

'That wasn't my fault!' Grover protested. 'Besides, this direction *smells* right. Like . . . cacti.'

Meg sniffed the air. 'I don't smell cacti.'

'Meg,' I said, 'the satyr is supposed to be our guide. We don't have much choice but to trust him.'

Grover huffed. 'Thanks for the vote of confidence. Your daily reminder: I didn't *ask* to be magically summoned halfway across the country and wake up in a rooftop tomato patch in Indianapolis!'

Brave words, but he kept his eyes on the twin rings around Meg's middle fingers, perhaps worried she might summon her golden scimitars and slice him into rotisserie-style cabrito.

Ever since learning that Meg was a daughter of Demeter, the goddess of growing things, Grover Underwood had acted more intimidated by her than by me, a former Olympian deity. Life was not fair.

Meg wiped her nose. 'Fine. I just didn't think we'd be wandering around down here for two days. The new moon is in –'

'Three more days,' I said, cutting her off. 'We know.'

Perhaps I was too brusque, but I didn't need a reminder about the other part of the prophecy. While we travelled south to find the next Oracle, our friend Leo Valdez was desperately flying his bronze dragon towards Camp Jupiter, the Roman demigod training ground in Northern California, hoping to warn them about the fire, death and disaster that supposedly faced them at the new moon.

I tried to soften my tone. 'We have to assume Leo and the Romans can handle whatever's coming in the north. We have our own task.'

'And plenty of our own fires.' Grover sighed.

'Meaning what?' Meg asked.

As he had for the last two days, Grover remained evasive. 'Best not to talk about it . . . here.'

He glanced around nervously as if the walls might have ears, which was a distinct possibility. The Labyrinth was a living structure. Judging from the smells that emanated

from some of the corridors, I was fairly sure it had a lower intestine at least.

Grover scratched his ribs. 'I'll try to get us there fast, guys,' he promised. 'But the Labyrinth has a mind of its own. Last time I was here, with Percy . . .'

His expression turned wistful, as it often did when he referred to his old adventures with his best friend, Percy Jackson. I couldn't blame him. Percy was a handy demigod to have around. Unfortunately, he was not as easy to summon from a tomato patch as our satyr guide had been.

I placed my hand on Grover's shoulder. 'We know you're doing your best. Let's keep going. And, while you're sniffing for cacti, if you could keep your nostrils open for breakfast – perhaps coffee and lemon-maple cronuts – that would be great.'

We followed our guide down the right-hand tunnel.

Soon the passage narrowed and tapered, forcing us to crouch and waddle in single file. I stayed in the middle, the safest place to be. You may not find that brave, but Grover was a lord of the Wild, a member of the satyrs' ruling Council of Cloven Elders. Allegedly, he had great powers, though I hadn't seen him use any yet. As for Meg, she could not only dual-wield golden scimitars but also do amazing things with packets of gardening seeds, which she'd stocked up on in Indianapolis.

I, on the other hand, had grown weaker and more defenceless by the day. Since our battle with the emperor Commodus, whom I'd blinded with a burst of divine light, I had not been able to summon even the smallest bit of my

former godly power. My fingers had grown sluggish on the fret board of my combat ukulele. My archery skills had deteriorated. I'd even missed a shot when I fired at that Cyclops on the toilet. (I'm not sure which of us had been more embarrassed.) At the same time, the waking visions that sometimes paralysed me had become more frequent and more intense.

I hadn't shared my concerns with my friends. Not yet.

I wanted to believe my powers were simply recharging. Our trials in Indianapolis had nearly destroyed me, after all.

But there was another possibility. I had fallen from Olympus and crash-landed in a Manhattan dumpster in January. It was now March. That meant I had been human for about two months. It was possible that the longer I stayed mortal, the weaker I would become, and the harder it would be to get back to my divine state.

Had it been that way the last two times Zeus exiled me to earth? I couldn't remember. On some days, I couldn't even remember the taste of ambrosia, or the names of my sun-chariot horses, or the face of my twin sister, Artemis. (Normally I would've said that was a blessing, not remembering my sister's face, but I missed her terribly. Don't you *dare* tell her I said that.)

We crept along the corridor, the magical Arrow of Dodona buzzing in my quiver like a silenced phone, as if asking to be taken out and consulted.

I tried to ignore it.

The last few times I'd asked the arrow for advice, it had been unhelpful. Worse, it had been unhelpful in Shakespearean English, with more *thee*s, *thou*s and *yea*,

*verily*s than I could stomach. I'd never liked the 90s. (By which I mean the 1590s.) Perhaps I would confer with the arrow when we made it to Palm Springs. *If* we made it to Palm Springs . . .

Grover stopped at another T.

He sniffed to the right, then the left. His nose quivered like a rabbit that had just smelled a dog.

Suddenly he yelled, 'Back!' and threw himself into reverse. The corridor was so narrow he toppled into my lap, which forced me to topple into Meg's lap, who sat down hard with a startled grunt. Before I could complain that I don't *do* group massage, my ears popped. All the moisture was sucked out of the air. An acrid smell rolled over me – like fresh tar on an Arizona highway – and across the corridor in front of us roared a sheet of yellow fire, a pulse of pure heat that stopped as quickly as it had begun.

My ears crackled . . . possibly from the blood boiling in my head. My mouth was so dry it was impossible to swallow. I couldn't tell if I was trembling uncontrollably, or if all three of us were.

'Wh-what was that?' I wondered why my first instinct had been to say *who*. Something about that blast had felt horribly familiar. In the lingering bitter smoke, I thought I detected the stench of hatred, frustration and hunger.

Grover's red Rasta cap steamed. He smelled of burnt goat hair. 'That,' he said weakly, 'means we're getting close. We need to hurry.'

'Like I've been *saying*,' Meg grumbled. 'Now get off.' She kneed me in the butt.

I struggled to rise, at least as far as I could in the cramped

tunnel. With the fire gone, my skin felt clammy. The corridor in front of us had gone dark and silent, as if it couldn't possibly have been a vent for hellfire, but I'd spent enough time in the sun chariot to gauge the heat of flames. If we'd been caught in that blast, we would've been ionized into plasma.

'We'll have to go left,' Grover decided.

'Um,' I said, 'left is the direction from which the fire came.'

'It's also the quickest way.'

'How about backwards?' Meg suggested.

'Guys, we're close,' Grover insisted. 'I can *feel* it. But we've wandered into *his* part of the maze. If we don't hurry –'

Screee!

The noise echoed from the corridor behind us. I wanted to believe it was some random mechanical sound the Labyrinth often generated: a metal door swinging on rusty hinges, or a battery-operated toy from the Halloween clearance store rolling into a bottomless pit. But the look on Grover's face told me what I already suspected: the noise was the cry of a living creature.

SCREEE! The second cry was angrier, and much closer.

I didn't like what Grover had said about us being in *his part of the maze*. Who was *his* referring to? I certainly didn't want to run into a corridor that had an insta-grill setting, but, on the other hand, the cry behind us filled me with terror.

'Run,' Meg said.

'Run,' Grover agreed.

We bolted down the left-hand tunnel. The only good

news: it was slightly larger, allowing us to flee for our lives with more elbow room. At the next crossroads, we turned left again, then took an immediate right. We jumped a pit, climbed a staircase and raced down another corridor, but the creature behind us seemed to have no trouble following our scent.

SCREEE! it cried from the darkness.

I knew that sound, but my faulty human memory couldn't place it. Some sort of avian creature. Nothing cute like a parakeet or a cockatoo. Something from the infernal regions – dangerous, bloodthirsty, very cranky.

We emerged in a circular chamber that looked like the bottom of a giant well. A narrow ramp spiralled up the side of the rough brick wall. What might be at the top, I couldn't tell. I saw no other exits.

SCREEE!

The cry grated against the bones of my middle ear. The flutter of wings echoed from the corridor behind us – or was I hearing *multiple* birds? Did these things travel in flocks? I had encountered them before. Confound it, I should *know* this!

'What now?' Meg asked. 'Up?'

Grover stared into the gloom above, his mouth hanging open. 'This doesn't make any sense. This shouldn't be here.'

'Grover!' Meg said. 'Up or no?'

'Yes, up!' he yelped. 'Up is good!'

'No,' I said, the back of my neck tingling with dread. 'We won't make it. We need to block this corridor.'

Meg frowned. 'But –'

'Magic plant stuff!' I shouted. 'Hurry!'

One thing I will say for Meg: when you need plant stuff done magically, she's your girl. She dug into the pouches on her belt, ripped open a packet of seeds and flung them into the tunnel.

Grover whipped out his panpipes. He played a lively jig to encourage growth as Meg knelt before the seeds, her face scrunched in concentration.

Together, the lord of the Wild and the daughter of Demeter made a super gardening duo. The seeds erupted into tomato plants. Their stems grew, interweaving across the mouth of the tunnel. Leaves unfurled with ultra-speed. Tomatoes swelled into fist-size red fruits. The tunnel was almost closed off when a dark feathery shape burst through a gap in the net.

Talons raked my left cheek as the bird flew past, narrowly missing my eye. The creature circled the room, screeching in triumph, then settled on the spiral ramp ten feet above us, peering down with round gold eyes like searchlights.

An owl? No, it was twice as big as Athena's largest specimens. Its plumage glistened obsidian black. It lifted one leathery red claw, opened its golden beak and, using its thick black tongue, licked the blood from its talons – *my* blood.

My sight grew fuzzy. My knees turned to rubber. I was dimly aware of other noises coming from the tunnel – frustrated shrieks, the flapping of wings as more demon birds battered against the tomato plants, trying to get through.

Meg appeared at my side, her scimitars flashing in her hands, her eyes fixed on the huge dark bird above us. 'Apollo, you okay?'

'Strix,' I said, the name floating up from the recesses of my feeble mortal mind. 'That thing is a strix.'

'How do we kill it?' Meg asked. Always the practical one.

I touched the cuts on my face. I could feel neither my cheek nor my fingers. 'Well, killing it could be a problem.'

Grover yelped as the strixes outside screamed and threw themselves at the plants. 'Guys, we've got six or seven more trying to get in. These tomatoes aren't going to hold them.'

'Apollo, answer me right now,' Meg ordered. 'What do I need to do?'

I wanted to comply. Really, I did. But I was having trouble forming words. I felt as if Hephaestus had just performed one of his famous tooth extractions on me and I was still under the influence of his giggle nectar.

'K-killing the bird will curse you,' I said finally.

'And if I *don't* kill it?' Meg asked.

'Oh, then it will d-disembowel you, drink your blood and eat your flesh.' I grinned, though I had a feeling I hadn't said anything funny. 'Also, don't let a strix scratch you. It'll paralyse you!'

By way of demonstration, I fell over sideways.

Above us, the strix spread its wings and swooped down.

2

Now I'm a suitcase
Duct-taped to a satyr's back.
Worst. Morning. Ever.

'STOP!' GROVER YELPED. 'We come in peace!'

The bird was not impressed. It attacked, only missing the satyr's face because Meg lashed out with her scimitars. The strix veered, pirouetting between her blades, and landed unscathed a little higher up the spiral ramp.

SCREE! the strix yelled, ruffling its feathers.

'What do you *mean* "you need to kill us"?' Grover asked.

Meg scowled. 'You can talk to it?'

'Well, yes,' Grover said. 'It's an animal.'

'Why didn't you tell us what it was saying before now?' Meg asked.

'Because it was just yelling *scree*!' Grover said. 'Now it's saying *scree* as in, it needs to kill us.'

I tried to move my legs. They seemed to have turned into sacks of cement, which I found vaguely amusing. I could still move my arms and had some feeling in my chest, but I wasn't sure how long that would last.

'Perhaps ask the strix *why* it needs to kill us?' I suggested.

'Scree!' Grover said.

I was getting tired of the strix language. The bird replied in a series of squawks and clicks.

Meanwhile, out in the corridor, the other strixes shrieked and bashed against the net of plants. Black talons and gold beaks poked out, snapping tomatoes into pico de gallo. I figured we had a few minutes at most until the birds burst through and killed us all, but their razor-sharp beaks sure were cute!

Grover wrung his hands. 'The strix says he's been sent to drink our blood, eat our flesh and disembowel us, not necessarily in that order. He says he's sorry, but it's a direct command from the emperor.'

'Stupid emperors,' Meg grumbled. 'Which one?'

'I don't know,' Grover said. 'The strix just calls him *Scree*.'

'You can translate *disembowel*,' she noted, 'but you can't translate the emperor's name?'

Personally, I was okay with that. Since leaving Indianapolis, I'd spent a lot of time mulling over the Dark Prophecy we had received in the Cave of Trophonius. We had already encountered Nero and Commodus, and I had a dreadful suspicion about the identity of the third emperor, whom we had yet to meet. At the moment, I didn't want confirmation. The euphoria of the strix venom was starting to dissipate. I was about to be eaten alive by a bloodsucking mega-owl. I didn't need any more reasons to weep in despair.

The strix dived at Meg. She dodged aside, whacking the flat of her blade against the bird's tail feathers as it rushed past, sending the unfortunate bird into the opposite wall,

where it smacked face-first into the brick, exploding in a cloud of monster dust and feathers.

'Meg!' I said. 'I told you not to kill it! You'll get cursed!'

'I didn't kill it. It committed suicide against that wall.'

'I don't think the Fates will see it that way.'

'Then let's not tell them.'

'Guys?' Grover pointed to the tomato plants, which were rapidly thinning under the onslaught of claws and beaks. 'If we can't kill the strixes, maybe we should strengthen this barrier?'

He raised his pipes and played. Meg turned her swords back into rings. She stretched her hands towards the tomato plants. The stems thickened and the roots struggled to take hold in the stone floor, but it was a losing battle. Too many strixes were now battering the other side, ripping through the new growth as fast as it emerged.

'No good.' Meg stumbled back, her face beaded with sweat. 'Only so much we can do without soil and sunlight.'

'You're right.' Grover looked above us, his eyes following the spiral ramp up into the gloom. 'We're nearly home. If we can just get to the top before the strixes get through –'

'So we climb,' Meg announced.

'Hello?' I said miserably. 'Paralysed former god here.'

Grover grimaced at Meg. 'Duct tape?'

'Duct tape,' she agreed.

May the gods defend me from heroes with duct tape. And heroes *always* seem to have duct tape. Meg produced a roll from a pouch on her gardening belt. She propped me

into a sitting position, back-to-back with Grover, then proceeded to loop tape under our armpits, binding me to the satyr as if I were a hiking pack.

With Meg's help, Grover staggered to his feet, jostling me around so I got random views of the walls, the floor, Meg's face and my own paralysed legs manspreading beneath me.

'Uh, Grover?' I asked. 'Will you have enough strength to carry me all the way up?'

'Satyrs are great climbers,' he wheezed.

He started up the narrow ramp, my paralysed feet dragging behind us. Meg followed, glancing back every so often at the rapidly deteriorating tomato plants.

'Apollo,' she said, 'tell me about strixes.'

I sifted through my brain, panning for useful nuggets among the sludge.

'They . . . they are birds of ill omen,' I said. 'When they show up, bad things happen.'

'Duh,' said Meg. 'What else?'

'Er, they usually feed on the young and weak. Babies, old people, paralysed gods . . . that sort of thing. They breed in the upper reaches of Tartarus. I'm only speculating here, but I'm pretty sure they don't make good pets.'

'How do we drive them off?' she said. 'If we can't kill them, how do we stop them?'

'I – I don't know.'

Meg sighed in frustration. 'Talk to the Arrow of Dodona. See if it knows anything. I'm going to try buying us some time.'

She jogged back down the ramp.

Talking to the arrow was just about the *only* way my day could get worse, but I was under orders, and when Meg commanded me I could not disobey. I reached over my shoulder, groped through my quiver and pulled forth the magic missile.

'Hello, Wise and Powerful Arrow,' I said. (Always best to start with flattery.)

TOOKEST THEE LONG ENOUGH, intoned the arrow. *FOR FORTNIGHTS UNTOLD HAVE I TRIED TO SPEAK WITH THEE.*

'It's been about forty-eight hours,' I said.

VERILY, TIME DOTH CREEP WHEN ONE IS QUIVERED. THOU SHOULDST TRY IT AND SEEST HOW THOU LIKEST IT.

'Right.' I resisted the urge to snap the arrow's shaft. 'What can you tell me about strixes?'

I MUST SPEAK TO THEE ABOUT – HOLD THE PHONE. STRIXES? WHEREFORE TALKEST TO ME OF THOSE?

'Because they are about to killeth – to kill us.'

FIE! groaned the arrow. *THOU SHOULDST AVOID SUCH DANGERS!*

'I would never have thought of that,' I said. 'Do you have any strix-pertinent information or not, O Wise Projectile?'

The arrow buzzed, no doubt trying to access Wikipedia. It denies using the Internet. Perhaps, then, it's just a coincidence the arrow is always more helpful when we are in an area with free Wi-Fi.

Grover valiantly lugged my sorry mortal body up the ramp. He huffed and gasped, staggering dangerously close to the edge. The floor of the room was now fifty feet below us – just far enough for a nice, lethal fall. I could see Meg down there pacing, muttering to herself and shaking out more packets of gardening seeds.

Above, the ramp seemed to spiral forever. Whatever waited for us at the top, assuming there *was* a top, remained lost in the darkness. I found it very inconsiderate that the Labyrinth did not provide an elevator, or at least a proper handrail. How were heroes with accessibility needs supposed to enjoy this death trap?

At last the Arrow of Dodona delivered its verdict: *STRIXES ART DANGEROUS*.

'Once again,' I said, 'your wisdom brings light to the darkness.'

SHUT THEE UP, the arrow continued. *THE BIRDS CAN BE SLAIN, THOUGH THIS SHALT CURSE THE SLAYER AND CAUSETH MORE STRIXES TO APPEARETH*.

'Yes, yes. What else?'

'What's it saying?' Grover asked between gasps.

Among its many irritating qualities, the arrow spoke solely in my mind, so not only did I look like a crazy person when I conversed with it but I had to constantly report its ramblings to my friends.

'It's still searching Google,' I told Grover. 'Perhaps, O Arrow, you could do a Boolean search, "strix plus defeat".'

I USE NOT SUCH CHEATS! the arrow thundered. Then it was silent long enough to type *strix* + *defeat*.

THE BIRDS MAY BE REPELLED WITH PIG ENTRAILS, it reported. *HAST THOU ANY?*

'Grover,' I called over my shoulder, 'would you happen to have any pig entrails?'

'*What?*' He turned, which was not an effective way of facing me, since I was duct-taped to his back. He almost scraped my nose off on the brick wall. 'Why would I carry pig entrails? I'm a vegetarian!'

Meg clambered up the ramp to join us.

'The birds are almost through,' she reported. 'I tried different kinds of plants. I tried to summon Peaches . . .' Her voice broke with despair.

Since entering the Labyrinth, she had been unable to summon her peach-spirit minion, who was handy in a fight but rather picky about when and where he showed up. I supposed that, much like tomato plants, Peaches didn't do well underground.

'Arrow of Dodona, what else?' I shouted at its point. 'There has to be *something* besides pig intestines that will keep strixes at bay!'

WAIT, the arrow said. *HARK! IT APPEARETH THAT ARBUTUS SHALL SERVE.*

'*Our-butt-us* shall what?' I demanded.

Too late.

Below us, with a peal of bloodthirsty shrieks, the strixes broke through the tomato barricade and swarmed into the room.