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opening extract from

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1 MY BEST FRIEND SHOPS FOR A WEDDING DRESS

My nightmare started like this.

I was standing on a deserted street in some little beach town. It was the middle of the night. A storm was blowing. Wind and rain ripped at the palm trees along the sidewalk. Pink and yellow stucco buildings lined the street, their windows boarded up. A block away, past a line of hibiscus bushes, the ocean churned.

Florida, I thought. Though I wasn't sure how I knew that. I'd never been to Florida.

Then I heard hooves clattering against the pavement. I turned and saw my friend Grover running for his life.

Yeah, I said *hooves*.

Grover is a satyr. From the waist up, he looks like a typical gangly teenager with a peach-fuzz goatee and a bad case of acne. He walks with a strange limp, but unless you happen to catch him without his trousers on (which I don't recommend), you'd never know there was anything unhuman about him. Baggy jeans and fake feet hide the fact that he's got furry hindquarters and hooves.

Grover had been my best friend in sixth grade. He'd gone on this adventure with me and a girl named Annabeth to save the world, but I hadn't seen him since last July, when he set off alone on a dangerous quest – a quest no satyr had ever returned from.

Anyway, in my dream, Grover was hauling goat tail, holding his human shoes in his hands the way he does when he needs to move fast. He clopped past the little tourist shops and surfboard rental places. The wind bent the palm trees almost to the ground.

Grover was terrified of something behind him. He must've just come from the beach. Wet sand was caked in his fur. He'd escaped from somewhere. He was trying to get away from . . . something.

A bone-rattling growl cut through the storm. Behind Grover, at the far end of the block, a shadowy figure loomed. It swatted aside a street lamp, which burst in a shower of sparks.

Grover stumbled, whimpering in fear. He muttered to himself, *Have to get away. Have to warn them!*

I couldn't see what was chasing him, but I could hear it muttering and cursing. The ground shook as it got closer. Grover dashed around a street corner and faltered. He'd run into a dead-end courtyard full of shops. No time to back up. The nearest door had been blown open by the storm. The sign above the darkened display window read: ST AUGUSTINE BRIDAL BOUTIQUE.

Grover dashed inside. He dived behind a rack of wedding dresses.

The monster's shadow passed in front of the shop. I could smell the thing – a sickening combination of wet sheep wool and rotten meat and that weird sour body odour only monsters have, like a skunk that's been living off Mexican food.

Grover trembled behind the wedding dresses. The monster's shadow passed on.

Silence except for the rain. Grover took a deep breath. Maybe the thing was gone.

Then lightning flashed. The entire front of the store exploded, and a monstrous voice bellowed, 'MIIIIINE!'

I sat bolt upright, shivering in my bed.

There was no storm. No monster.

Morning sunlight filtered through my bedroom window.

I thought I saw a shadow flicker across the glass – a humanlike shape. But then there was a knock on my bedroom door – my mom called, 'Percy, you're going to be late' – and the shadow at the window disappeared.

It must've been my imagination. A fifth-storey window with a rickety old fire escape . . . there couldn't have been anyone out there.

'Come on, dear,' my mother called again. 'Last day of school. You should be excited! You've almost made it!'

'Coming,' I managed.

I felt under my pillow. My fingers closed reassuringly around the ballpoint pen I always slept with. I brought it out, studied the Ancient Greek writing engraved on the side: *Anaklusmos*. Riptide.

I thought about uncapping it, but something held me back. I hadn't used Riptide for so long . . .

Besides, my mom had made me promise not to use deadly weapons in the apartment after I'd swung a javelin the wrong way and taken out her china cabinet. I put Anaklusmos on my nightstand and dragged myself out of bed.

I got dressed as quickly as I could. I tried not to think

about my nightmare or monsters or the shadow at my window.

Have to get away. Have to warn them!

What had Grover meant?

I made a three-fingered claw over my heart and pushed outwards – an ancient gesture Grover had once taught me for warding off evil.

The dream couldn't have been real.

Last day of school. My mom was right, I should have been excited. For the first time in my life, I'd almost made it an entire year without getting expelled. No weird accidents. No fights in the classroom. No teachers turning into monsters and trying to kill me with poisoned cafeteria food or exploding homework. Tomorrow, I'd be on my way to my favourite place in the world – Camp Half-Blood.

Only one more day to go. Surely even I couldn't mess that up.

As usual, I didn't have a clue how wrong I was.

My mom made blue waffles and blue eggs for breakfast. She's funny that way, celebrating special occasions with blue food. I think it's her way of saying anything is possible. Percy can pass seventh grade. Waffles can be blue. Little miracles like that.

I ate at the kitchen table while my mom washed dishes. She was dressed in her work uniform – a starry blue skirt and a red-and-white striped blouse she wore to sell candy at Sweet on America. Her long brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

The waffles tasted great, but I guess I wasn't digging

in like I usually did. My mom looked over and frowned. 'Percy, are you all right?'

'Yeah . . . fine.'

But she could always tell when something was bothering me. She dried her hands and sat down across from me. 'School, or . . .'

She didn't need to finish. I knew what she was asking.

'I think Grover's in trouble,' I said, and I told her about my dream.

She pursed her lips. We didn't talk much about the *other* part of my life. We tried to live as normally as possible, but my mom knew all about Grover.

'I wouldn't be too worried, dear,' she said. 'Grover is a big satyr now. If there were a problem, I'm sure we would've heard from . . . from camp . . .' Her shoulders tensed as she said the word *camp*.

'What is it?' I asked.

'Nothing,' she said. 'I'll tell you what. This afternoon we'll celebrate the end of school. I'll take you and Tyson to Rockefeller Center – to that skateboard shop you like.'

Oh, man, that was tempting. We were always struggling with money. Between my mom's night classes and my private school tuition, we could never afford to do special stuff like shop for a skateboard. But something in her voice bothered me.

'Wait a minute,' I said. 'I thought we were packing me up for camp tonight.'

She twisted her dishcloth. 'Ah, dear, about that . . . I got a message from Chiron last night.'

My heart sank. Chiron was the activities director at Camp Half-Blood. He wouldn't contact us unless

something serious was going on. 'What did he say?'

'He thinks . . . it might not be safe for you to come to camp just yet. We might have to postpone.'

'*Postpone?* Mom, how could it not be *safe*? I'm a half-blood! It's like the only safe place on earth for me!'

'Usually, dear. But with the problems they're having –'

'*What* problems?'

'Percy . . . I'm very, very sorry. I was hoping to talk to you about it this afternoon. I can't explain it all now. I'm not even sure Chiron can. Everything happened so suddenly.'

My mind was reeling. How could I *not* go to camp? I wanted to ask a million questions, but just then the kitchen clock chimed the half-hour.

My mom looked almost relieved. 'Seven thirty, dear. You should go. Tyson will be waiting.'

'But –'

'Percy, we'll talk this afternoon. Go on to school.'

That was the last thing I wanted to do, but my mom had this fragile look in her eyes – a kind of warning, like if I pushed her too hard she'd start to cry. Besides, she was right about my friend Tyson. I had to meet him at the subway station on time or he'd get upset. He was scared of travelling underground alone.

I gathered up my stuff, but I stopped in the doorway. 'Mom, this problem at camp. Does it . . . could it have anything to do with my dream about Grover?'

She wouldn't meet my eyes. 'We'll talk this afternoon, dear. I'll explain . . . as much as I can.'

Reluctantly, I told her goodbye. I jogged downstairs to catch the Number Two train.

I didn't know it at the time, but my mom and I would never get to have our afternoon talk.

In fact, I wouldn't be seeing home for a long, long time.

As I stepped outside, I glanced at the brownstone building across the street. Just for a second I saw a dark shape in the morning sunlight – a human silhouette against the brick wall, a shadow that belonged to no one.

Then it rippled and vanished.