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opening extract from

Percy Jackson and the Battle of the Labyrinth

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1 I BATTLE THE CHEERLEADING SQUAD

The last thing I wanted to do on my summer break was blow up another school. But there I was Monday morning, the first week of June, sitting in my mom's car in front of Goode High School on East 81st.

Goode was this big brownstone building overlooking the East River. A bunch of BMWs and Lincoln Town Cars were parked out front. Staring up at the fancy stone archway, I wondered how long it would take me to get kicked out of this place.

'Just relax.' My mom didn't sound relaxed. 'It's only an orientation tour. And remember, dear, this is Paul's school. So try not to . . . you know.'

'Destroy it?'

'Yes.'

Paul Blofis, my mom's boyfriend, was standing out front, greeting future ninth graders as they came up the steps. With his salt-and-pepper hair, denim clothes and leather jacket, he reminded me of a TV actor, but he was just an English teacher. He'd managed to convince Goode High School to accept me for ninth grade, despite the fact that I'd been kicked out of every school I'd ever attended. I'd tried to warn him it wasn't a good idea, but he wouldn't listen.

I looked at my mom. 'You haven't told him the truth about me, have you?'

She tapped her fingers nervously on the wheel. She was dressed up for a job interview – her best blue dress and high-heeled shoes.

'I thought we should wait,' she admitted.

'So we don't scare him away.'

'I'm sure orientation will be fine, Percy. It's only one morning.'

'Great,' I mumbled. 'I can get expelled before I even start the school year.'

'Think positive. Tomorrow you're off to camp! After orientation, you've got your date –'

'It's not a date!' I protested. 'It's just Annabeth, Mom. Jeez!'

'She's coming all the way from camp to meet you.'

'Well, yeah.'

'You're going to the movies.'

'Yeah.'

'Just the two of you.'

'Mom!'

She held up her hands in surrender, but I could tell she was trying hard not to smile. 'You'd better get inside, dear. I'll see you tonight.'

I was about to get out of the car when I looked over at the steps of the school. Paul Blofis was greeting a girl with frizzy red hair. She wore a maroon T-shirt and ratty jeans decorated with marker drawings. When she turned, I caught a glimpse of her face, and the hairs on my arms stood straight up.

'Percy?' my mom asked. 'What's wrong?'

'N-nothing,' I stammered. 'Does the school have a side entrance?'

'Down the block on the right. Why?'

'I'll see you later.'

My mom started to say something, but I got out of the car and ran, hoping the redheaded girl wouldn't see me.

What was *she* doing here? Not even *my* luck could be this bad.

Yeah, right. I was about to find out my luck could get a whole lot worse.

Sneaking into orientation didn't work out too well. Two cheerleaders in purple-and-white uniforms were standing at the side entrance, waiting to ambush freshmen.

'Hi!' They smiled, which I figured was the first and last time any cheerleaders would be that friendly to me. One was blonde with icy blue eyes. The other was African American with dark curly hair like Medusa's (and, believe me, I know what I'm talking about). Both girls had their names stitched in cursive on their uniforms, but with my dyslexia, the words looked like meaningless spaghetti.

'Welcome to Goode,' the blonde girl said. 'You are *so* going to love it.'

But as she looked me up and down, her expression said something more like, *Eww, who is this loser?*

The other girl stepped uncomfortably close to me. I studied the stitching on her uniform and made out: *Kelli.* She smelled like roses and something else I recognized from riding lessons at camp – the scent of freshly washed horses. It was a weird smell for a cheerleader. Maybe she owned a horse or something. Anyway, she stood so close I got the feeling she was going to try to push me down the steps. 'What's your name, fish?'

'Fish?'

'Freshman.'

'Uh, Percy.'

The girls exchanged looks.

'Oh, Percy Jackson,' the blonde one said. 'We've been waiting for you.'

That sent a major *Uh-oh* chill down my back. They were blocking the entrance, smiling in a not-very-friendly way. My hand crept instinctively towards my pocket, where I kept my lethal ballpoint pen, Riptide.

Then another voice came from inside the building: 'Percy?' It was Paul Blofis, somewhere down the hallway. I'd never been so glad to hear his voice.

The cheerleaders backed off. I was so anxious to get past them I accidentally kneed Kelli in the thigh.

Clang.

Her leg made a hollow, metallic sound, like I'd just hit a flagpole.

'Ow,' she muttered. 'Watch it, *fish.*'

I glanced down, but her leg looked like a regular old leg. I was too freaked out to ask questions. I dashed into the hall, the cheerleaders laughing behind me.

'There you are!' Paul told me. 'Welcome to Goode!'

'Hey, Paul – uh, Mr Blofis.' I glanced back, but the weird cheerleaders had disappeared.

'Percy, you look like you've seen a ghost.'

'Yeah, uh –'

Paul clapped me on the back. 'Listen, I know you're nervous, but don't worry. We get a lot of kids here with ADHD and dyslexia. The teachers know how to help.'

I almost wanted to laugh. If only ADHD and dyslexia

were my biggest worries. I mean, I knew Paul was trying to help, but if I told him the truth about me, he'd either think I were crazy or he'd run away screaming. Those cheerleaders, for instance. I had a bad feeling about them . . .

Then I looked down the hall, and I remembered I had another problem. The redheaded girl I'd seen on the front steps was just coming in the main entrance.

Don't notice me, I prayed.

She noticed me. Her eyes widened.

'Where's the orientation?' I asked Paul.

'The gym. That way. But –'

'Bye.'

'Percy?' he called, but I was already running.

I thought I'd lost her.

A bunch of kids were heading for the gym, and soon I was just one of three hundred fourteen-year-olds all crammed into the stands. A marching band played an out-of-tune fight song that sounded like somebody hitting a bag of cats with a metal baseball bat. Older kids, probably student-council members, stood up in front modelling the Goode school uniform and looking all, *Hey, we're cool.* Teachers milled around, smiling and shaking hands with students. The walls of the gym were plastered with big purple-and-white banners that said WELCOME, FUTURE FRESHMEN, GOODE IS GOOD, WE'RE ALL FAMILY, and a bunch of other happy slogans that pretty much made me want to throw up.

None of the other freshmen looked thrilled to be here, either. I mean, coming to orientation in June is not cool when school doesn't even start until September, but at

Goode, 'We prepare to excel early!' At least that's what the brochure said.

The marching band stopped playing. A guy in a pinstripe suit came to the microphone and started talking, but the sound echoed around the gym so I had no idea what he was saying. He might've been gargling.

Someone grabbed my shoulder. 'What are you doing here?'

It was her: my redheaded nightmare.

'Rachel Elizabeth Dare,' I said.

Her jaw dropped like she couldn't believe I had the nerve to remember her name. 'And you're Percy somebody. I didn't get your full name last December when you tried to *kill* me.'

'Look, I wasn't – I didn't – What are *you* doing here?'

'Same as you, I guess. Orientation.'

'You live in New York?'

'What, you thought I lived at Hoover Dam?'

It had never occurred to me. Whenever I thought about her (and I'm *not* saying I *thought* about her; she just, like, crossed my mind from time to time, okay?), I always figured she lived in the Hoover Dam area, since that's where I'd met her. We'd spent maybe ten minutes together, during which time I'd accidentally swung a sword at her, she'd saved my life and I'd run away, chased by a band of supernatural killing machines. You know, your typical chance meeting.

Some guy behind us whispered, 'Hey, shut up. The cheerleaders are talking!'

'Hi, guys!' a girl bubbled into the microphone. It was

the blonde I'd seen at the entrance. 'My name is Tammi, and this is, like, Kelli.' Kelli did a cartwheel.

Next to me, Rachel yelped like someone had stuck her with a pin. A few kids looked over and snickered, but Rachel just stared at the cheerleaders in horror. Tammi didn't seem to notice the outburst. She started talking about all the great ways we could get involved during our freshman year.

'Run,' Rachel told me. 'Now.'

'Why?'

Rachel didn't explain. She pushed her way to the edge of the stands, ignoring the frowning teachers and grumbling kids she was stepping on.

I hesitated. Tammi was explaining how we were about to break into small groups and tour the school. Kelli caught my eye and gave me an amused smile, like she was waiting to see what I'd do. It would look bad if I left right now. Paul Blofis was down there with the rest of the teachers. He'd wonder what was wrong.

Then I thought about Rachel Elizabeth Dare, and the special ability she'd shown last winter at Hoover Dam. She'd been able to see a group of security guards who weren't guards at all, who weren't even human. My heart pounding, I got up and followed her out of the gym.

I found Rachel in the band room. She was hiding behind a bass drum in the percussion section.

'Get over here!' she said. 'Keep your head down!'

I felt pretty silly, hiding behind a bunch of bongos, but I crouched beside her.

'Did they follow you?' Rachel asked.

'You mean the cheerleaders?'

She nodded nervously.

'I don't think so,' I said. 'What are they? What did you see?'

Her green eyes were bright with fear. She had a sprinkle of freckles on her face that reminded me of constellations. Her maroon T-shirt read HARVARD ART DEPT. 'You . . . you wouldn't believe me.'

'Oh yeah, I would,' I promised. 'I know you can see through the Mist.'

'The what?'

'The Mist. It's . . . well, it's like this veil that hides the way things really are. Some mortals are born with the ability to see through it. Like you.'

She studied me carefully. 'You did that at Hoover Dam. You called me a mortal. Like you're not.'

I felt like punching a bongo. What was I thinking? I could never explain. I shouldn't even try.

'Tell me,' she begged. 'You know what it means. All these horrible things I see?'

'Look, this is going to sound weird. Do you know anything about Greek myths?'

'Like . . . the Minotaur and the Hydra?'

'Yeah, just try not to say those names when I'm around, okay?'

'And the Furies,' she said, warming up. 'And the Sirens, and –'

'Okay!' I looked around the band room, sure that Rachel was going to make a bunch of bloodthirsty nasties pop out of the walls, but we were still alone. Down the hallway, I heard a mob of kids coming out of the gymnasium. They

were starting the group tours. We didn't have long to talk.

'All those monsters,' I said, 'all the Greek gods – they're real.'

'I knew it!'

I would've been more comfortable if she'd called me a liar, but Rachel looked like I'd just confirmed her worst suspicion.

'You don't know how hard it's been,' she said. 'For years I thought I was going crazy. I couldn't tell anybody. I couldn't –' Her eyes narrowed. 'Wait. Who are you? I mean *really*?'

'I'm not a monster.'

'Well, I know that. I could *see* if you were. You look like . . . you. But you're not human, are you?'

I swallowed. Even though I'd had three years to get used to who I was, I'd never talked about it with a regular mortal before – I mean, except for my mom, but she already knew. I don't know why, but I took the plunge.

'I'm a half-blood,' I said. 'I'm half human.'

'And half what?'

Just then Tammi and Kelli stepped into the band room. The doors slammed shut behind them.

'There you are, Percy Jackson,' Tammi said. 'It's time for your orientation.'

'They're horrible!' Rachel gasped.

Tammi and Kelli were still wearing their purple-and-white cheerleader costumes, holding pom-poms from the rally.

'What do they really look like?' I asked, but Rachel seemed too stunned to answer.

'Oh, forget her.' Tammi gave me a brilliant smile and started walking towards us. Kelli stayed by the doors, blocking our exit.

They'd trapped us. I knew we'd have to fight our way out, but Tammi's smile was so dazzling it distracted me. Her blue eyes were beautiful, and the way her hair swept over her shoulders . . .

'Percy,' Rachel warned.

I said something really intelligent like, 'Uhhh?'

Tammi was getting closer. She held out her pom-poms.

'Percy!' Rachel's voice seemed to be coming from a long way away. 'Snap out of it!'

It took all my willpower, but I got my pen out of my pocket and uncapped it. Riptide grew into a metre-long bronze sword, its blade glowing with a faint golden light. Tammi's smile turned to a sneer.

'Oh, come on,' she protested. 'You don't need that. How about a kiss instead?'

She smelled like roses and clean animal fur – a weird but somehow intoxicating smell.

Rachel pinched my arm, hard. 'Percy, she wants to bite you! Look at her!'

'She's just jealous.' Tammi looked back at Kelli. 'May I, mistress?'

Kelli was still blocking the door, licking her lips hungrily. 'Go ahead, Tammi. You're doing fine.'

Tammi took another step forward, but I levelled the tip of my sword at her chest. 'Get back.'

She snarled. 'Freshmen,' she said with disgust. 'This is *our* school, half-blood. We feed on whom we choose!'

Then she began to change. The colour drained out of her face and arms. Her skin turned as white as chalk, her eyes completely red. Her teeth grew into fangs.

'A vampire!' I stammered. Then I noticed her legs. Below the cheerleader skirt, her left leg was brown and shaggy, with a donkey's hoof. Her right leg was shaped like a human leg, but it was made of bronze. 'Uhh, a vampire with –'

'Don't mention the legs!' Tammi snapped. 'It's rude to make fun!'

She advanced on her weird, mismatched legs. She looked totally bizarre, especially with the pom-poms, but I couldn't laugh – not facing those red eyes and sharp fangs.

'A vampire, you say?' Kelli laughed. 'That silly legend was based on *us*, you fool. We are *empousai*, servants of Hecate.'

'Mmmm.' Tammi edged closer to me. 'Dark magic formed us from animal, bronze and ghost! We exist to feed on the blood of young men. Now come, give me that kiss!'

She bared her fangs. I was so paralysed I couldn't move, but Rachel threw a snare drum at the *empousa*'s head.

The demon hissed and batted the drum away. It went rolling along the aisles between music stands, its springs rattling against the drum head. Rachel threw a xylophone, but the demon just swatted that away, too.

'I don't usually kill girls,' Tammi growled. 'But for you, mortal, I'll make an exception. Your eyesight is a little *too* good!'

She lunged at Rachel.

'No!' I slashed with Riptide. Tammi tried to dodge my blade, but I sliced straight through her cheerleader uniform, and with a horrible wail she exploded into dust all over Rachel.

Rachel coughed. She looked like she'd just had a sack of flour dumped on her head. 'Gross!'

'Monsters do that,' I said. 'Sorry.'

'You killed my trainee!' Kelli yelled. 'You need a lesson in school spirit, half-blood!'

Then she, too, began to change. Her wiry hair turned to flickering flames. Her eyes turned red. She grew fangs. She loped towards us, her brass foot and hoof clopping unevenly on the band-room floor.

'I am senior *empousa*,' she growled. 'No hero has bested me in a thousand years.'

'Yeah?' I said. 'Then you're overdue!'

Kelli was a lot faster than Tammi. She dodged my first strike and rolled into the brass section, knocking over a row of trombones with a mighty crash. Rachel scrambled out of the way. I put myself between her and the *empousa.* Kelli circled us, her eyes going from me to the sword.

'Such a pretty little blade,' she said. 'What a shame it stands between us.'

Her form shimmered – sometimes a demon, sometimes a pretty cheerleader. I tried to keep my mind focused, but it was really distracting.

'Poor dear.' Kelli chuckled. 'You don't even know what's happening, do you? Soon, your pretty little camp in flames, your friends made slaves to the Lord of Time, and there's nothing you can do to stop it. It would be merciful to end your life now, before you have to see that.'

From down the hall, I heard voices. A tour group was approaching. A man was saying something about locker combinations.

The *empousa*'s eyes lit up. 'Excellent! We're about to have company!'

She picked up a tuba and threw it at me. Rachel and I ducked. The tuba sailed over our heads and crashed through the window.

The voices in the hall died down.

'Percy!' Kelli shouted, pretending to be scared. 'Why did you throw that?'

I was too surprised to answer. Kelli picked up a music stand and swiped a row of clarinets and flutes. Chairs and musical instruments crashed to the floor.

'Stop it!' I said.

People were tromping down the hall now, coming in our direction.

'Time to greet our visitors!' Kelli bared her fangs and ran for the doors. I charged after her with Riptide. I had to stop her from hurting the mortals.

'Percy, don't!' Rachel shouted. But I hadn't realized what Kelli was up to until it was too late.

Kelli flung open the doors. Paul Blofis and a bunch of freshmen stepped back in shock. I raised my sword.

At the last second, the *empousa* turned towards me like a cowering victim. 'Oh no, please!' she cried. I couldn't stop my blade. It was already in motion.

Just before the celestial bronze hit her, Kelli exploded into flames like a Molotov cocktail. Waves of fire splashed over everything. I'd never seen a monster do that before, but I didn't have time to wonder about it. I backed into the band room as flames engulfed the doorway.

'Percy?' Paul Blofis looked completely stunned, staring at me from across the fire. 'What have you done?'

Kids screamed and ran down the hall. The fire alarm wailed. Ceiling sprinklers hissed into life.

In the chaos, Rachel tugged on my sleeve. 'You have to get out of here!'

She was right. The school was in flames and I'd be held responsible. Mortals couldn't see through the Mist properly. To them it would look like I'd just attacked a helpless cheerleader in front of a group of witnesses. There was no way I could explain it. I turned from Paul and sprinted for the broken band-room window.

I burst out of the alley onto East 81st and ran straight into Annabeth.

'Hey, you're out early!' She laughed, grabbing my shoulders to keep me from tumbling into the street. 'Watch where you're going, Seaweed Brain.'

For a split second she was in a good mood and everything was fine. She was wearing jeans and an orange camp T-shirt and her clay bead necklace. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Her grey eyes sparkled. She looked like she was ready to catch a movie, have a cool afternoon hanging out together.

Then Rachel Elizabeth Dare, still covered in monster dust, came charging out of the alley, yelling, 'Percy, wait up!'

Annabeth's smile melted. She stared at Rachel, then at the school. For the first time, she seemed to notice the black smoke and the ringing fire alarms.

She frowned at me. 'What did you do this time? And who is this?'

'Oh, Rachel – Annabeth. Annabeth – Rachel. Um, she's a friend. I guess.'

I wasn't sure what else to call Rachel. I mean, I barely knew her, but after being in two life-or-death situations together, I couldn't just call her nobody.

'Hi,' Rachel said. Then she turned to me. 'You are in *so* much trouble. And you still owe me an explanation!'

Police sirens wailed on FDR Drive.

'Percy,' Annabeth said coldly, 'we should go.'

'I want to know more about half-bloods,' Rachel insisted. 'And monsters. And this stuff about the gods.' She grabbed my arm, whipped out a permanent marker and wrote a phone number on my hand. 'You're going to call me and explain, okay? You owe me that. Now get going.'

'But –'

'I'll make up some story,' Rachel said. 'I'll tell them it wasn't your fault. Just go!'

She ran back towards the school, leaving Annabeth and me in the street.

Annabeth stared at me for a second. Then she turned and took off.

'Hey!' I jogged after her. 'There were these two *empousai*,' I tried to explain. 'They were cheerleaders, see, and they said camp was going to burn, and –'

'You told a mortal girl about half-bloods?'

'She can see through the Mist. She saw the monsters before I did.'

'So you told her the truth.'

'She recognized me from Hoover Dam, so –'

'You've met her *before*?'

'Um, last winter. But, seriously, I barely know her.'

'She's kind of cute.'

'I – I never thought about it.'

Annabeth kept walking towards York Avenue.

'I'll deal with the school,' I promised, anxious to change the subject. 'Honest, it'll be fine.'

Annabeth wouldn't even look at me. 'I guess our afternoon is off. We should get you out of here, now that the police will be searching for you.'

Behind us, smoke billowed up from Goode High School. In the dark column of ashes, I thought I could almost see a face – a she-demon with red eyes, laughing at me.

Your pretty little camp in flames, Kelli had said. *Your friends made slaves to the Lord of Time.*

'You're right,' I told Annabeth, my heart sinking. 'We have to get to Camp Half-Blood. *Now.*'