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Opening extract from

Heroes of Olympus: The Lost Hero

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I

JASON

Even before he got electrocuted, Jason was having a rotten day.

He woke up in the back seat of a school bus, not sure where he was, holding hands with a girl he didn't know. That wasn't necessarily the rotten part. The girl was cute, but he couldn't figure out who she was or what he was doing there. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, trying to think.

A few dozen kids were sprawled in the seats in front of him, listening to iPods, talking or sleeping. They all looked around his age . . . fifteen? Sixteen? Okay, that was scary. He didn't know his own age.

The bus rumbled along a bumpy road. Out of the windows, desert rolled by under a bright blue sky. Jason was pretty sure he didn't live in the desert. He tried to think back . . . the last thing he remembered . . .

The girl squeezed his hand. 'Jason, you okay?'

She wore faded jeans, hiking boots and a fleece

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snowboarding jacket. Her chocolate-brown hair was cut choppy and uneven, with thin strands braided down the sides. She wore no makeup like she was trying not to draw attention to herself, but it didn't work. She was seriously pretty. Her eyes seemed to change colour like a kaleidoscope – brown, blue and green.

Jason let go of her hand. 'Um, I don't –'

In the front of the bus, a teacher shouted, 'All right, cupcakes, listen up!'

The guy was obviously a coach. His baseball cap was pulled low over his hair, so you could just see his beady eyes. He had a wispy goatee and a sour face, like he'd eaten something mouldy. His buff arms and chest pushed against a bright orange polo shirt. His nylon workout pants and Nikes were spotless white. A whistle hung from his neck, and a megaphone was clipped to his belt. He would've looked pretty scary if he hadn't been five feet zero. When he stood up in the aisle, one of the students called, 'Stand up, Coach Hedge!'

'I heard that!' The coach scanned the bus for the offender. Then his eyes fixed on Jason, and his scowl deepened.

A jolt went down Jason's spine. He was sure the coach knew he didn't belong there. He was going to call Jason out, demand to know what he was doing on the bus – and Jason wouldn't have a clue what to say.

But Coach Hedge looked away and cleared his throat. 'We'll arrive in five minutes! Stay with your partner. Don't lose your worksheet. And if any of you precious little cupcakes causes any trouble on this trip I will personally send you back to campus the hard way.'

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He picked up a baseball bat and made like he was hitting a homer.

Jason looked at the girl next to him. 'Can he talk to us that way?'

She shrugged. 'Always does. This is the Wilderness School. "Where kids are the animals."'

She said it like it was a joke they'd shared before.

'This is some kind of mistake,' Jason said. 'I'm not supposed to be here.'

The boy in front of him turned and laughed. 'Yeah, right, Jason. We've all been framed! I didn't run away six times. Piper didn't steal a BMW.'

The girl blushed. 'I didn't steal that car, Leo!'

'Oh, I forgot, Piper. What was your story? You "talked" the dealer into lending it to you?' He raised his eyebrows at Jason like, *Can you believe her?*

Leo looked like a Latino Santa's elf, with curly black hair, pointy ears, a cheerful, babyish face and a mischievous smile that told you right away this guy should not be trusted around matches or sharp objects. His long, nimble fingers wouldn't stop moving – drumming on the seat, sweeping his hair behind his ears, fiddling with the buttons of his army fatigue jacket. Either the kid was naturally hyper or he was hopped up on enough sugar and caffeine to give a heart attack to a water buffalo.

'Anyway,' Leo said, 'I hope you've got your worksheet, 'cause I used mine for spit wads days ago. Why are you looking at me like that? Somebody draw on my face again?'

'I don't know you,' Jason said.

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Leo gave him a crocodile grin. 'Sure. I'm not your best friend. I'm his evil clone.'

'Leo Valdez!' Coach Hedge yelled from the front. 'Problem back there?'

Leo winked at Jason. 'Watch this.' He turned to the front. 'Sorry, Coach! I was having trouble hearing you. Could you use your megaphone, please?'

Coach Hedge grunted like he was pleased to have an excuse. He unclipped the megaphone from his belt and continued giving directions, but his voice came out like Darth Vader's. The kids cracked up. The coach tried again, but this time the megaphone blared: 'The cow says moo!'

The kids howled, and the coach slammed down the megaphone. 'Valdez!'

Piper stifled a laugh. 'My god, Leo. How did you do that?'

Leo slipped a tiny Phillips-head screwdriver from his sleeve. 'I'm a special boy.'

'Guys, seriously,' Jason pleaded. 'What am I doing here? Where are we going?'

Piper knitted her eyebrows. 'Jason, are you joking?'

'No! I have no idea –'

'Aw, yeah, he's joking,' Leo said. 'He's trying to get me back for that shaving cream on the Jell-O thing, aren't you?'

Jason stared at him blankly.

'No, I think he's serious.' Piper tried to take his hand again, but he pulled it away.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I don't – I can't –'

'That's it!' Coach Hedge yelled from the front. 'The back row has just volunteered to clean up after lunch!'

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The rest of the kids cheered.

'There's a shocker,' Leo muttered.

But Piper kept her eyes on Jason, like she couldn't decide whether to be hurt or worried. 'Did you hit your head or something? You really don't know who we are?'

Jason shrugged helplessly. 'It's worse than that. I don't know who *I* am.'

The bus dropped them in front of a big red stucco complex like a museum, just sitting in the middle of nowhere. Maybe that's what it was: the National Museum of Nowhere, Jason thought. A cold wind blew across the desert. Jason hadn't paid much attention to what he was wearing, but it wasn't nearly warm enough: jeans and trainers, a purple T-shirt and a thin black windbreaker.

'So, a crash course for the amnesiac,' Leo said, in a helpful tone that made Jason think this was not going to be helpful. 'We go to the "Wilderness School"' – Leo made air quotes with his fingers. 'Which means we're "bad kids". Your family, or the court, or whoever, decided you were too much trouble, so they shipped you off to this lovely prison – sorry, "boarding school" – in Armpit, Nevada, where you learn valuable nature skills like running ten miles a day through the cacti and weaving daisies into hats! And for a special treat we go on "educational" field trips with Coach Hedge, who keeps order with a baseball bat. Is it all coming back to you now?'

'No.' Jason glanced apprehensively at the other kids: maybe twenty guys, half that many girls. None of them looked like hardened criminals, but he wondered what they'd all done to

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get sentenced to a school for delinquents, and he wondered why he belonged with them.

Leo rolled his eyes. 'You're really gonna play this out, huh? Okay, so the three of us started here together this semester. We're totally tight. You do everything I say and give me your dessert and do my chores –'

'Leo!' Piper snapped.

'Fine. Ignore that last part. But we *are* friends. Well, Piper's a little more than your friend, the last few weeks –'

'Leo, stop it!' Piper's face turned red. Jason could feel his face burning, too. He thought he'd remember if he'd been going out with a girl like Piper.

'He's got amnesia or something,' Piper said. 'We've got to tell somebody.'

Leo scoffed. 'Who, Coach Hedge? He'd try to fix Jason by whacking him upside the head.'

The coach was at the front of the group, barking orders and blowing his whistle to keep the kids in line, but every so often he'd glance back at Jason and scowl.

'Leo, Jason needs help,' Piper insisted. 'He's got a concussion or –'

'Yo, Piper.' One of the other guys dropped back to join them as the group was heading into the museum. The new guy wedged himself between Jason and Piper and knocked Leo down. 'Don't talk to these bottom-feeders. You're my partner, remember?'

The new guy had dark hair cut Superman-style, a deep tan and teeth so white they should've come with a warning label: DO NOT STARE DIRECTLY AT TEETH. PERMANENT BLINDNESS

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MAY OCCUR. He wore a Dallas Cowboys jersey, Western jeans and boots, and he smiled like he was God's gift to juvenile delinquent girls everywhere. Jason hated him instantly.

'Go away, Dylan,' Piper grumbled. 'I didn't ask to work with you.'

'Ah, that's no way to be. This is your lucky day!' Dylan hooked his arm through hers and dragged her through the museum entrance. Piper shot one last look over her shoulder like, *911*.

Leo got up and brushed himself off. 'I hate that guy.' He offered Jason his arm, like they should go skipping inside together. '"I'm Dylan. I'm so cool, I want to date myself, but I can't figure out how! You want to date me instead? You're so lucky!"'

'Leo,' Jason said, 'you're weird.'

'Yeah, you tell me that a lot.' Leo grinned. 'But if you don't remember me, that means I can reuse all my old jokes. Come on!'

Jason figured that if this was his best friend his life must be pretty messed up, but he followed Leo into the museum.

They walked through the building, stopping here and there for Coach Hedge to lecture them with his megaphone, which alternately made him sound like a Sith Lord or blared out random comments like, 'The pig says oink.'

Leo kept pulling out nuts, bolts and pipe cleaners from the pockets of his army jacket and putting them together, like he had to keep his hands busy at all times.

Jason was too distracted to pay much attention to the

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exhibits, but they were about the Grand Canyon and the Hualapai tribe, which owned the museum.

Some girls kept looking over at Piper and Dylan and snickering. Jason figured these girls were the popular clique. They wore matching jeans and pink tops and enough makeup for a Halloween party.

One of them said, 'Hey, Piper, does your tribe run this place? Do you get in free if you do a rain dance?'

The other girls laughed. Even Piper's so-called partner Dylan suppressed a smile. Piper's snowboarding jacket sleeves hid her hands, but Jason got the feeling she was clenching her fists.

'My dad's Cherokee,' she said. 'Not Hualapai. Course, you'd need a few brain cells to know the difference, Isabel.'

Isabel widened her eyes in mock surprise, so that she looked like an owl with a makeup addiction. 'Oh, sorry! Was your *mom* in this tribe? Oh, that's right. You never knew your mom.'

Piper charged her, but before a fight could start Coach Hedge barked, 'Enough back there! Set a good example or I'll break out my baseball bat!'

The group shuffled on to the next exhibit, but the girls kept calling out little comments to Piper.

'Good to be back on the rez?' one asked in a sweet voice.

'Dad's probably too drunk to work,' another said with fake sympathy. 'That's why she turned klepto.'

Piper ignored them, but Jason was ready to punch them himself. He might not remember Piper, or even who he was, but he knew he hated mean kids.

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Leo caught his arm. 'Be cool. Piper doesn't like us fighting her battles. Besides, if those girls found out the truth about her dad, they'd be all bowing down to her and screaming, "We're not worthy!"'

'Why? What about her dad?'

Leo laughed in disbelief. 'You're not kidding? You really don't remember that your girlfriend's dad –'

'Look, I wish I did, but I don't even remember *her*, much less her dad.'

Leo whistled. 'Whatever. We *have* to talk when we get back to the dorm.'

They reached the far end of the exhibit hall, where some big glass doors led out to a terrace.

'All right, cupcakes,' Coach Hedge announced. 'You are about to see the Grand Canyon. Try not to break it. The skywalk can hold the weight of seventy jumbo jets, so you featherweights should be safe out there. If possible, try to avoid pushing each other over the edge, as that would cause me extra paperwork.'

The coach opened the doors, and they all stepped outside. The Grand Canyon spread before them, live and in person. Extending over the edge was a horseshoe-shaped walkway made of glass, so you could see right through it.

'Man,' Leo said. 'That's pretty wicked.'

Jason had to agree. Despite his amnesia and his feeling that he didn't belong there, he couldn't help being impressed.

The canyon was bigger and wider than you could appreciate from a picture. They were up so high that birds circled below their feet. Five hundred feet down, a river snaked along

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the canyon floor. Banks of storm clouds had moved overhead while they'd been inside, casting shadows like angry faces across the cliffs. As far as Jason could see in any direction, red and grey ravines cut through the desert like some crazy god had taken a knife to it.

Jason got a piercing pain behind his eyes. *Crazy gods* . . . Where had he come up with that idea? He felt like he'd got close to something important – something he should know about. He also got the unmistakable feeling he was in danger.

'You all right?' Leo asked. 'You're not going to throw up over the side, are you? 'Cause I should've brought my camera.'

Jason grabbed the railing. He was shivering and sweaty, but it had nothing to do with heights. He blinked, and the pain behind his eyes subsided.

'I'm fine,' he managed. 'Just a headache.'

Thunder rumbled overhead. A cold wind almost knocked him sideways.

'This can't be safe.' Leo squinted at the clouds. 'Storm's right over us, but it's clear all the way around. Weird, huh?'

Jason looked up and saw Leo was right. A dark circle of clouds had parked itself over the skywalk, but the rest of the sky in every direction was perfectly free of clouds. Jason had a bad feeling about that.

'All right, cupcakes!' Coach Hedge yelled. He frowned at the storm like it bothered him, too. 'We may have to cut this short, so get to work! Remember, complete sentences!'

The storm rumbled, and Jason's head began to hurt again. Not knowing why he did it, he reached into his jeans pocket and brought out a coin – a circle of gold the size of

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a half-dollar, but thicker and more uneven. Stamped on one side was a picture of a battleaxe. On the other was some guy's face wreathed in laurels. The inscription said something like IVLIVS.

'Dang, is that gold?' Leo asked. 'You been holding out on me!'

Jason put the coin away, wondering how he'd come to have it, and why he had the feeling he was going to need it soon.

'It's nothing,' he said. 'Just a coin.'

Leo shrugged. Maybe his mind had to keep moving as much as his hands. 'Come on,' he said. 'Dare you to spit over the edge.'

They didn't try very hard on the worksheet. For one thing, Jason was too distracted by the storm and his own mixed-up feelings. For another thing, he didn't have any idea how to 'name three sedimentary strata you observe' or 'describe two examples of erosion'.

Leo was no help. He was too busy building a helicopter out of pipe cleaners.

'Check it out.' He launched the copter. Jason figured it would plummet, but the pipe-cleaner blades actually spun. The little copter made it halfway across the canyon before it lost momentum and spiralled into the void.

'How'd you do that?' Jason asked.

Leo shrugged. 'Would've been cooler if I had some rubber bands.'

'Seriously,' Jason said, 'are we friends?'

'Last I checked.'

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'You sure? What was the first day we met? What did we talk about?'

'It was . . .' Leo frowned. 'I don't recall exactly. I'm ADHD, man. You can't expect me to remember details.'

'But I don't remember you *at all*. I don't remember anyone here. What if –'

'You're right and everyone else is wrong?' Leo asked. 'You think you just appeared here this morning, and we've all got fake memories of you?'

A little voice in Jason's head said, *That's exactly what I think.*

But it sounded crazy. Everybody here took him for granted. Everyone acted like he was a normal part of the class – except for Coach Hedge.

'Take the worksheet.' Jason handed Leo the paper. 'I'll be right back.'

Before Leo could protest, Jason headed across the skywalk.

Their school group had the place to themselves. Maybe it was too early in the day for tourists, or maybe the weird weather had scared them off. The Wilderness School kids had spread out in pairs. Most were joking around or talking. Some of the guys were dropping pennies over the side. About fifty feet away, Piper was trying to fill out her worksheet, but her stupid partner, Dylan, was hitting on her, putting his hand on her shoulder and giving her that blinding white smile. She kept pushing him away, and when she saw Jason she gave him a look like, *Throttle this guy for me.*

Jason motioned for her to hang on. He walked up to Coach Hedge, who was leaning on his baseball bat, studying the storm clouds.

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'Did you do this?' the coach asked him.

Jason took a step back. 'Do what?' It sounded like the coach had just asked if he'd made the thunderstorm.

Coach Hedge glared at him, his beady little eyes glinting under the brim of his cap. 'Don't play games with me, kid. What are you doing here, and why are you messing up my job?'

'You mean . . . you *don't* know me?' Jason said. 'I'm not one of your students?'

Hedge snorted. 'Never seen you before today.'

Jason was so relieved he almost wanted to cry. At least he wasn't going insane. He *was* in the wrong place. 'Look, sir, I don't know how I got here. I just woke up on the school bus. All I know is I'm not supposed to be here.'

'Got that right.' Hedge's gruff voice dropped to a murmur, like he was sharing a secret. 'You got a powerful way with the Mist, kid, if you can make all these people think they know you, but you can't fool me. I've been smelling monster for days now. I knew we had an infiltrator, but you don't smell like a monster. You smell like a half-blood. So – who are you, and where'd you come from?'

Most of what the coach said didn't make sense, but Jason decided to answer honestly. 'I don't know who I am. I don't have any memories. You've got to help me.'

Coach Hedge studied his face like was trying to read Jason's thoughts.

'Great,' Hedge muttered. 'You're being truthful.'

'Of course I am! And what was all that about monsters and half-bloods? Are those code words or something?'

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Hedge narrowed his eyes. Part of Jason wondered if the guy was just nuts. But the other part knew better.

'Look, kid,' Hedge said, 'I don't know who you are. I just know *what* you are, and it means trouble. Now I've got to protect three of you rather than two. Are you the special package? Is that it?'

'What are you talking about?'

Hedge looked at the storm. The clouds were getting thicker and darker, hovering right over the skywalk.

'This morning,' Hedge said, 'I got a message from camp. They said an extraction team is on the way. They're coming to pick up a special package, but they wouldn't give me details. I thought to myself, Fine. The two I'm watching are pretty powerful, older than most. I know they're being stalked. I can smell a monster in the group. I figure that's why the camp is suddenly frantic to pick them up. But then *you* pop up out of nowhere. So, are you the special package?'

The pain behind Jason's eyes got worse than ever. *Half-bloods. Camp. Monsters.* He still didn't know what Hedge was talking about, but the words gave him a massive brain freeze – like his mind was trying to access information that should've been there but wasn't.

He stumbled, and Coach Hedge caught him. For a short guy, the coach had hands like steel. 'Whoa, there, cupcake. You say you've got no memories, huh? Fine. I'll just have to watch you, too, until the team gets here. We'll let the director figure things out.'

'What director?' Jason said. 'What camp?'

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'Just sit tight. Reinforcements should be here soon. Hopefully nothing happens before –'

Lightning crackled overhead. The wind picked up with a vengeance. Worksheets flew into the Grand Canyon, and the entire bridge shuddered. Kids screamed, stumbling and grabbing the rails.

'I had to say something,' Hedge grumbled. He bellowed into his megaphone: 'Everyone inside! The cow says moo! Off the skywalk!'

'I thought you said this thing was stable!' Jason shouted over the wind.

'Under normal circumstances,' Hedge agreed, 'which these aren't. Come on!'

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I I

JASON

The storm churned into a miniature hurricane. Funnel clouds snaked towards the skywalk like the tendrils of a monster jellyfish.

Kids screamed and ran for the building. The wind snatched away their notebooks, jackets, hats and backpacks. Jason skidded across the slick floor.

Leo lost his balance and almost toppled over the railing, but Jason grabbed his jacket and pulled him back.

'Thanks, man!' Leo yelled.

'Go, go, go!' said Coach Hedge.

Piper and Dylan were holding the doors open, herding the other kids inside. Piper's snowboarding jacket was flapping wildly, her dark hair all in her face. Jason thought she must've been freezing, but she looked calm and confident – telling the others it would be okay, encouraging them to keep moving.

Jason, Leo and Coach Hedge ran towards them, but it was

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like running through quicksand. The wind seemed to fight them, pushing them back.

Dylan and Piper pushed one more kid inside, then lost their grip on the doors. They slammed shut, closing off the skywalk.

Piper tugged at the handles. Inside, the kids pounded on the glass, but the doors seemed to be stuck.

'Dylan, help!' Piper shouted.

Dylan just stood there with an idiotic grin, his Cowboys jersey rippling in the wind, like he was suddenly enjoying the storm.

'Sorry, Piper,' he said. 'I'm done helping.'

He flicked his wrist and Piper flew backwards, slamming into the doors and sliding to the skywalk deck.

'Piper!' Jason tried to charge forward, but the wind was against him, and Coach Hedge pushed him back.

'Coach,' Jason said, 'let me go!'

'Jason, Leo, stay behind me,' the coach ordered. 'This is my fight. I should've known that was our monster.'

'What?' Leo demanded. A rogue worksheet slapped him in the face, but he swatted it away. 'What monster?'

The coach's cap blew off, and sticking up above his curly hair were two bumps – like the knots cartoon characters get when they're bonked on the head. Coach Hedge lifted his baseball bat – but it wasn't a regular bat any more. Somehow it had changed into a crudely shaped tree-branch club, with twigs and leaves still attached.

Dylan gave him that psycho happy smile. 'Oh, come on,

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Coach. Let the boy attack me! After all, you're getting too old for this. Isn't that why they *retired* you to this stupid school? I've been on your team the entire season and you didn't even know. You're losing your nose, grandpa.'

The coach made an angry sound like an animal bleating. 'That's it, cupcake. You're going down.'

'You think you can protect three half-bloods at once, old man?' Dylan laughed. 'Good luck.'

Dylan pointed at Leo, and a funnel cloud materialized around him. Leo flew off the skywalk like he'd been tossed. Somehow he managed to twist in midair and slammed sideways into the canyon wall. He skidded, clawing furiously for any handhold. Finally he grabbed a thin ledge about fifty feet below the skywalk and hung there by his fingertips.

'Help!' he yelled up at them. 'Rope, please? Bungee cord? Something?'

Coach Hedge cursed and tossed Jason his club. 'I don't know who you are, kid, but I hope you're good. Keep that *thing* busy –' he stabbed a thumb at Dylan – 'while I get Leo.'

'Get him how?' Jason demanded. 'You going to fly?'

'Not fly. Climb.' Hedge kicked off his shoes, and Jason almost had a coronary. The coach didn't have any feet. He had hooves – goat's hooves. Which meant those things on his head, Jason realized, weren't bumps. They were horns.

'You're a faun,' Jason said.

'*Satyr!*' Hedge snapped. 'Fauns are Roman. But we'll talk about that later.'

Hedge leaped over the railing. He sailed towards the canyon wall and hit hooves first. He bounded down the cliff with

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impossible agility, finding footholds no bigger than postage stamps, dodging whirlwinds that tried to attack him as he picked his way towards Leo.

'Isn't that cute!' Dylan turned towards Jason. 'Now it's your turn, boy.'

Jason threw the club. It seemed useless with the winds so strong, but the club flew right at Dylan, even curving when he tried to dodge, and smacked him on the head so hard he fell to his knees.

Piper wasn't as dazed as she appeared. Her fingers closed around the club when it rolled next to her, but before she could use it Dylan rose. Blood – *golden* blood – trickled from his forehead.

'Nice try, boy.' He glared at Jason. 'But you'll have to do better.'

The skywalk shuddered. Hairline fractures appeared in the glass. Inside the museum, kids stopped banging on the doors. They backed away, watching in terror.

Dylan's body dissolved into smoke, as if his molecules were coming unglued. He had the same face, the same brilliant white smile, but his whole form was suddenly composed of swirling black vapour, his eyes like electrical sparks in a living storm cloud. He sprouted black smoky wings and rose above the skywalk. If angels could be evil, Jason decided, they would look exactly like this.

'You're a *ventus*,' Jason said, though he had no idea how he knew that word. 'A storm spirit.'

Dylan's laugh sounded like a tornado tearing off a roof. 'I'm glad I waited, demigod. Leo and Piper I've known about

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for weeks. Could've killed them at any time. But my mistress said a third was coming – someone special. She'll reward me greatly for your death!'

Two more funnel clouds touched down on either side of Dylan and turned into *venti* – ghostly young men with smoky wings and eyes that flickered with lightning.

Piper stayed down, pretending to be dazed, her hand still gripping the club. Her face was pale, but she gave Jason a determined look, and he understood the message: *Keep their attention. I'll brain them from behind.*

Cute, smart *and* violent. Jason wished he remembered having her as a girlfriend.

He clenched his fists and got ready to charge, but he never got a chance.

Dylan raised his hand, arcs of electricity running between his fingers, and blasted Jason in the chest.

Bang! Jason found himself flat on his back. His mouth tasted like burning aluminium foil. He lifted his head and saw that his clothes were smoking. The lightning bolt had gone straight through his body and blasted his left shoe off. His toes were black with soot.

The storm spirits were laughing. The winds raged. Piper was screaming defiantly, but it all sounded tinny and far away.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jason saw Coach Hedge climbing the cliff with Leo on his back. Piper was on her feet, desperately swinging the club to fend off the two extra storm spirits, but they were just toying with her. The club went right through their bodies like they weren't there. And Dylan, a dark winged tornado with eyes, loomed over Jason.

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'Stop,' Jason croaked. He rose unsteadily to his feet, and he wasn't sure who was more surprised: him or the storm spirits.

'How are you alive?' Dylan's form flickered. 'That was enough lightning to kill twenty men!'

'My turn,' Jason said.

He reached in his pocket and pulled out the gold coin. He let his instincts take over, flipping the coin in the air like he'd done it a thousand times. He caught it in his palm, and suddenly he was holding a sword – a wickedly sharp double-edged weapon. The ridged grip fitted his fingers perfectly, and the whole thing was gold – hilt, handle and blade.

Dylan snarled and backed up. He looked at his two comrades and yelled, 'Well? Kill him!'

The other storm spirits didn't look happy with that order, but they flew at Jason, their fingers crackling with electricity.

Jason swung at the first spirit. His blade passed through it, and the creature's smoky form disintegrated. The second spirit let loose a bolt of lightning, but Jason's blade absorbed the charge. Jason stepped in – one quick thrust and the second storm spirit dissolved into gold powder.

Dylan wailed in outrage. He looked down as if expecting his comrades to re-form, but their gold dust remains dispersed in the wind. 'Impossible! Who *are* you, half-blood?'

Piper was so stunned she dropped her club. 'Jason, how . . . ?'

Then Coach Hedge leaped back onto the skywalk and dumped Leo like a sack of flour.

'Spirits, fear me!' Hedge bellowed, flexing his short arms. Then he looked around and realized there was only Dylan.

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'Curse it, boy!' he snapped at Jason. 'Didn't you leave some for me? I like a challenge!'

Leo got to his feet, breathing hard. He looked completely humiliated, his hands bleeding from clawing at the rocks. 'Yo, Coach Supergoat, whatever you are – I just fell down the freaking Grand Canyon! Stop asking for challenges!'

Dylan hissed at them, but Jason could see fear in his eyes. 'You have no idea how many enemies you've awakened, half-bloods. My mistress will destroy *all* demigods. This war you *cannot* win.'

Above them, the storm exploded into a full-force gale. Cracks expanded in the skywalk. Sheets of rain poured down, and Jason had to crouch to keep his balance.

A hole opened in the clouds – a swirling vortex of black and silver.

'The mistress calls me back!' Dylan shouted with glee. 'And you, demigod, will come with me!'

He lunged at Jason, but Piper tackled the monster from behind. Even though he was made of smoke, Piper somehow managed to connect. Both of them went sprawling. Leo, Jason and the coach surged forward to help, but the spirit screamed with rage. He let loose a torrent that knocked them all backwards. Jason and Coach Hedge landed on their butts. Jason's sword skidded across the glass. Leo hit the back of his head and curled on his side, dazed and groaning. Piper got the worst of it. She was thrown off Dylan's back and hit the railing, tumbling over the side until she was hanging by one hand over the abyss.

Jason started towards her, but Dylan screamed, 'I'll settle for this one!'

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He grabbed Leo's arm and began to rise, towing a half-conscious Leo below him. The storm spun faster, pulling them upward like a vacuum cleaner.

'Help!' Piper yelled. 'Somebody!'

Then she slipped, screaming as she fell.

'Jason, go!' Hedge yelled. 'Save her!'

The coach launched himself at the spirit with some serious goat fu – lashing out with his hooves, knocking Leo free from the spirit's grasp. Leo dropped safely to the floor, but Dylan grappled the coach's arms instead. Hedge tried to head-butt him, then kicked him and called him a cupcake. They rose into the air, gaining speed.

Coach Hedge shouted down once more, 'Save her! I've got this!' Then the satyr and the storm spirit spiralled into the clouds and disappeared.

Save her? Jason thought. *She's gone!*

But again his instincts won. He ran to the railing, thinking, *I'm a lunatic*, and jumped over the side.

Jason wasn't scared of heights. He was scared of being smashed against the canyon floor five hundred feet below. He figured he hadn't accomplished anything except for dying along with Piper, but he tucked in his arms and plummeted headfirst. The sides of the canyon raced past like a film on fast-forward. His face felt like it was peeling off.

In a heartbeat, he caught up with Piper, who was flailing wildly. He grabbed her waist and closed his eyes, waiting for death. Piper screamed. The wind whistled in Jason's ears. He wondered what dying would feel like. He was thinking,

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probably not so good. He wished somehow they could never hit bottom.

Suddenly the wind died. Piper's scream turned into a strangled gasp. Jason thought they must be dead, but he hadn't felt any impact.

'J-J-Jason,' Piper managed.

He opened his eyes. They weren't falling. They were floating in midair, a hundred feet above the river.

He hugged Piper tight, and she repositioned herself so she was hugging him, too. They were nose to nose. Her heart beat so hard Jason could feel it through her clothes.

Her breath smelled like cinnamon. She said, 'How did you –'

'I didn't,' he said. 'I think I would know if I could fly . . .'

But then he thought: *I don't even know who I am.*

He imagined going up. Piper yelped as they shot a few feet higher. They weren't exactly floating, Jason decided. He could feel pressure under his feet like they were balancing at the top of a geyser.

'The air is supporting us,' he said.

'Well, tell it to support us more! Get us out of here!'

Jason looked down. The easiest thing would be to sink gently to the canyon floor. Then he looked up. The rain had stopped. The storm clouds didn't seem as bad, but they were still rumbling and flashing. There was no guarantee the spirits were gone for good. He had no idea what had happened to Coach Hedge. And he'd left Leo up there, barely conscious.

'We have to help them,' Piper said, as if reading his thoughts. 'Can you –'

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'Let's see.' Jason thought, *Up*, and instantly they shot skyward.

The fact he was riding the winds might've been cool under different circumstances, but he was too much in shock. As soon as they landed on the skywalk, they ran to Leo.

Piper turned Leo over, and he groaned. His army coat was soaked from the rain. His curly hair glittered gold from rolling around in monster dust. But at least he wasn't dead.

'Stupid . . . ugly . . . goat,' he muttered.

'Where did he go?' Piper asked.

Leo pointed straight up. 'Never came down. Please tell me he didn't actually save my life.'

'Twice,' Jason said.

Leo groaned even louder. 'What happened? The tornado guy, the gold sword . . . I hit my head. That's it, right? I'm hallucinating?'

Jason had forgotten about the sword. He walked over to where it was lying and picked it up. The blade was well balanced. On a hunch he flipped it. Midspin, the sword shrank back into a coin and landed in his palm.

'Yep,' Leo said. 'Definitely hallucinating.'

Piper shivered in her rain-soaked clothes. 'Jason, those things –'

'*Venti*,' he said. 'Storm spirits.'

'Okay. You acted like . . . like you'd seen them before. Who *are* you?'

He shook his head. 'That's what I've been trying to tell you. I don't know.'

The storm dissipated. The other kids from the Wilderness

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School were staring out of the glass doors in horror. Security guards were working on the locks now, but they didn't seem to be having any luck.

'Coach Hedge said he had to protect three people,' Jason remembered. 'I think he meant us.'

'And that thing Dylan turned into . . .' Piper shuddered. 'God, I can't believe it was *hitting* on me. He called us . . . what, *demigods*?'

Leo lay on his back, staring at the sky. He didn't seem anxious to get up. 'Don't know what *demi* means,' he said. 'But I'm not feeling too godly. You guys feeling godly?'

There was a brittle sound like dry twigs snapping, and the cracks in the skywalk began to widen.

'We need to get off this thing,' Jason said. 'Maybe if we –'

'Ohhh-kay,' Leo interrupted. 'Look up there and tell me if those are flying horses.'

At first Jason thought Leo *had* hit his head too hard. Then he saw a dark shape descending from the east – too slow for a plane, too large for a bird. As it got closer, he could see a pair of winged animals – grey, four-legged, exactly like horses – except each one had a twenty-foot wingspan. And they were pulling a brightly painted box with two wheels: a chariot.

'Reinforcements,' he said. 'Hedge told me an extraction squad was coming for us.'

'Extraction squad?' Leo struggled to his feet. 'That sounds painful.'

'And where are they extracting us *to*?' Piper asked.

Jason watched as the chariot landed on the far end of the skywalk. The flying horses tucked in their wings and cantered

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nervously across the glass, as if they sensed it was near breaking. Two teenagers stood in the chariot – a tall blonde girl maybe a little older than Jason, and a bulky dude with a shaved head and a face like a pile of bricks. They both wore jeans and orange T-shirts, with shields tossed over their backs. The girl leaped off before the chariot had even finished moving. She pulled a knife and ran towards Jason's group while the bulky dude was reining in the horses.

'Where is he?' the girl demanded. Her grey eyes were fierce and a little startling.

'Where's who?' Jason asked.

She frowned like his answer was unacceptable. Then she turned to Leo and Piper. 'What about Gleeson? Where is your protector, Gleeson Hedge?'

The coach's first name was Gleeson? Jason might've laughed if the morning hadn't been quite so weird and scary. Gleeson Hedge: football coach, goat man, protector of demigods. Sure. Why not?

Leo cleared his throat. 'He got taken by some . . . tornado things.'

'*Venti*,' Jason said. 'Storm spirits.'

The blonde girl arched an eyebrow. 'You mean *anemoi thuellai*? That's the Greek term. Who are you, and what happened?'

Jason did his best to explain, though it was hard to meet those intense grey eyes. About halfway through the story, the other guy from the chariot came over. He stood there glaring at them, his arms crossed. He had a tattoo of a rainbow on his biceps, which seemed a little unusual.

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When Jason had finished his story, the blonde girl didn't look satisfied. 'No, no, no! She *told* me he would be here. She told me if I came here, I'd find the answer.'

'Annabeth,' the bald guy grunted. 'Check it out.' He pointed at Jason's feet.

Jason hadn't thought much about it, but he was still missing his left shoe, which had been blown off by the lightning. His bare foot felt okay, but it looked like a lump of charcoal.

'The guy with one shoe,' said the bald dude. 'He's the answer.'

'No, Butch,' the girl insisted. 'He can't be. I was tricked.' She glared at the sky as though it had done something wrong. 'What do you want from me?' she screamed. 'What have you done with him?'

The skywalk shuddered, and the horses whinnied urgently.

'Annabeth,' said the bald dude, Butch, 'we gotta leave. Let's get these three to camp and figure it out there. Those storm spirits might come back.'

She fumed for a moment. 'Fine.' She fixed Jason with a resentful look. 'We'll settle this later.'

She turned on her heel and marched towards the chariot.

Piper shook her head. 'What's *her* problem? What's going on?'

'Seriously,' Leo agreed.

'We have to get you out of here,' Butch said. 'I'll explain on the way.'

'I'm not going anywhere with *her*.' Jason gestured towards the blonde. 'She looks like she wants to kill me.'

Butch hesitated. 'Annabeth's okay. You gotta cut her some

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slack. She had a vision telling her to come here, to find a guy with one shoe. That was supposed to be the answer to her problem.'

'What problem?' Piper asked.

'She's been looking for one of our campers, who's been missing for three days,' Butch said. 'She's going out of her mind with worry. She hoped he'd be here.'

'Who?' Jason asked.

'Her boyfriend,' Butch said. 'A guy named Percy Jackson.'

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