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THE SON OF NEPTUNE

Heroes of Olympus, Book Two

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Rick Riordan

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PERCY

1.

The snake-haired ladies were starting to annoy Percy.

They should've died three days ago when he dropped a crate of bowling balls on them at the Napa Bargain Mart. They should've died two days ago when he ran over them with a police car in Martinez. They *definitely* should've died this morning when he cut off their heads in Tilden Park.

No matter how many times Percy killed them and watched them crumble to powder, they just kept re-forming like large evil dust bunnies. He couldn't even seem to outrun them.

He reached the top of the hill and caught his breath. How long since he'd killed them last? Maybe two hours. They never seemed to stay dead longer than that.

The past few days, he'd hardly slept. He'd eaten whatever he could scrounge – vending machine Gummi Bears, stale bagels, even a Jack in the Crack burrito, which was a new personal low. His clothes were torn, burned and splattered with monster slime.

He'd only survived this long because the two snake-haired ladies – *gorgons,* they called themselves – couldn't seem to kill him either. Their claws didn't cut his skin. Their teeth broke whenever they tried to bite him. But Percy couldn't keep going much longer. Soon he'd collapse from exhaustion, and then – as hard as he was to kill – he was pretty sure the gorgons would find a way.

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Where to run?

He scanned his surroundings. Under different circumstances, he might've enjoyed the view. To his left, golden hills rolled inland, dotted with lakes, woods, and a few herds of cows. To his right, the flatlands of Berkeley and Oakland marched west – a vast checkerboard of neighborhoods with several million people who probably did not want their morning interrupted by two monsters and a filthy demigod.

Farther west, San Francisco Bay glittered under a silvery haze. Past that, a wall of fog had swallowed most of San Francisco, leaving just the tops of skyscrapers and the towers of the Golden Gate Bridge.

A vague sadness weighed on Percy's chest. Something told him he'd been to San Francisco before. The city had some connection to Annabeth – the only person he could remember from his past. His memory of her was frustratingly dim. The wolf had promised he would see her again and regain his memory -- *if* he succeeded in his journey.

Should he try to cross the bay?

It was tempting. He could feel the power of the ocean just over the horizon. Water always revived him. Salt water was the best. He'd discovered that two days ago when he strangled a sea monster in the Carquinez Strait. If he could reach the bay, he might be able to make a last stand. Maybe he could even drown the gorgons. But the shore was at least two miles away. He'd have to cross an entire city.

He hesitated for another reason. The wolf Lupa had taught him to sharpen his senses – to trust the instincts that had been guiding him south. His homing

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radar was tingling like crazy now. The end of his journey was close -- almost right under his feet. But how could that be? There was nothing on the hilltop.

The wind changed. Percy caught the sour scent of reptile. A hundred yards downthe slope, something rustled through the woods – snapping branches, crunching leaves, hissing.

Gorgons.

For the millionth time, Percy wished their noses weren't so good. They always said they could *smell* him because he was a demigod – the half-blood son of some old Roman god. Percy had tried rolling in mud, splashing through creeks, even keeping air freshener sticks in his pockets so he'd have that new car smell, but apparently demigod stink was hard to mask.

He scrambled to the west side of the summit. It was too steep to descend. The slope plummeted eighty feet, straight to the roof of an apartment complex built into the side of the hill. Fifty feet below that, a highway emerged from the base of the hill and wound its way toward Berkeley.

Great. No other way off the hill. He'd managed to get himself cornered.

He stared at the stream of cars flowing west toward San Francisco and wished he were in one of them. Then he realized the highway must cut through the hill. There must be a tunnel . . . right under his feet.

His internal radar went nuts. He *was* in the right place, just too high up. He had to check out that tunnel. He needed a way down to the highway – fast.

He slung off his backpack. He'd managed to grab a lot of supplies at the Napa Bargain Mart: a portable GPS, duct tape, lighter, super glue, water bottle, camping roll, a comfy panda pillow pet (as seen on TV) and aSwiss army knife –

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pretty much every tool a modern demigod could want. But he had nothing that would serve as a parachute or a sled.

That left him two options: jump eighty feet to his death, or stand and fight. Both options sounded pretty bad.

He cursed and pulled his pen from his pocket.

The pen didn't look like much, just a regular cheap ballpoint, but when Percy uncapped it, it grew into a glowing bronze sword. The blade balancedperfectly. The leather grip fit his hand like it had been custom designed for him. Etched along the guard was an Ancient Greek word Percy somehow understood: *Anaklusmos,* Riptide.

He'd woken up with this swordhis first night at the Wolf House -- two months ago? More? He'd lost track. He'd found himself in the courtyard of a burned-out mansion in the middle of the woods, wearing shorts, an orange T-shirt and a leather necklace with a bunch of strange clay beads. Riptide had been in his hand, but he had no idea who he was or how he'd gotten there. He'd been barefoot, freezing, and confused. And then the wolves came . . .

Right next to him, a familiar voice jolted him back to the present: "There you are!"

Percy stumbled away from the gorgon, almost falling off the edge of the hill.

It was the smiley one – Beano.

Okay, her name wasn't really Beano. As near as Percy could figure, he was dyslexic, because words got twisted around when he tried to read. The first time he saw the gorgon posing as a Bargain Mart greeter with a big green button that read: *WELCOME! MY NAME IS STHENO!,* he thought it said BEANO.

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She was still wearing her green Bargain Mart employee vest over a flower-print dress. If you just looked at her body, you might think she was somebody's dumpy old grandmother – until you looked down and realized she had rooster feet. Or you looked up and saw bronze boar tusks sticking out the sides of her mouth. Her eyes glowed red and her hair was a writhing nest of bright green snakes.

The most horrible thing about her? She was still holding her big silver platter of free samples: Crispy Cheese n' Wieners. Her platter was dented up from all the times Percy had killed her, but those little samples looked perfectly fine. Stheno just kept gathering them up and toting them across California so she could offer Percy a snack before she killed him. Percy didn't know why, but if he ever needed a suit of armor he was going to make it out of Crispy Cheese n' Wieners. That stuff was indestructible.

"Try one?" Stheno offered.

Percy fended her off with his sword. "Where's your sister?"

"Oh, put the sword away," Stheno chided. "You know by now even Celestial bronze can't kill us for long. Have a Cheese n' Wiener! They're on sale this week, and I'd hate to kill you on an empty stomach."

"Stheno!" The second gorgon appeared on Percy's right so fast he didn't have time to react. Fortunately she was too busy glaring at her sister to pay him much attention. "I told you to sneak up on him and kill him!"

Stheno's smile wavered. "But Euryale . . ." She said the name so it rhymed with 'Muriel.' "Can't I give him a sample first?"

"No, you imbecile!" Euryale turned toward Percy and bared her fangs.

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Except for her hair, which was a nest of coral snakes instead of green vipers, she looked exactly like her sister. Her Bargain Mart vest, her flowery dress, even her tusks were decorated with '50% off' stickers. Her name badge read: *Hello! My name is DIE, DEMIGOD SCUM!*

"You've led us quite a chase, Percy Jackson," Euryale said. "But now you're trapped, and we'll have our revenge!"

"The Cheese n' Wieners are only $2.99," Stheno added helpfully. "Grocery department, aisle three."

Euryale snarled. "Stheno, the Bargain Mart was a *front!* You're going native! Now put down that ridiculous tray and help me kill this demigod. Or have you forgotten he's the one who vaporized Medusa?"

Percy stepped back. Six more inches, and he'd be tumbling through thin air. "Look, ladies, we've been through this. I don't even *remember* killing Medusa. I don't remember anything! Can't we just call a truce and talk about your weekly specials?"

Stheno gave her sister a pouty look, which was hard to do with giant bronze tusks. "Can we?"

"No!" Euryale's red eyes bored into Percy. "I don't care what you remember, son of the sea god. I can smell Medusa's blood on you. It's faint, yes, several years old, but *you* were the last one to defeat her. She *still* has not returned from Tartarus. It's your fault!"

Percy didn't really get that. The whole 'monster-dying-then-returning-from-Tartarus' concept gave him a headache. Of course so did the idea that ballpoint pens could turn into swords, or that monsters could disguise themselves with something called the Mist, or that Percy was the son of a

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barnacle-encrusted god from five thousand years ago. But he *did* believe it. Even though his memory was erased, he knew he was a demigod the same way he knew his name was Percy Jackson. From his very first conversation with Lupa the wolf, he'd accepted that this crazy messed-up world of gods and monsters was his reality. Which pretty much sucked for him.

"How about we call it a draw?" he said. "I can't kill you. You can't kill me. If you're Medusa's sisters – like *the* Medusa who turned people to stone -- shouldn't I be petrified by now?"

"Heroes!" Euryale said with disgust. "They always bring that up, just like our mother! 'Why can't you turn people to stone? Your *sister* can turn people to stone.' Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, boy! That was Medusa's curse alone. *She* was the most hideous one in the family. She got all the luck!"

Stheno looked hurt. "Mother said *I* was the most hideous."

"Quiet!" Euryale snapped. "As for you, Percy Jackson, it's true you bear the mark of Achilles. That makes you a little tougher to kill. But don't worry. We'll find a way."

"The mark of what?"

"Achilles," Stheno said cheerfully. "Oh, he was *gorgeous!* Dipped in the River Styx as a child, you know, so he was invulnerable except for a tiny spot on his ankle. That's what happened to you, dear. Someone must've dumped you in the Styx and made your skin like iron, but not to worry. Heroes like you always have a weak spot. We just have to find it and then we can kill you. Won't that be lovely? Have a Cheese n' Wiener!"

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Percy tried to think. He didn't remember any dip in the Styx. Then again he didn't remember much of anything. His skin didn't feel like iron, but it explained how he'd held out so long against the gorgons.

Maybe if he just fell down the mountain . . . would he survive? He didn't want to risk it – not without something to slow the fall, or a sled, or . . .

He looked at Stheno's large silver platter of free samples.

Hmm . . .

"Reconsidering?" Stheno asked. "Very wise, dear. I added some gorgon's blood to these, so your death will be quick and painless."

Percy's throat constricted. "You added your blood to the Cheese N' Wieners?"

"Just a little." Stheno smiled. "A little nick on the arm, but you're sweet to be concerned. The blood from our right side can cure anything, you know, but blood from our left side is deadly --"

"You dimwit!" Euryale screeched. "You're not supposed to tell him that! He won't eat the wieners if you tell him they're poisoned!"

Stheno looked stunned. "He won't? But I said it's quick and painless."

"Never mind!" Euryale's fingernails grew into claws. "We'll kill him the hard way – just keep slashing until we find the weak spot. Once we defeat Percy Jackson, we'll be more famous than Medusa! Our patron will reward us greatly!"

Percy gripped his sword. He'd have to time his move perfectly -- a few seconds of confusion,grab the platter with his left hand . . .

Keep them talking, he thought.

"Before you slash me to bits," he said, "who's this patron you mentioned?"

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Euryale sneered. “The goddess Gaea, of course! The one who brought us back from oblivion! You won’t live long enough to meet her, but your friends below will soon face her wrath. Even now, her armies are marching south. At the Feast of Fortune, she’ll awaken, and the demigods will be cut down like – like --”

“Like our low prices at Bargain Mart!” Stheno suggested.

“Gah!” Euryale stormed toward her sister. Percy took the opening.

He grabbed Stheno’s platter, scattering poisoned Cheese n’ Wieners, and slashed Riptide across Euryale’s waist, cutting her in half.

He raised the platter, and Stheno found herself facing her own greasy reflection.

“Medusa!” she screamed.

Her sister Euryale had crumbled to dust, but she was already starting to re-form, like a snowman un-melting in reverse.

“Stheno, you fool!” she gurgled as her half-made face rose from the mound of dust. “That’s just your reflection! Get him!”

Percy slammed the metal tray on top of Stheno’s head and she passed out cold.

He put the platter over his butt, said a silent prayer to whatever Roman god oversaw stupid sledding tricks, and jumped off the side of the hill.

THE GREEK GODS ARE ALIVE AND KICKING IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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