

The Battle of the Labyrinth

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EXCERPT

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 gotten 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 blond 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 blond 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 blond 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 toward 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 was 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.

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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 bleachers. 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 front modeling 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 as well have 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 bleachers, 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.

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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?”

“Oh, and the Furies,” she continued, beginning to warm 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.”