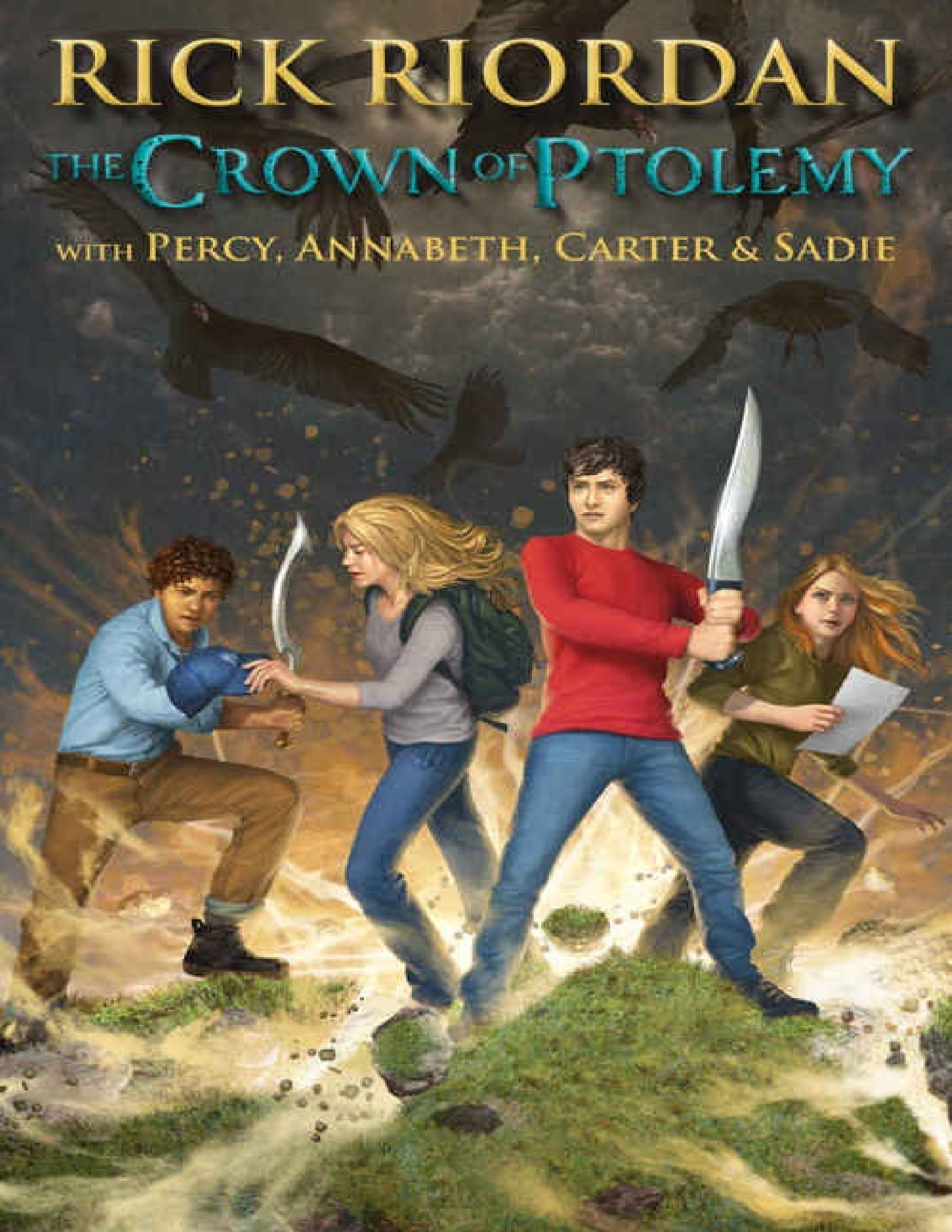


RICK RIORDAN

THE CROWN OF PTOLEMY

WITH PERCY, ANNABETH, CARTER & SADIE



THE CROWN
OF PTOLEMY

RICK RIORDAN

Disney • HYPERION
LOS ANGELES • NEW YORK

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“CARTER!” I SHOUTED.

Nothing happened.

Next to me, pressed against the wall of the old fort, Annabeth peered into the rain, waiting for magical teenagers to fall out of the sky.

“Are you doing it right?” she asked me.

“Gee, I dunno. I’m pretty sure his name is pronounced *Carter*.”

“Try tapping the hieroglyph multiple times.”

“That’s stupid.”

“Just try it.”

I stared at my hand. There wasn’t even a trace of the hieroglyph that Carter Kane had drawn on my palm almost two months back. He’d assured me that the magic couldn’t be washed away, but with my luck, I’d accidentally wiped it off on my pants or something.

I tapped my palm. “Carter. Hello, Carter. Percy to Carter. Paging Carter Kane. Testing, one, two, three. Is this thing on?”

Still nothing.

Usually I wouldn’t panic if the cavalry failed to show. Annabeth and I had been in a lot of bad situations without any backup. But usually we weren’t stranded on Governors Island in the middle of a hurricane, surrounded by fire-breathing death snakes.

(Actually, I *have* been surrounded by fire-breathing death snakes before, but not ones with wings. Everything is worse when it has wings.)

“All right.” Annabeth wiped the rain out of her eyes, which didn’t help, since it was pouring buckets. “Sadie’s not answering her phone. Carter’s hieroglyph isn’t working. I guess we have to do this ourselves.”

“Sure,” I said. “But what do we do?”

I peeked around the corner. At the far end of an arched entryway, a grass courtyard stretched about a hundred yards square, surrounded by red brick buildings. Annabeth had told me this place was a fort or something from the Revolutionary War, but I hadn’t listened to the details. Our main problem was the guy standing in the middle of the lawn doing a magic ritual.

He looked like a runty Elvis Presley, strutting back and forth in skinny black jeans, a powder-blue dress shirt, and a black leather jacket. His greasy pompadour hairdo seemed impervious to the rain and the wind.

In his hands he held an old scroll, like a treasure map. As he paced, he read aloud from it, occasionally throwing back his head and laughing. Basically the dude was in full-on crazy mode.

If that wasn’t creepy enough, flying around him were half a dozen winged serpents, blowing flames in the rain.

Overhead, lightning flashed. Thunder shook my molars.

Annabeth pulled me back.

“That’s got to be Setne,” she said. “The scroll he’s reading from is the Book of Thoth. Whatever spell he’s casting, we have to stop him.”

At this point I should probably back up and explain what the heck was going on.

Only problem: I wasn’t sure what the heck was going on.

A couple of months ago, I fought this giant crocodile on Long Island. A kid named Carter Kane showed up, said he was a magician, and proceeded to help me by blowing up stuff with hieroglyphs and turning into a giant glowing chicken-headed warrior. Together we defeated the crocodile, which Carter explained was a son of Sobek, the Egyptian crocodile god. Carter postulated that some strange Egyptian-Greek hybrid stuff was happening. (Gee, I never would've guessed.) He wrote a magical hieroglyph on my hand and told me to call his name if I ever needed help.

Fast-forward to last month: Annabeth ran into Carter's sister, Sadie Kane, on the A train to Rockaway. They fought some godly dude named Serapis, who had a three-headed staff, and a cereal bowl for a hat. Afterward, Sadie told Annabeth that an ancient magician named Setne might be behind all the weirdness. Apparently this Setne had come back from the dead, snagged an ultrapowerful sorcery cheat sheet called the Book of Thoth, and was playing around with Egyptian and Greek magic, hoping to find a way to become a god himself. Sadie and Annabeth had exchanged numbers and agreed to keep in touch.

Today, four weeks later, Annabeth showed up at my apartment at ten in the morning and announced that she'd had a bad dream—a vision from her mom.

(By the way: her mom is Athena, the goddess of wisdom. My dad is Poseidon. We're Greek demigods. Just thought I should mention that, you know, in passing.)

Annabeth decided that instead of going to the movies, we should spend our Saturday slogging down to the bottom of Manhattan and taking the ferry to Governors Island, where Athena had told her that trouble was brewing.

As soon as we got there, a freak hurricane slammed into New York Harbor. All the mortals evacuated Governors Island, leaving Annabeth and me stranded at an old fort with Crazy Elvis and the Flying Death Snakes.

Make sense to you?

Me neither.

"Your invisibility cap," I said. "It's working again, right? How about I distract Setne while you sneak up behind him? You can knock the book out of his hands."

Annabeth knit her eyebrows. Even with her blond hair plastered to the side of her face, she looked cute. Her eyes were the same color as the storm clouds.

"Setne is supposedly the world's greatest magician," she said. "He might be able to see through invisibility. Plus, if you run out there, he'll probably zap you with a spell. Believe me, Egyptian magic is not something you want to get zapped with."

"I know. Carter walloped me with a glowing blue fist once. But unless you have a better idea...?"

Unfortunately, she didn't offer one. She pulled her New York Yankees cap from her backpack. "Give me a minute head start. Try to take out those flying snakes first. They should be softer targets."

"Got it." I raised my ballpoint pen, which doesn't sound like an impressive weapon; but it turns into a magic sword when I uncap it. No, seriously. "Will a Celestial bronze blade kill them?"

Annabeth frowned. "It should. At least...my bronze dagger worked on the staff of Serapis. Of course, that bronze dagger was made from an Egyptian wand, so..."

"I'm getting a headache. Usually when I get a headache, it's time to stop talking and attack something."

"Fine. Just remember: our main goal is to get that scroll. According to Sadie, Setne can use it to turn himself immortal."

"Understood. No bad guys turning immortal on my watch." I kissed her, because 1) when you're a demigod going into battle, every kiss might be your last, and 2) I like kissing her. "Be careful."

She put on her Yankees cap and vanished.

I'd love to tell you that I walked in and killed the snakes, Annabeth stabbed Elvis in the back and took his scroll, and we went home happy.

You'd figure *once* in a while things would work out the way we planned.

But noooooo.

I gave Annabeth a few seconds to sneak into the courtyard.

Then I uncapped my pen, and Riptide sprang to full length—three feet of razor-sharp Celestial bronze.

I strolled into the courtyard and sliced the nearest serpent out of the air.

Nothing says *Hi, neighbor!* like killing a guy's flying reptile.

The snake didn't disintegrate like most monsters I'd fought. Its two halves just landed in the wet grass. The half with wings flopped around aimlessly.

Crazy Elvis didn't notice. He kept pacing back and forth, engrossed in his scroll, so I moved farther into the courtyard and sliced another snake.

The storm made it hard to see. Normally I can stay dry when submersed in water, but rain is trickier. It needed my skin and got in my eyes.

Lightning flashed. By the time my vision cleared, two more snakes were dive-bombing me from either side. I jumped backward just as they blew fire.

FYI, jumping backward is hard when you're holding a sword. It's even harder when the ground is muddy.

Long story short: I slipped and landed on my butt.

Flames shot over my head. The two snakes circled above me like they were too surprised to attack again. Probably they were wondering, *Did that guy just fall on his butt on purpose? Should we laugh before we kill him? Would that be mean?*

Before they could decide what to do, Crazy Elvis called out, "Leave him!"

The snakes darted off to join their brethren, who were orbiting ten feet above the magician.

I wanted to get up and face Setne, but my rear end had other ideas. It wanted to stay where it was and be in extreme pain. Butts are like that sometimes. They can be, well, butts.

Setne rolled up his scroll. He sauntered toward me, the rain parting around him like a bead curtain. His winged snakes followed, their flames making plumes of steam in the storm.

"Hi, there!" Setne sounded so casual and friendly, I knew I was in trouble. "You're a demigod, I suppose?"

I wondered how Setne knew that. Maybe he could "smell" a demigod's aura the way Greek monsters could. Or maybe my prankster friends the Stoll brothers had written I'M A DEMIGOD on my forehead in permanent marker, and Annabeth had decided not to tell me. That happened occasionally.

Setne's smile made his face look even gaunter. Dark eyeliner rimmed his eyes, giving him a hungry, feral stare. Around his neck glittered a golden chain of interlocking ankhs, and from his left ear dangled an ornament that looked like a human finger bone.

"You must be Setne." I managed to get to my feet without killing myself. "Did you get that outfit at the Halloween Store?"

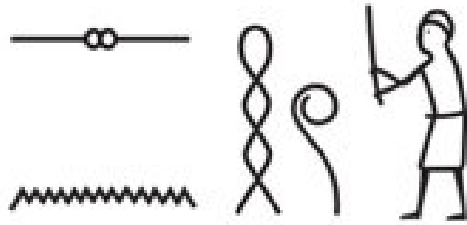
Setne chuckled. "Look, nothing personal, but I'm a little busy at the moment. I'm going to ask you and your girlfriend to wait while I finish my incantation, okay? Once I've summoned the *deshret*, we can chat."

I tried to look confused, which is one of my most convincing expressions. "What girlfriend? I'm alone. Also, why are you summoning a dishrag?"

"It's *deshret*." Setne patted his pompadour. "The red crown of Lower Egypt. As for your girlfriend..."

He wheeled and pointed behind him, shouting something like "*Sun-AH!*"

Red hieroglyphs burned in the air where Setne pointed:



Annabeth turned visible. I'd never actually seen her wearing her Yankees cap before, since she vanished every time she put it on, but there she was—wide-eyed with surprise, caught in the act of sneaking up on Setne.

Before she could react, the red glowing hieroglyphs turned into ropes like licorice whips and lashed out, wrapping around her, pinning her arms and legs with such force that she toppled over.

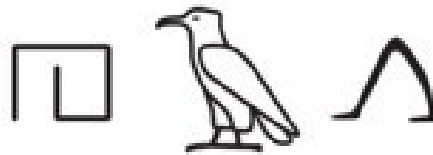
"Hey!" I yelled. "Let her go!"

The magician grinned. "Invisibility magic. *Please*. I've been using invisibility spells since the pyramids were under warranty. Like I said, this is nothing personal, demigods. I just can't spare the energy to kill you...at least not until the summons is over. I hope you understand."

My heart hammered. I'd seen Egyptian magic before, when Carter helped me fight the giant crocodile on Long Island, but I had no idea how to stop it, and I couldn't stand to see it used against Annabeth.

I charged at Setne. He just waved his hand and muttered, "*Hu-Ai*."

More stupid hieroglyphs flashed in front of me.



I fell on my face.

My face did not appreciate that. I got mud in my nostrils and blood in my mouth from biting my tongue. When I blinked, the red hieroglyphs burned on the insides of my eyelids.

I groaned. "What was *that* spell?"

"*Fall*," Setne said. "One of my favorites. Really, don't get up. You'll just hurt yourself more."

"Setne!" Annabeth shouted through the storm. "Listen to me. You *can't* make yourself into a god. It won't work. You'll just destroy—"

The coil of magical red ropes expanded, covering Annabeth's mouth.

"I appreciate your concern," said the magician. "Really, I do. But I've got this figured out. That business with Serapis...when you destroyed my hybrid god? I learned quite a bit from that. I took excellent notes."

Annabeth struggled uselessly.

I wanted to run to her, but I had a feeling I'd just end up with my face in the mud again. I'd have to play this smart...which was not my usual style.

I tried to steady my breathing. I scooted sideways, just to see if I could.

"So you were watching in Rockaway Beach?" I asked Setne. "When Annabeth and Sadie took down

Serapis, that was all an experiment to you?”

“Of course!” Setne looked very pleased with himself. “I jotted down the incantations Serapis used while he tried to raise his new Alexandrian lighthouse. Then it was just a matter of cross-referencing those with the older magic in the Book of Thoth, and *voilà!* I found exactly the spell combo I need to make myself into a god. It’s going to be great. Watch and see!”

He opened his scroll and started chanting again. His winged serpents spiraled through the rain. Lightning flashed. The ground rumbled.

On Setne’s left, about fifteen feet away from me, the grass split open. A geyser of flames spewed upward, and the winged serpents flew straight into it. Earth, fire, rain, and serpents swirled into a tornado of elements, merging and solidifying into one huge shape: a coiled cobra with a female human head.

Her reptilian hood was easily six feet across. Her eyes glittered like rubies. A forked tongue flickered between her lips, and her dark hair was plaited with gold. Resting on her head was a sort of crown—a red pillbox-looking thing with a curlicue ornament on the front.

Now, personally, I’m not fond of huge snakes, especially ones with human heads and stupid hats. If I’d summoned this thing, I would’ve cast a spell to send it back, super quick.

But Setne just rolled up his scroll, slipped it in his jacket pocket, and grinned. “Awesome!”

The cobra lady hissed. “Who dares summon me? I am Wadjet, queen of cobras, protector of Lower Egypt, eternal mistress of—”

“I know!” Setne clapped his hands. “I’m a huge fan!”

I crawled toward Annabeth. Not that I could help much with the *fall* spell keeping me off my feet, but I wanted to be close to her if something went down with this eternal cobra queen of whatever blah, blah, blah. Maybe I could at least use Riptide to cut those red cords and give Annabeth a fighting chance.

“Oh, this is so great,” Setne continued. He fished something out of his pants pocket...a cell phone.

The goddess bared her fangs. She sprayed Setne with a cloud of green mist—poison, I guessed—but he repelled it like the nose cone of a rocket repelled heat.

I kept crawling toward Annabeth, who was struggling helplessly in her red-licorice cocoon. Her eyes blazed with frustration. She hated being sidelined worse than just about anything.

“Okay, where’s the camera icon?” Setne fumbled with his phone. “We have to get a picture together before I destroy you.”

“*Destroy me?*” demanded the cobra goddess. She lashed out at Setne, but a sudden gust of rain and wind pushed her back.

I was ten feet away from Annabeth. Riptide’s blade glowed as I dragged it through the mud.

“Let’s see.” Setne tapped his phone. “Sorry, this is new to me. I’m from the Nineteenth Dynasty. Ah, okay. No. Darn it. Where did the screen go? Ah! Right! So what do modern folks call this...a snappie?” He leaned in toward the cobra goddess, held out his phone at arm’s length, and took a picture. “Got it!”

“WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?” Wadjet roared. “YOU DARE TAKE A SELFIE WITH THE COBRA GODDESS?”

“Selfie!” said the magician. “That’s right! Thanks. And now I’ll take your crown and consume your essence. Hope you don’t mind.”

“*WHAT?*” The cobra goddess reared and bared her fangs again, but the rain and wind restrained her like a seat belt. Setne shouted something in a mixture of Egyptian and Ancient Greek. A few of the Greek words I understood: *soul* and *bind* and possibly *butter* (though I could be wrong about the last one). The cobra goddess began to writhe.

I reached Annabeth just as Setne finished his spell.

The cobra goddess imploded, with a noise like the world’s largest straw finishing the world’s largest milk shake. Wadjet was sucked into her own red crown, along with Setne’s four winged serpents and a five-foot-wide circle of lawn where Wadjet had been coiled.

The crown dropped into the smoking, muddy crater.

Setne laughed in delight. "PERFECT!"

I had to agree, if by *perfect* he meant *so horrifying I want to vomit and I have to get Annabeth out of here right now.*

Setne clambered into the pit to retrieve the crown as I frantically started cutting Annabeth's bonds. I'd only managed to ungag her mouth before the bindings blared like an air horn.

My ears popped. My vision went black.

When the sound died and my vertigo faded, Setne was standing over us, the red crown now atop his pompadour.

"The ropes scream if you cut them," he advised. "I guess I should've mentioned that."

Annabeth wriggled, trying to free her hands. "What—what did you do to the cobra goddess?"

"Hmm? Oh." Setne tapped the curlicue at the front of the crown. "I devoured her essence. Now I have the power of Lower Egypt."

"You...devoured a god," I said.

"Yep!" From his jacket, he pulled the Book of Thoth and wagged it at us. "Amazing what kind of knowledge is in here. Ptolemy the First had the right idea, making himself a god, but by the time he became king of Alexandria, Egyptian magic was diluted and weak. He definitely didn't have access to prime source material like the Book of Thoth. With this baby, I'm cooking with spice! Now that I've got the crown of Lower Egypt—"

"Let me guess," Annabeth said. "You'll go for the crown of Upper Egypt. Then you'll put them together and rule the world."

He grinned. "Smart girl. But first I have to destroy you two. Nothing personal. It's just that when you're doing hybrid Greek-Egyptian magic, I've found that a little demigod blood is a great catalyst. Now, if you'll just hold still—"

I lunged forward and jabbed him with my sword.

Amazingly, Riptide went straight into his gut.

I so rarely succeed that I just crouched there, stunned, my hand trembling on the hilt.

"Wow." Setne looked down at the blood on his powder-blue shirt. "Nice job."

"Thanks." I tried to yank out Riptide, but it seemed to be stuck. "So...you can die now, if it's not too much trouble."

Setne smiled apologetically. "About that...I'm beyond dying now. At this point—" He tapped the blade. "Get it? *This point?* I'm afraid all you can do is make me stronger!"

His red crown began to glow.

For once, my instincts saved my life. Despite the klutz spell Setne had hexed me with, I somehow managed to get to my feet, grab Annabeth, and haul her as far from the magician as possible.

I dropped to the ground at the archway as a massive roar shook the courtyard. Trees were uprooted. Windows shattered. Bricks peeled off the wall, and everything in sight hurtled toward Setne as if he'd become the new center of gravity. Even Annabeth's magical bonds were stripped away. It took all my strength to hold her with one arm while gripping the corner of the building with my other hand.

Clouds of debris spun around the magician. Wood, stone, and glass vaporized as they were absorbed into Setne's body.

Once gravity returned to normal, I realized I'd left something important behind.

Riptide was gone. The wound in Setne's gut had closed.

"HEY!" I got up, my legs shaking. "You ate my sword!"

My voice sounded shrill—like a little kid who's just had his lunch money stolen. The thing is, Riptide was my most important possession. I'd had it a long time. It had seen me through a lot of scrapes.

I'd lost my sword before on a few occasions, but it always reappeared in pen form back in my pocket.

I had a feeling that wasn't going to happen this time. Riptide had been *consumed*—sucked into Setne's body along with the bricks, the broken glass, and several cubic feet of sod.

Setne turned up his palms. "Sorry about that. I'm a growing deity. I need my nutrition..." He tilted his head as if listening to something in the storm. "*Percy Jackson*. Interesting. And your friend, Annabeth Chase. You two have had some interesting adventures. You'll give me lots of nourishment!"

Annabeth struggled to her feet. "How do you know our names?"

"Oh, you can learn a lot about someone from devouring their prized possession." Setne patted his stomach. "Now, if you don't mind, I really need to consume you both. Not to worry, though! Your essence will live forever right here...next to my, uh, pancreas, I think."

I slipped my hand into Annabeth's. After all we'd been through, I was not going to let our lives end this way—devoured by a wannabe Elvis god with a pillbox hat.

I weighed my options: direct attack or strategic retreat. I wanted to punch Setne in his heavily mascaraed eyes, but if I could get Annabeth to the shore, we could jump into the harbor. Being the son of Poseidon, I'd have the upper hand underwater. We could regroup, maybe come back with a few dozen demigod friends and some heavy artillery.

Before I could decide, something completely random changed the equation.

A full-sized camel dropped out of the sky and crushed Setne flat.

"Sadie!" Annabeth cried.

For a split-second, I thought she was calling the camel *Sadie*. Then I realized Annabeth was looking up into the storm, where two falcons spiraled above the courtyard.

The camel bellowed and farted, which made me appreciate it even more.

Unfortunately we didn't have time to become friends. The camel widened its eyes, bleated in alarm, and dissolved into sand.

Setne rose from the dust pile. His crown was tilted. His black jacket was covered in camel fuzz, but he looked unhurt.

"That was rude." He glanced up at the two falcons now diving toward him. "No time for this nonsense."

Just as the birds were about to rip his face off, Setne vanished in a swirl of rain.

The falcons landed and morphed into two human teens. On the right stood my buddy Carter Kane, looking casual in his beige linen combat jammies, with a curved ivory wand in one hand and a crescent-bladed sword in the other. On the left stood a slightly younger blond girl, who I assumed was his sister, Sadie. She had black linen jammies, orange highlights in her hair, a white wooden staff, and mud-spattered combat boots.

Physically, the two siblings looked nothing alike. Carter's complexion was coppery, his hair black and curly. His thoughtful scowl radiated seriousness. By contrast, Sadie was fair-skinned with blue eyes and a lopsided smile so full of mischief, I would've figured her for a Hermes kid back at Camp Half-Blood.

Then again, I have Cyclopes and two-tailed mermen as siblings. I wasn't about to comment on the Kane kids' lack of resemblance.

Annabeth exhaled with relief. "I am so glad to see you."

She gave Sadie a big hug.

Carter and I looked at each other.

"Hey, man," I said. "I'm not going to hug you."

"That's okay," Carter said. "Sorry we're late. This storm was messing up our locator magic."

I nodded like I knew what *locator magic* was. "So this friend of yours, Setne...he's kind of a dirt

wipe.”

Sadie snorted. “You don’t know the *half* of it. Did he happen to give you a helpful villain monologue? Reveal his evil plans, say where he was going next, that sort of thing?”

“Well, he used that scroll, the Book of Thoth,” I said. “He summoned a cobra goddess, devoured her essence, and stole her red hat.”

“Oh, dear.” Sadie glanced at Carter. “The crown of Upper Egypt will be next.”

Carter nodded. “And if he manages to put the two crowns together—”

“He’ll become immortal,” Annabeth guessed. “A newly made god. Then he’ll start vacuuming up all the Greek and Egyptian magic in the world.”

“Also he stole my sword,” I said. “I want it back.”

The three of them stared at me.

“What?” I said. “I like my sword.”

Carter hooked his curvy-bladed *khopesh* and his wand to his belt. “Tell us everything that happened. Details.”

While we talked, Sadie muttered some sort of spell, and the rain bent around us like we were under a giant invisible umbrella. Neat trick.

Annabeth had the better memory, so she did most of the explaining about our fight with Setne...though calling it a *fight* was generous.

When she was done, Carter knelt and traced some hieroglyphs in the mud.

“If Setne gets the *hedjet*, we’re finished,” he said. “He’ll form the crown of Ptolemy and—”

“Hold up,” I said. “Low tolerance for confusing names. Can you explain what’s going on in, like, regular words?”

Carter frowned. “The *pschent* is the double crown of Egypt, okay? The bottom half is the red crown, the *deshret*. It represents the Lower Kingdom. The top half is the *hedjet*, the white crown of the Upper Kingdom.”

“You wear them together,” Annabeth added, “and that means you’re the pharaoh of all Egypt.”

“Except in this case,” Sadie said, “our ugly friend Setne is creating a very special *pschent*—the crown of Ptolemy.”

“Okay...” I still didn’t get it, but felt like I should at least pretend to follow along. “But wasn’t Ptolemy a Greek dude?”

“Yes,” Carter said. “Alexander the Great conquered Egypt. Then he died. His general Ptolemy took over and tried to mix Greek and Egyptian religion. He proclaimed himself a god-king, like the old pharaohs, but Ptolemy went a step further. He used a combination of Greek and Egypt magic to try making himself immortal. It didn’t work out, but—”

“Setne has perfected the formula,” I guessed. “That Book of Thoth gives him some primo magic.”

Sadie clapped for me. “I think you’ve got it. Setne will recreate the crown of Ptolemy, but this time he’ll do it properly, and he’ll become a god.”

“Which is bad,” I said.

Annabeth tugged thoughtfully at her ear. “So...who was that cobra goddess?”

“Wadjet,” Carter said. “The guardian of the red crown.”

“And there’s a guardian of the white crown?” she asked.

“Nekhbet.” Carter’s expression turned sour. “The vulture goddess. I don’t like her much, but I suppose we’ll have to stop her from getting devoured. Since Setne needs the Upper Kingdom crown, he’ll probably go south for the next ritual. It’s like a symbolic thing.”

“Isn’t up usually north?” I asked.

Sadie smirked. “Oh, that would be *much* too easy. In Egypt, up is south, because the Nile runs from the south to the north.”

“Great,” I said. “So how far south are we talking about—Brooklyn? Antarctica?”

“I don’t think he’ll go that far.” Carter rose to his feet and scanned the horizon. “Our headquarters are in Brooklyn. And I’m guessing Manhattan is like Greek god central? A long time ago, our Uncle Amos hinted at that.”

“Well, yeah,” I said. “Mount Olympus hovers over the Empire State Building, so—”

“Mount Olympus”—Sadie blinked—“hovers over the...Of course it does. Why not? I think what my brother’s trying to say is that if Setne wants to establish a new seat of power, blending Greek *and* Egyptian—”

“He’d find a place in between Brooklyn and Manhattan,” Annabeth said. “Like right here, Governors Island.”

“Exactly,” Carter said. “He’ll need to conduct the ritual for the second crown south of this point, but it doesn’t have to be *far* south. If I were him—”

“And we’re glad you’re not,” I said.

“—I would stay on Governors Island. We’re at the north end now, so...”

I gazed south. “Anyone know what’s at the other end?”

“I’ve never been here,” Annabeth said. “But I think there’s a picnic area.”

“Lovely.” Sadie raised her staff. The tip flared with white fire. “Anyone fancy a picnic in the rain?”

“Setne’s dangerous,” Annabeth said. “We can’t just go charging in. We need a plan.”

“She’s right,” Carter said.

“I kind of like charging in,” I said. “Speed is of the essence, right?”

“Thank you,” Sadie muttered.

“Being smart is *also* of the essence,” Annabeth said.

“Exactly,” Carter said. “We have to figure out how to attack.”

Sadie rolled her eyes at me. “Just as I feared. These two together...they’ll overthink us to death.”

I felt the same way, but Annabeth was getting that annoyed stormy look in her eyes, and since I *date* Annabeth, I figured I’d better suggest a compromise.

“How about we plan while we walk?” I said. “We can charge south, like, really slowly.”

“Deal,” said Carter.

We headed down the road from the old fort, past some fancy brick buildings that might have been officers’ quarters back in the day. We made our way across a soggy expanse of soccer fields. The rain kept pouring down, but Sadie’s magic umbrella traveled with us, keeping the worst of the storm away.

Annabeth and Carter compared notes from the research they’d done. They talked about Ptolemy and the mixing of Greek and Egyptian magic.

As for Sadie, she didn’t appear interested in strategy. She leaped from puddle to puddle in her combat boots. She hummed to herself, twirled like a little kid, and occasionally pulled random things out of her backpack: wax animal figurines, some string, a piece of chalk, a bright yellow bag of candy.

She reminded me of someone....

Then it occurred to me. She looked like a younger version of Annabeth, but her fidgeting and hyperness reminded me of...well, me. If Annabeth and I ever had a daughter, she might be a lot like Sadie.

Whoa.

It’s not like I’d never dreamed about kids before. I mean, you date someone for over a year, the idea is going to be in the back of your mind somewhere, right? But still—I’m barely seventeen. I’m not ready to think *too* seriously about stuff like that. Also, I’m a demigod. On a day-to-day basis, I’m busy just trying to stay alive.

Yet, looking at Sadie, I could imagine that someday maybe I’d have a little girl who looked like Annabeth and acted like me—a cute little hellion of a demigod, stomping through puddles and flattening monsters with magic camels.

I must have been staring, because Sadie frowned at me. “What?”

“Nothing,” I said quickly.

Carter nudged me. “Were you listening?”

“Yes. No. What?”

Annabeth sighed. “Percy, explaining things to you is like lecturing a gerbil.”

“Hey, Wise Girl, don’t start with me.”

“Whatever, Seaweed Brain. We were just saying that we’ll have to combine our attacks.”

“Combine our attacks...” I patted my pocket, but Riptide had not reappeared in pen form. I didn’t want to admit how nervous that made me.

Sure, I had other skills. I could make waves (literally) and occasionally even whip up a nice frothy hurricane. But my sword was a big part of who I was. Without it, I felt crippled.

“How do we do combine attacks?”

Carter got a mischievous gleam in his eyes that made him look more like his sister. “We turn Setne’s strategy against him. He’s using hybrid magic—Greek and Egyptian together, right? We do the same.”

Annabeth nodded. “Greek-style attacks won’t work. You saw what Setne did with your sword. And Carter is pretty sure regular Egyptian spells won’t be enough either. But if we can find a way to mix our powers—”

“Do you *know* how to mix our powers?” I asked.

Carter’s shoes squished in the mud. “Well...not exactly.”

“Oh, please,” Sadie said. “That’s *easy*. Carter, give your wand to Percy.”

“Why?”

“Just do it, brother dear. Annabeth, do you remember when we fought Serapis?”

“Right!” Annabeth’s eyes lit up. “I grabbed Sadie’s wand and it turned into a Celestial bronze dagger, just like my old one. It was able to destroy Serapis’s staff. Maybe we can create another Greek weapon from an Egyptian wand. Good idea, Sadie.”

“Cheers. You see, I don’t need to spend hours planning and researching to be brilliant. Now, Carter, if you please.”

As soon as I took the wand, my hand clenched like I’d grabbed an electrical cable. Spikes of pain shot up my arm. I tried to drop the wand, but I couldn’t. Tears filled my eyes.

“By the way,” Sadie said, “this may hurt a bit.”

“Thanks.” I gritted my teeth. “Little late on the warning.”

The ivory began to smolder. When the smoke cleared and the agony subsided, instead of a wand I was holding a Celestial bronze sword that *definitely* wasn’t Riptide.

“What is this?” I asked. “It’s huge.”

Carter whistled under his breath. “I’ve seen those in museums. That’s a *kopis*.”

I hefted the sword. Like so many I’d tried, it didn’t feel right in my hands. The hilt was too heavy for my wrist. The single-edged blade was curved awkwardly, like a giant hook knife. I tried a jab and nearly lost my balance.

“This one doesn’t look like yours,” I told Carter. “Isn’t yours called a *kopis*?”

“Mine is a *khopesh*,” Carter said. “The original Egyptian version. What you’re holding is a *kopis*—a Greek design adapted from the Egyptian original. It’s the kind of sword Ptolemy’s warriors would’ve used.”

I looked at Sadie. “Is he trying to confuse me?”

“No,” she said brightly. “He’s confusing *without* trying.”

Carter smacked his palm against his forehead. “That wasn’t even confusing. How was that—? Never mind. Percy, the main thing is, can you fight with that sword?”

I sliced the *kopis* through the air. “I feel like I’m fencing with a meat cleaver, but it’ll have to do.”

What about weapons for you guys?"

Annabeth rubbed the clay beads on her necklace, the way she does when she's thinking. She looked beautiful. But I digress.

"Sadie," she said, "those hieroglyphic spells you used on Rockaway Beach...which one made the explosion?"

"It's called—well, I can't actually say the word without making you blow up. Hold on." Sadie rummaged through her backpack. She brought out a sheet of yellow papyrus, a stylus, and a bottle of ink—I guess because pen and paper would be un-Egyptian. She knelt, using her backpack as a makeshift writing desk, and scrawled in normal letters: *HA-DI*.

"That's a good spell," Carter agreed. "We could show you the hieroglyph for it, but unless you know how to speak words of power—"

"No need," Annabeth said. "The phrase means *explode*?"

"More or less," Sadie said.

"And you can write the hieroglyph on a scroll without triggering the *ka-boom*?"

"Right. The scroll will store the magic for later. If you read the word from the papyrus...well, that's even better. More *ka-boom* with less effort."

"Good," Annabeth said. "Do you have another piece of papyrus?"

"Annabeth," I said, "what are you doing? 'Cause if you're messing around with exploding words—"

"Relax," she said. "I know what I'm doing. Sort of."

She knelt next to Sadie, who gave her a fresh sheet of papyrus.

Annabeth took the stylus and wrote something in Ancient Greek:

Κεραυνόω

Being dyslexic, I'm lucky if I can recognize *English* words, but being a demigod, Ancient Greek is sort of hardwired into my brain.

"Ke-rau-noh," I pronounced. "*Blast*?"

Annabeth gave me a wicked little smile. "Closest term I could think of. Literally it means *strike with lightning bolts*."

"Ooh," Sadie said. "I love striking things with lightning bolts."

Carter stared at the papyrus. "You're thinking we could invoke an Ancient Greek word the same way we do with hieroglyphs?"

"It's worth a try," Annabeth said. "Which of you is better with that kind of magic?"

"Sadie," Carter said. "I'm more a combat magician."

"Giant chicken mode," I remembered.

"Dude, my avatar is a *falcon-headed warrior*."

"I still think you could get a sponsorship deal with KFC. Make some big bucks."

"Knock it off, you two." Annabeth handed her scroll to Sadie. "Carter, let's trade. I'll try your *khopesh*; you try my Yankees cap."

She tossed him the hat.

"I'm usually more of a basketball guy, but..." Carter put on the cap and disappeared. "Wow, okay. I'm invisible, aren't I?"

Sadie applauded. "You've never looked better, brother dear."

"Very funny."

"If you can sneak up on Setne," Annabeth suggested, "you might be able to take him by surprise, get the crown away from him."

"But you told us Setne saw right through your invisibility," Carter said.

“That was *me*,” Annabeth said, “a Greek using a Greek magic item. For you, maybe it’ll work better—or differently, at least.”

“Carter, give it a shot,” I said. “The only thing better than a giant chicken man is a giant invisible chicken man.”

Suddenly the ground shook under our feet.

Across the soccer fields, toward the south end of the island, a white glow lit the horizon.

“That can’t be good,” Annabeth said.

“No,” Sadie agreed. “Perhaps we should charge in a little more quickly.”

The vultures were having a party.

Past a line of trees, a muddy field stretched to the edge of the island. At the base of a small lighthouse, a few picnic tables huddled as if for shelter. Across the harbor, the Statue of Liberty glowed white in the storm, rainclouds pushing around her like waves off the prow of a ship.

In the middle of the picnic grounds, six large black buzzards whirled in the rain, orbiting our buddy Setne.

The magician was rocking a new outfit. He’d changed into a red quilted smoking jacket—I guess to match his red crown. His silk pants shimmered in red and black paisley. Just to make sure his look wasn’t too understated, his loafers were entirely covered in rhinestones.

He strutted around with the Book of Thoth, chanting some spell, the same way he’d done back at the fort.

“He’s summoning Nekhbet,” Sadie murmured. “I’d really rather not see *her* again.”

“What kind of name is Neck Butt, anyway?” I asked.

Sadie snickered. “That’s what *I* called her the first time I saw her. But really, she’s *not* very nice. Possessed my gran, chased me across London...”

“So what’s the plan?” Carter asked. “Maybe a flanking maneuver?”

“Or,” Annabeth said, “we could try a diversionary—”

“Charge!” Sadie barreled into the clearing, her staff in one hand and her Greek scroll in the other.

I glanced at Annabeth. “Your new friend is awesome.”

Then I followed Sadie.

My plan was pretty simple: run at Setne and kill him. Even with my heavy new sword, I outpaced Sadie. Two vultures dived at me. I sliced them out of the air.

I was five feet from Setne and imagining the satisfaction of slicing him in half when he turned and noticed me. The magician vanished. My blade cut through empty air.

I stumbled, off-balance and angry.

Ten feet to my left, Sadie smacked a vulture with her staff. The bird exploded into white sand. Annabeth jogged toward us, giving me one of those annoyed expressions like, *If you get yourself killed, I’m going to murder you*. Carter, being invisible, was nowhere to be seen.

With a bolt of white fire, Sadie blasted another vulture out of the sky. The remaining birds scattered in the storm.

Sadie scanned the field for Setne. “Where *is* the skinny old git?”

The skinny old git appeared right behind her. He spoke a single word from his scroll of nasty surprises, and the ground exploded.

When I regained my senses, I was still standing, which was a minor miracle. The force of the spell had pushed me away from Setne, so my shoes had made trenches in the mud.

I looked up, but I couldn’t make sense of what I was seeing. Around Setne, the earth had ruptured in a ten-foot-diameter ring, splitting open like a seedpod. Plumes of dirt had sprayed outward and were frozen

in midair. Tendrils of red sand coiled around my legs and brushed against my face as they snaked in all directions. It looked like somebody had stopped time while slinging red mud from a giant salad spinner.

Sadie lay flat on the ground to my left, her legs buried under a blanket of mud. She struggled but couldn't seem to get free. Her staff was knocked out of reach. Her scroll was a muddy rag in her hand.

I stepped toward her, but the coils of sand pushed me back.

Somewhere behind me, Annabeth yelled my name. I turned and saw her just outside the explosion zone. She was trying to charge in, but the earthen tendrils moved to block her, whipping around like octopus arms.

There was no sign of Carter. I could only hope he hadn't gotten caught in this stupid web of floating dirt.

"Setne!" I yelled.

The magician brushed the lapels of his smoking jacket. "You *really* should stop interrupting me, demigod. The *deshret* crown was originally a gift to the pharaohs from the earth god Geb, you know. It can defend itself with some cool earth magic!"

I gritted my teeth. Annabeth and I had recently done battle with Gaea the Earth Mother. More dirt sorcery was the *last* thing I needed.

Sadie struggled, her legs still encased in mud. "Clean up all this dirt right now, young man. Then give us that crown and go to your room."

The magician's eyes glittered. "Ah, Sadie. Delightful as always. Where's your brother? Did I accidentally blow him up? You can thank me for that later. Right now, I must get on with business."

He turned his back on us and resumed chanting.

The wind picked up. Rain whipped around him. The floating lines of sand began to stir and shift.

I managed to step forward, but it was like wading through wet cement. Behind me, Annabeth wasn't having much more luck. Sadie managed to pull one of her legs free, minus her combat boot. She cursed worse than my immortal horse friend Arion (which is pretty bad) as she retrieved the boot.

Setne's weird earth spell was loosening, but not fast enough. I'd only managed two more steps when Setne finished his incantation.

In front of him, a wisp of darkness grew into the form of a queenly woman. Rubies embroidered the collar of her black dress. Gold bands circled her upper arms. Her face had an imperious, timeless quality that I'd learned to recognize. It meant *I'm a goddess; deal with it*. Perched atop her braided black hair was a white conical crown, and I couldn't help wondering why a powerful immortal being would choose to wear a headpiece shaped like a bowling pin.

"You!" she snarled at Setne.

"Me!" he agreed. "Wonderful to see you again, Nekhbet. Sorry we don't have longer to chat, but I can't keep these mortals pinned down forever. We'll have to make this brief. The *hedjet*, please."

The vulture goddess spread her arms, which grew into huge black wings. Around her, the air turned dark as smoke. "I do not yield to upstarts like you. I am the protector of the crown, the shield of the pharaoh, the—"

"Yes, yes," Setne said. "But you've yielded to upstarts plenty of times. The history of Egypt is basically a list of which upstarts you've yielded to. So let's have the crown."

I didn't know vultures could hiss, but Nekhbet did. Smoke billowed from her wings.

All around the clearing, Setne's earth magic shattered. The tendrils of red sand fell to the ground with a loud *slosh*, and suddenly I could move again. Sadie struggled to her feet. Annabeth ran to my side.

Setne didn't seem concerned about us.

He gave Nekhbet a mock bow. "Very impressive. But watch this!"

He didn't need to read from the scroll this time. He shouted a combination of Greek and Egyptian—words I recognized from the spell he'd used back at the fort.

I locked eyes with Annabeth. I could tell we were thinking the same thing. We couldn't let Setne consume the goddess.

Sadie raised her muddy piece of papyrus. "Annabeth, you and Percy get Nekhbet out of here. GO!"

No time to argue. Annabeth and I plowed into the goddess like linebackers and pushed her across the field, away from Setne.

Behind us, Sadie yelled, "*Ke-rau-noh!*"

I didn't see the explosion, but it must have been impressive.

Annabeth and I were thrown forward. We landed on top of Nekhbet, who let out an indignant squawk. (By the way, I would not recommend stuffing your pillow with vulture feathers. They're not very comfy.)

I managed to get up. Where Setne had been standing was a smoking crater.

Sadie's hair was singed at the tips. Her scroll was gone. Her eyes were wide with surprise. "That was brilliant. Did I get him?"

"Nope!" Setne appeared a few feet away, stumbling a little. His clothes were smoldering, but he looked more dazed than hurt.

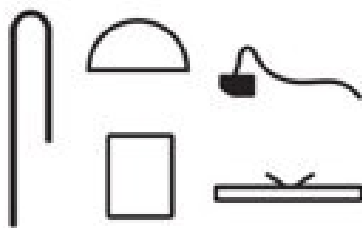
He knelt and picked up something conical and white...Nekhbet's crown, which must've rolled off when we tackled her.

"Thanks for this." Setne spread his arms triumphantly—the white crown in one hand, the Book of Thoth in the other. "Now, where was I? Oh, right! Consuming all of you!"

Across the field, Carter's voice yelled: "*STAHP!*"

I guess *stahp* is actually a word in Ancient Egyptian. Who knew?

A bright blue hieroglyph scythed through the air, cutting off Setne's right hand at the wrist.



Setne shrieked in pain. The Book of Thoth dropped into the grass.

Twenty feet away from me, Carter appeared out of thin air, holding Annabeth's Yankees cap. He wasn't in giant chicken mode, but since he'd just saved our lives, I wasn't going to complain.

Setne glanced down at the Book of Thoth, still in his severed hand, but I lunged forward, thrusting the point of my new sword under his nose. "I don't think so."

The magician snarled. "Take the book, then! I don't need it anymore!"

He vanished in a whirl of darkness.

On the ground behind me, the vulture goddess Nekhbet thrashed and pushed Annabeth aside. "Get off me!"

"Hey, lady,"—Annabeth rose—"I was trying to keep you from being devoured. You're welcome."

The vulture goddess got to her feet.

She didn't look nearly as impressive without her crown. Her hairdo was a mud-and-grass salad. Her black dress had turned into a smock of molting feathers. She looked shriveled and hunched over, with her neck sticking out like...well, a vulture. All she needed was a cardboard sign saying: HOMELESS, ANYTHING HELPS, and I totally would have given her my spare change.

"You miserable children," she grumbled. "I could have destroyed that magician!"

"Not so much," I said. "A few minutes ago, we watched Setne inhale a cobra goddess. She was a lot

more impressive than you.”

Nekhbet’s eyes narrowed. “Wadjet? He inhaled *Wadjet*? Tell me everything.”

Carter and Sadie joined us as we briefed the goddess on what had happened so far.

When we were done, Nekhbet wailed in outrage. “This is unacceptable! Wadjet and I were the symbols of unity in Ancient Egypt. We were revered as the Two Ladies! That upstart Setne has stolen my other Lady!”

“Well, he didn’t get you,” Sadie said. “Which I suppose is a good thing.”

Nekhbet bared her teeth, which were pointy and red like a row of little vulture beaks. “You *Kanes*. I should’ve known you’d be involved. Always mucking about in godly affairs.”

“Oh, so now it’s *our* fault?” Sadie hefted her staff. “Listen here, buzzard breath—”

“Let’s stay focused,” Carter said. “At least we got the Book of Thoth. We stopped Setne from devouring Nekhbet. So what’s Setne’s next move, and how do we stop him?”

“He has both parts of the *pschent*!” said the vulture goddess. “Without my essence, the white crown is not as powerful as it would be, true, but it’s still enough for Setne’s purposes. He needs only to complete the deification ceremony while wearing the crown of Ptolemy. Then he will become a god. I *hate* it when mortals become gods! They always want thrones. They build garish McPalaces. They don’t respect the rules in the gods’ lounge.”

“The gods’ lounge?” I asked.

“We must stop him!” Nekhbet yelled.

Sadie, Carter, Annabeth, and I exchanged uneasy looks. Normally when a god says *We must stop him*, it means *You must stop him while I sit back and enjoy a cold beverage*. But Nekhbet seemed serious about joining the gang.

That didn’t make me any less nervous. I try to avoid teaming up with goddesses who eat roadkill. It’s one of my personal boundaries.

Carter knelt. He pulled the Book of Thoth from Setne’s severed hand. “Can we use the scroll? It has powerful magic.”

“If that’s true,” Annabeth said, “why would Setne leave it behind? I thought it was the key to his immortality.”

“He said he was done with it,” I recalled. “I guess he, like, passed the test, so he threw away his notes.”

Annabeth looked horrified. “Are you crazy? You throw away your notes after a test?”

“Doesn’t everybody, Miss Brainiac?”

“Guys!” Sadie interrupted. “It’s terribly cute watching you two snipe at each other, but we have business.” She turned to Nekhbet. “Now, your Scavenging Highness, is there a way to stop Setne?”

Nekhbet curled her talon fingernails. “Possibly. He’s not a full god yet. But without my crown, my own powers are greatly diminished.”

“What about the Book of Thoth?” Sadie asked. “It may be no further use to Setne, but it *did* help us defeat Apophis.”

At the mention of that name, Nekhbet’s face blanched. Three feathers fell from her dress. “Please don’t remind me of that battle. But you’re correct. The Book of Thoth contains a spell for imprisoning gods. It would take a great deal of concentration and preparation....”

Carter coughed. “I’m guessing Setne won’t stand around quietly while we get ready.”

“No,” Nekhbet agreed. “At least three of you would be required to set a proper trap. A circle must be drawn. A rope must be enchanted. The earth must be consecrated. Other parts of the spell would have to be improvised. I hate Ptolemaic magic. Mixing Greek and Egyptian power is an abomination. However ___”

“It works,” Annabeth said. “Carter was able to go invisible using my hat. Sadie’s explosion scroll at

least dazed Setne.”

“But we’ll need more,” Sadie said.

“Yes...” The vulture goddess fixed her eyes on me like I was a tasty dead possum on the side of the highway. “One of you will have to fight Setne and keep him unbalanced while the others prepare the trap. We need a very potent hybrid attack, an abomination even Ptolemy would approve of.”

“Why are you looking at me?” I asked. “I’m not abominable.”

“You are a son of Poseidon,” the goddess noted. “That would be a most unexpected combination.”

“Combination? What—”

“Oh, no, no, no.” Sadie raised her hands. She looked horrified, and anything that could scare *that* girl I did not want to know about. “Nekhbet, you can’t be serious. You want a demigod to host you? He’s not even a magician. He doesn’t have the blood of the pharaohs!”

Carter grimaced. “That’s her point, Sadie. Percy isn’t the usual kind of host. If the pairing worked, he could be very powerful.”

“Or it could melt his brain!” Sadie said.

“Hold it,” Annabeth said. “I prefer my boyfriend with an un-melted brain. What exactly are we talking about here?”

Carter wagged the Yankees cap at me. “Nekhbet wants Percy to be her host. That’s one way the Egyptian gods maintain a presence in the mortal world. They can inhabit mortals’ bodies.”

My stomach jackknifed. “You want *her*”—I pointed at the frazzled old vulture goddess—“to *inhabit* me? That sounds...”

I tried to think of a word that would convey my complete disgust without offending the goddess. I failed.

“Nekhbet”—Annabeth stepped forward—“join with me instead. I’m a child of Athena. I might be better—”

“Ridiculous!” The goddess sneered. “Your mind is too wily, girl—too stubborn and intelligent. I couldn’t steer you as easily.”

“Steer me?” I protested. “Hey, lady, I’m not a Toyota.”

“My host needs a certain level of simplicity,” the goddess continued. “Percy Jackson is perfect. He is powerful, yet his mind is not overly crowded with plans and ideas.”

“Wow,” I said. “Really feeling the love here.”

Nekhbet rounded on me. “There is no time to argue! Without a physical anchor, I cannot remain in the mortal world much longer. If you want to stop Setne from becoming immortal, you need the power of a god. We must act *now*. Together, we will triumph! We will feast upon that upstart magician’s carcass!”

I swallowed. “I’m actually trying to cut back on carcass feasting.”

Carter gave me a sympathetic look that only made me feel worse. “Unfortunately, Nekhbet is right. Percy, you’re our best shot. Sadie and I couldn’t host Nekhbet even if she wanted us to. We already have patron gods.”

“Who, conveniently, have gone silent,” Sadie noted. “Scared of getting their essences sucked up, I suppose.”

Nekhbet fixed her glittery black eyes on me. “Do you consent to hosting me, demigod?”

I could think of a million ways to say no. The word *yes* simply wouldn’t pass my lips. I glanced at Annabeth for support, but she looked as alarmed as I felt.

“I—I don’t know, Percy,” she confessed. “This is *way* beyond me.”

Suddenly the rainstorm fizzled out. In the eerie muggy quiet, a red glow lit the middle of the island, as if somebody had started a bonfire on the soccer fields.

“That would be Setne,” Nekhbet said. “He has begun his ascension to godhood. What is your answer, Percy Jackson? This will only work properly if you consent.”

I took a deep breath. I told myself that hosting a goddess couldn't be worse than all the other weird horrible things I'd experienced in my demigod career....Besides, my friends needed my help. And I did not want that skinny Elvis impersonator to become a god and build a McPalace in my neighborhood.

"All right," I said. "Vulture me up."

Nekhbet dissolved into black smoke. She swirled around me—filling my nostrils with a smell like boiling tar.

What was it like merging with a god?

If you want the full details, read my Yelp review. I don't feel like going into it again. I gave the experience half a star.

For now, let's just say that being possessed by a vulture goddess was even more disturbing than I'd imagined.

Thousands of years of memories flooded my mind. I saw pyramids rising from the desert, the sun glittering on the Nile River. I heard priests chanting in the cool shadows of a temple, and smelled myrrh incense on the air. I soared over the cities of Ancient Egypt, circling the palace of the pharaoh. I was the vulture goddess Nekhbet—protector of the king, shield of the strong, scourge of the weak and dying.

I also had a burning desire to find a nice warm hyena carcass, stick my face right in there, and—
Okay, basically I wasn't myself.

I tried to focus on the present. I stared at my shoes...the same old pair of Brooks, yellow shoelace on the left, black shoelace on the right. I raised my sword arm to make sure I could still control my muscles.

Relax, demigod. The voice of Nekhbet spoke in my mind. *Let me take charge.*

"I don't think so," I said aloud. I was relieved that my voice still sounded like my voice. "We do this together or not at all."

"Percy?" Annabeth asked. "Are you okay?"

Looking at her was disorienting. The "Percy" part of me saw my usual awesome girlfriend. The "Nekhbet" part of me saw a young woman surrounded by a powerful ultraviolet aura—the mark of a Greek demigod. The sight filled me with disdain and fear. (For the record: I have my own healthy fear of Annabeth. She has kicked my butt on more than one occasion. But disdain? Not so much. That was all Nekhbet.)

"I'm fine," I said. "I was talking to the vulture in my head."

Carter walked a circle around me, frowning like I was an abstract sculpture. "Percy, try to strike a balance. Don't let her take over, but don't fight her, either. It's kind of like running a three-legged race. You have to get in a rhythm with your partner."

"But if you have to choose," Sadie said, "smack her down and stay in control."

I snarled. "Stupid girl! Do not tell me—" I forced my lips closed. The taste of rotting jackal filled my mouth. "Sorry, Sadie," I managed. "That was Nekhbet talking, not me."

"I know." Sadie's expression tightened. "I wish we had more time for you to get used to hosting a goddess. However—"

Another red flash illuminated the treetops.

"The sooner I get this goddess out of my head, the better," I said. "Let's go smash Setne's face."

Setne really could not decide on his wardrobe.

He strutted around the soccer field in black bell-bottomed slacks, a frilly white shirt, and a glittery purple trench coat—all of which clashed with his newly combined red and white crown. He looked like Prince from one of my mom's old album covers, and judging from the magic lights swirling around him,

Setne was getting ready to party like it was 1999 B.C.E.

Having only one hand didn't seem to bother him. He waved his stump conductor-style, chanting in Greek and Egyptian while fog rose at his feet. Bursts of light danced and bobbed around him, as if a thousand kids were writing their names with sparklers.

I didn't understand what I was looking at, but Nekhbet did. Having her sight, I recognized the Duat—the magical dimension that existed beneath the mortal realm. I saw layers of reality, like strata of glowing multicolored jelly, plunging down into infinity. On the surface, where the mortal and immortal worlds met, Setne was whipping the Duat into a storm—churning waves of color and frothy white plumes of smoke.

After Annabeth's adventure on Rockaway Beach, she'd told me how frightening it was to see the Duat. She wondered whether the Egyptian Duat was somehow related to the Greek concept of Mist—the magical veil that kept mortals from recognizing gods and monsters.

With Nekhbet in my mind, I knew the answer. Of course the Mist was related. The Mist was simply a Greek name for the uppermost layer between the worlds—the layer that Setne was now shredding.

I should have been terrified. Seeing the world in all its infinite levels was enough to give anybody vertigo.

But I'd been dropped into oceans before. I was used to floating in the depths with endless thermal layers around me.

Also, Nekhbet wasn't easily impressed. She'd seen just about everything over the millennia. Her mind was as cold and dry as the desert night wind. To her, the mortal world was a constantly changing wasteland, dotted with the carcasses of men and their civilizations. Nothing lasted. It was all roadkill waiting to happen. As for the Duat, it was always churning, sending up plumes of magic like sun flares into the mortal world.

Still, we were both disturbed by the way Setne's spell tore through the Mist. He wasn't just manipulating it. Magicians did that all the time. Setne was strip-mining the Duat. Wherever he stepped, fractures radiated outward, cleaving through the layers of the magic realm. His body sucked in energy from every direction, destroying the boundaries between the Duat and the mortal world, between Greek magic and Egyptian magic—slowly transforming him into an immortal. In the process, he was ripping a hole in the cosmic order that might never close.

His magic pulled at us—Nekhbet and me—urging us to give up and be absorbed into his new glorious form.

I didn't want to be absorbed. Neither did the vulture goddess. Our common purpose helped us work together.

I marched across the field. Sadie and Annabeth fanned out on my right. I assumed Carter was somewhere on my left, but he'd gone invisible again, so I couldn't be sure. The fact that I couldn't detect him, even with Nekhbet's super vulture senses, gave me hope that Setne wouldn't see him either.

Maybe if I kept Setne busy, Carter would be able to cut off Setne's other hand. Or his legs. Bonus points for his head.

Setne stopped chanting when he saw me.

"Awesome!" He grinned. "You brought the vulture with you. Thanks!"

Not the reaction I'd been hoping for. I keep waiting for the day when the bad guy sees me and screams, *I give up!* But it hasn't happened yet.

"Setne, drop the crown." I raised my *kopis*, which didn't feel heavy with Nekhbet's power flowing through me. "Surrender, and you might get out of this alive. Otherwise—"

"Oh, very good! Very threatening! And your friends here...Let me guess. You keep me occupied while they set some amazing trap to contain the newly made god?"

"You're not a god yet."

He waved off the comment. "I suppose Carter is lurking around here too, all stealthy and invisible?"

Hi, Carter!”

If Carter was nearby, he didn't respond. Smart guy.

Setne raised his stump of a wrist. “Wherever you are, Carter, I was impressed with the hand-cutting-off spell. Your father would be proud. That's what matters to you, isn't it? Making your father proud? But think what would be possible if you joined me. I intend to change the rules of the game. We could bring your father back to life—I mean *real* life, not that horrible half-life he's got in the Underworld. Anything is possible, once I'm a god!”

Around Setne's wrist, the Mist curled, solidifying into a new hand. “What do you say, Carter?”

Above the magician, the air shimmered. A giant blue fist the size of a refrigerator appeared over Setne's head and pounded him into the ground like a nail into soft wood.

“I say no.” Carter appeared across the field, Annabeth's Yankees cap in his hand.

I stared at the crown of Ptolemy—the only part of Setne still visible aboveground.

“You were supposed to wait,” I told Carter. “Set the trap. Let me deal with Setne.”

Carter shrugged. “He shouldn't have brought up my father.”

“Never mind that!” Annabeth said. “Get the crown!”

I realized she was right. I would've sprung into action, except Nekhbet and I had a moment of paralysis. The goddess wanted her hat back. But I took one look at the crown's eerie glow, remembered the way the cobra goddess had been devoured, and decided I was *not* touching that crown without latex gloves and maybe a hazmat suit.

Before Nekhbet and I could resolve our differences, the earth rumbled.

Setne rose from the ground as if on an elevator platform and glared at Carter. “I make you a perfectly fair offer, and you hit me with a giant fist? Perhaps your father wouldn't be proud, after all.”

Carter's face contorted. His whole body glowed with blue light. He levitated off the ground as the avatar of Horus took shape around him.

Setne didn't look worried. He curled his newly regrown fingers in a *come here* gesture, and Carter's avatar shattered. The blue light swirled toward Setne and was engulfed in his growing aura. Carter collapsed, motionless, on the wet ground.

“SETNE!” Sadie shouted, raising her staff. “Over here, you little weasel!”

She blasted the magician with a jet of white fire. Setne caught it on his chest and absorbed the energy.

“Sadie, hon,” he chided. “Don't be mad. Carter has always been the *boring* one. I didn't really want to grant him eternal life. But you—why don't you work with me, eh? We can have tons of fun! Tearing up the universe, destroying things as we see fit!”

“That's—that's not fair,” Sadie said, her voice trembling. “Tempting me with destruction.”

She tried for her usual sassy tone, but her eyes stayed fixed on Carter, who still wasn't moving.

I knew I should do something. We'd had a plan...But I couldn't remember it. The vulture goddess in my head was flying circles on autopilot. Even Annabeth looked like she was struggling to concentrate. Being so close to Setne was like standing next to a waterfall. His white noise drowned out everything.

“You know,” Setne continued, as if we were planning a party together, “I think this island will be perfect. My palace will go right here, in the new center of the universe!”

“A muddy soccer field,” Annabeth noted.

“Oh, come now, child of Athena! You can see the possibilities. That old fool Serapis had the right idea: gather all the wisdom of Greece and Egypt together in one place, and use that power to rule the world! Except Serapis didn't have my *vision*. I'll consume the old pantheons—Zeus, Osiris, all those dusty deities. Who needs them? I'll just take the bits and pieces I can use from all of them. I'll become the head of a new race of gods. Humans will come here from all over the world to make offerings and buy souvenirs.”

“Souvenirs?” I said. “You want immortality so you can sell T-shirts?”

“And snow globes!” Setne got a dreamy look in his eyes. “I love snow globes. Anyway, there’s room for more than one new god. Sadie Kane—you’d be perfect. I know you love breaking rules. Let’s break *all* of them! Your friends can come along too!”

Behind the magician, Carter groaned and began to stir.

Setne glanced back with distaste. “Not dead yet? Tough kid. Well...I suppose we can include him in our plans. Although, if you’d prefer, Sadie, I can certainly finish him off.”

Sadie let loose a guttural cry. She advanced, but Annabeth caught her arm.

“Fight smart,” Annabeth said. “Not angry.”

“Point taken,” Sadie said, though her arms still trembled with rage. “But I’ll do both.”

She unfurled the Book of Thoth.

Setne just laughed. “Sadie, dear, I know how to defeat every spell in that book.”

“You won’t win,” Sadie insisted. “You won’t take anything else from anyone!”

She began to chant. Annabeth raised her borrowed *khopesh*, ready to defend her.

“Ah, well.” Setne sighed. “I suppose you’ll want *this* back, then.”

Setne’s body began to glow. Thanks to Nekhbet, I realized what was going to happen a split second before it did, which saved our lives.

Carter was just struggling to his feet when I shouted, “GET DOWN!”

He dropped like a sack of rocks.

A ring of fire exploded outward from Setne.

I discarded my sword and lunged in front of the girls, spreading my arms goalie-style. A shell of purple light surrounded me, and the flames rolled harmlessly over translucent wings that now extended on either side of me. With my new accessories I was able to shield Sadie and Annabeth from the worst of the blast.

I lowered my arms. The giant wings retracted. My feet, floating just off the ground, were now encased in large ghostly legs with three long toes and the talons of a bird.

When I realized I was hovering at the center of a giant glowing purple vulture, my first thought was: *Carter will never stop teasing me about this.*

My second thought was: *Oh, gods. Carter.*

Sadie must have seen him at the same time I did. She screamed.

The fire had blackened the entire field, instantly turning wet mud into cracked clay. The Mist and magic lights had burned away. My new sword was a steaming line of bronze slag on the ground. Carter lay right where he’d dropped, wreathed in smoke, his hair charred, his face red with blisters.

I feared the worst. Then his fingers twitched. He croaked out a sound, like “Gug,” and I could breathe again.

“Thank the gods,” Annabeth said.

Setne brushed some ash off his purple trench coat. “Well, you can thank the gods if you want, but they won’t be around much longer. Another few minutes, and the magic I’ve started will be irreversible. Now, Percy, please drop that silly avatar before I take it away from you. And Sadie, I suggest you give me the Book of Thoth before you hurt yourself. There’s no spell you could read that would harm me.”

Sadie stepped forward. Her orange-highlighted hair whipped around her face. Her eyes turned steely, making her look even more like a young Annabeth.

“*No spell I could read,*” Sadie agreed. “But I have friends.”

She handed the Book of Thoth to Annabeth, who blinked in surprise. “Um...Sadie?”

Setne chuckled. “What’s *she* going to do? She may be smart, but she can’t read Old Egyptian.”

Sadie gripped Annabeth’s forearm. “Miss Chase,” she said formally, “I have one word for you.” She leaned in and whispered something in Annabeth’s ear.

Annabeth’s face transformed. Only once before had I seen her with such an expression of pure

wonder: when she beheld the gods' palaces on Mount Olympus.

Sadie turned to me. "Percy...Annabeth has work to do. I need to tend to my brother. Why don't you keep our friend Setne entertained?"

Annabeth opened the scroll. She began to read aloud in Ancient Egyptian. Glowing hieroglyphs floated off the papyrus. They swirled in the air around her, mixing with Greek words as if Annabeth was adding her own commentary to the spell.

Setne looked even more surprised than I was. He made a strangled noise in the back of his throat. "That's not...Hold on, now. No!"

He raised his arms to cast some counterspell. His crown began to glow.

I needed to move, but Nekhbet wasn't helping. She was a little too focused on Carter, who smelled charbroiled and yummy.

That one is weak, she murmured in my mind. *Dead soon. The weak must die.*

Anger gave me the upper hand. Carter Kane was my friend. I would *not* sit around while my friend died.

Move, I told Nekhbet. And I took control of the vulture avatar.

Before Setne could finish casting his spell, I grabbed him in my spectral claws and carried him into the sky.

Now...I live and breathe weirdness. It goes with the territory when you're a demigod. But there are still moments when I do a mental double take: like when I'm flying upward inside a giant glowing vulture, flapping my arms to control make-believe wings, holding an almost-immortal magician in my talons...all so I can steal his hat.

That hat was not coming off, either.

I spiraled into the storm, shaking Setne, trying to knock the crown off his head, but the dude must have fastened it to his pompadour with superglue.

He blasted me with fire and flashes of light. My bird exoskeleton deflected the attacks, but each time, the purple avatar dimmed, and my wings felt heavier.

"Percy Jackson!" Setne writhed in my claws. "This is a waste of time!"

I didn't bother responding. The strain of combat was quickly taking its toll.

During our first encounter, Carter had warned me that magic could literally burn up a magician if he used too much at once. I guessed that applied to demigods, too. Every time Setne blasted me or tried to wriggle out of my grip with his near-godly strength, my head throbbed. My eyesight dimmed. Soon I was drenched in sweat.

I hoped Sadie was helping Carter. I hoped Annabeth was finishing whatever super-weird spell she'd been chanting so we could trap Setne, because I couldn't stay airborne much longer.

We broke through the top of the cloud layer. Setne stopped fighting, which surprised me so much, I almost dropped him. Then coldness began to seep through my vulture avatar, chilling my wet clothes, soaking into my bones. It was a subtler kind of attack—probing for weakness—and I knew I couldn't allow it. I curled my vulture feet tighter around Setne's chest, hoping to crush him.

"Percy, Percy." His tone made it sound like we were a couple of bros on a night out. "Don't you see what an incredible opportunity this is? A perfect *do-over*. You of all people should appreciate that. The Olympians once offered you their most valuable gift. They offered to make you a god, didn't they? And you—you lovable idiot—you turned them down! This is your chance to correct that mistake."

My avatar flickered and blinked like a bad fluorescent tube. Nekhbet, my brain buddy, turned her attention inward.

You turned down immortality? Her voice was incredulous, offended.

She scanned my memories. I saw my own past from her dry, cynical point of view: I stood in the throne room of Mount Olympus after the war against the Titans. Zeus offered me a reward: godhood. I turned him down flat. I wanted justice for other demigods instead. I wanted the gods to stop being jerks and to pay attention to their kids.

A stupid request. A naive thing to wish for. I gave up power. You *never* give up power.

I struggled to keep my grip on Setne. “Nekhbet, those are *your* thoughts, not mine. I made the right choice.”

Then you are a fool, the vulture goddess hissed.

“Yeah, pal,” Setne said, who apparently could hear her. “I gotta agree with Nekhbet on this one. You did the noble thing. How did that work out? Did the gods honor their promises?”

I couldn’t separate Nekhbet’s bitterness from my own feelings. Sure, I grumbled about the gods all the time, but I’d never regretted my decision to stay mortal. I had a girlfriend. I had a family. I had my whole life ahead of me—assuming I could stay alive.

Now...maybe it was just Nekhbet in my mind, or Setne toying with me, but I started to wonder if I’d made a huge blunder.

“I get it, kid.” Setne’s voice was full of pity. “The gods are your family. You want to think they’re good. You want to make them proud. I wanted that with *my* family. My dad was Ramses the Great, you know.”

I was gliding in a lazy circle now, my left wing carving the tops of the storm clouds. Setne’s crown glowed more brightly. His aura grew colder, numbing my limbs and turning my thoughts sluggish. I knew I was in trouble, but I couldn’t think of what to do about it.

“It’s hard having a powerful dad,” Setne continued. “Ramses was the pharaoh, of course, so most of the time he was hosting the god Horus. That made him distant, to say the least. I kept thinking, If I just make the right choices and prove I’m a good kid, he’ll eventually notice me. He’ll treat me right. But the thing is, the gods don’t care about mortals, even their children. Look into the vulture’s mind if you don’t believe me. Behave like a good little boy, act all noble—that just makes it easier for the gods to ignore you. The only way to get their respect is to act up, be *bad*, and take what you want!”

Nekhbet didn’t try to convince me otherwise. She was the protector goddess of the pharaohs, but she didn’t care about them as individual humans. She cared about maintaining the power of Egypt, which in turn kept the worship of the gods alive. She certainly didn’t care about noble acts or fairness. Only the weak demanded fairness. The weak were carcasses waiting to die—appetizers in the long dinner of Nekhbet’s eternal life.

“You’re a good kid,” Setne told me. “A lot nicer than the goddess you’re trying to host. But you’ve got to see the truth. You should’ve taken Zeus’s offer. You would be a god now. You’d be strong enough to *make* those changes you asked for!”

Strength is good, Nekhbet agreed. *Immortality is good*.

“I’m giving you a second chance,” Setne said. “Help me out, Percy. Become a god.”

We turned in the air as Nekhbet’s consciousness separated from mine. She’d forgotten which of us was the enemy. Nekhbet favored the strong. Setne was strong. I was weak.

I remembered the way Setne had been strip-mining the Duat—cutting fissures in reality, destroying the entire cosmic order to make himself immortal.

I’ll just take the bits and pieces I can use, he’d told Sadie.

My thoughts finally cleared. I understood how Setne operated, how he’d beaten us so badly up till now.

“You’re looking for a way into my mind,” I said. “Something you can relate to and use against me. But I’m not like you. I don’t *want* immortality, especially not if it rips the world apart.”

Setne smiled. “Well, it was worth a try. Especially since I made you lose control of your vulture!”

An explosion of cold shattered my avatar. Suddenly I was falling.

My one advantage: I'd been holding Setne in my claws, which meant he was directly below me. I slammed right into him and locked my arms around his chest. We plummeted together through the clouds.

I shivered so badly, I was surprised I could stay conscious. Frost caked my clothes. Wind and ice stung my eyes. I felt like I was downhill skiing without a mask.

I'm not sure why Setne didn't just magic himself away. I suppose even a powerful magician can succumb to panic. When you're free-falling, you forget to think rationally: *Gee, I have spells and stuff.* Instead your animal brain takes over and you think: *OH MY GOD THIS KID IS HOLDING ON TO ME AND I'M TRAPPED AND FALLING AND I'M GOING TO DIE!*

Even though I was seconds away from becoming vulture hors d'oeuvres, Setne's squawking and flapping brought me some satisfaction.

If we'd fallen straight down, I would've hit solid ground and died. No question.

Fortunately, the winds were strong, and Governors Island was a small target in a very big harbor.

We hit the water with a wonderfully familiar *KA-FLOOM!*

My pain disappeared. Warmth surged back into my limbs. Salt water swirled around me, filling me with new energy. Seawater always did good things for me, but normally not this fast. Maybe the presence of Nekhbet ramped up my healing. Maybe my dad Poseidon was trying to do me a favor.

Whatever the case, I felt great. I grabbed Setne by the throat with one hand and began to squeeze. He fought like a demon. (Believe me, I know. I've fought a few.) The crown of Ptolemy glowed in the water, steaming like a volcanic vent. Setne clawed at my arm and exhaled streams of bubbles—maybe trying to cast spells, or maybe trying to sweet talk me out of strangling him. I couldn't hear him, and I didn't want to. Underwater, I was in charge.

Bring him to shore, said Nekhbet's voice.

Are you crazy? I thought back. *This is my home court.*

He cannot be defeated here. Your friends are waiting.

I didn't want to, but I understood. I might be able to keep Setne occupied underwater for a while, but he was too far down the path to immortality for me to destroy. I needed to undo his magic, which meant I needed help.

I kept my grip on his throat and let the currents push me to Governors Island.

Carter waited for me on the island's ring road. His head was wrapped in bandages like a turban. The blisters on his face had been treated with some kind of purple goo. His linen ninja jammies looked like they'd been laundered in a burning wood chipper. But he was alive, and angry. In one hand he held a glowing white rope like a cowboy's lasso.

"Welcome back, Percy." He glared at Setne. "This guy give you any trouble?"

Setne flailed and shot fire in Carter's direction. Carter lashed the flames aside with his rope.

"I've got him under control for now," I said.

I felt confident that was true. The seawater had brought me back to full strength. Nekhbet was cooperating again, ready to shield me from anything Setne might try. The magician himself seemed dazed and deflated. Getting strangled at the bottom of New York Harbor will do that to you.

"Let's go, then," Carter said. "We have a nice reception planned."

Back at the burned soccer fields, Sadie and Annabeth had sketched a magical bull's-eye on the ground. At least that's how it looked to me. The chalk circle was about five feet in diameter, and elaborately bordered with words of power in Greek and hieroglyphics. In the Duat, I could see that the circle radiated white light. It was drawn over the rift that Setne had made, like a bandage over a wound.

The girls stood on opposite sides of the circle. Sadie crossed her arms and planted her combat boots defiantly. Annabeth was still holding the Book of Thoth.

When she saw me, she kept her battle face on; but from the gleam in her eyes, I could tell she was

relieved.

I mean...we'd just passed our one-year dating anniversary. I figured I was a sort of long-term investment for her. She hoped I would pay dividends eventually; if I died now, she would've put up with all my annoying qualities for nothing.

"You lived," she noted.

"No thanks to Elvis." I lifted Setne by his neck. He weighed almost nothing. "He was pretty tough until I figured out his system."

I threw him into the center of the circle. The four of us surrounded him. The hieroglyphs and Greek letters burned and swirled, rising in a funnel cloud to contain our prisoner.

"Dude is a scavenger," I said. "Not too different from a vulture. He picks through our minds, finds whatever he can relate to, and he uses that to get through our defenses. Annabeth's love of wisdom. Carter's desire to make his dad proud. Sadie's—"

"My incredible modesty," Sadie guessed. "And obvious good looks."

Carter snorted.

"Anyway," I said, "Setne tried to offer me immortality. He tried to get a handle on my motives for turning it down once before, but—"

"Pardon," Sadie interrupted. "Did you say you've turned down immortality before?"

"You can still be a god!" Setne croaked. "All of you! Together we can—"

"I don't *want* to be a god," I said. "You don't get that, do you? You couldn't find anything about me you could relate to, which I take as a big compliment."

Inside my mind, Nekhbet hissed: *Kill him. Destroy him utterly.*

No, I said. Because that's not me, either.

I stepped to the edge of the circle. "Annabeth, Carter, Sadie...you ready to put this guy away?"

"Any time." Carter hefted his rope.

I crouched until I was face-to-face with Setne. His kohl-lined eyes were wide and unfocused. On his head, the crown of Ptolemy tilted sideways like an observatory telescope.

"You were right about one thing," I told him. "There's a lot of power in mixing Greek and Egyptian. I'm glad you introduced me to my new friends. We're going to keep mixing it up."

"Percy Jackson, listen—"

"But there's a difference between sharing and stealing," I said. "You have something that belongs to me."

He started to speak. I shoved my hand right in his mouth.

Sound gross? Wait, it gets worse.

Something guided me—maybe Nekhbet's intuition, maybe my own instincts. My fingers closed around a small pointy object in the back of Setne's throat, and I yanked it free: my ballpoint pen, Riptide.

It was like I'd pulled the plug out of a tire. Magic spewed from Setne's mouth: a multicolored stream of hieroglyphic light.

GET BACK! Nekhbet screamed in my mind as Annabeth yelled the same thing aloud.

I stumbled away from the circle. Setne writhed and spun as all the magic he'd tried to absorb now came gushing out in a disgusting torrent. I'd heard about people "puking rainbows," because they saw something that was just too cute.

Let me tell you: If you actually *see* someone puking rainbows...there's nothing cute about it.

Annabeth and Sadie shouted magic commands in unison. The funnel cloud of magic intensified around the circle, hemming in Setne, who was shriveling rapidly. The crown of Ptolemy rolled off his head. Carter stepped forward and threw his glowing rope.

As soon as the rope touched Setne, a flash of light blinded me.

When my vision returned, Setne and the rope were gone. No magic lights swirled. The vulture

goddess had left my mind. My mouth no longer tasted like dead hyena.

Annabeth, the Kanes, and I stood in a loose ring, staring at the crown of Ptolemy, which lay sideways in the dirt. Next to it sat a plastic bauble the size of a goose egg.

I picked it up.

Inside the snow globe, a miniature model of Governors Island was permanently submerged. Alternately running and swimming around the landscape, trying to avoid flurries of fake snow, was a termite-size man in a purple trench coat.

Setne had made Governors Island his eternal headquarters, after all.

He'd been imprisoned in a cheap plastic souvenir.

An hour later, we sat on the parapets of the old fort, watching the sun go down over the New Jersey coastline. I'd had a cheese sandwich and an ice-cold Ribena from Sadie's extra-dimensional stash of junk food (along with two extra-strength Advil), so I was feeling brave enough to hear explanations.

"Would someone explain what happened back there?" I asked.

Annabeth slipped her hand into mine. "We won, Seaweed Brain."

"Yeah, but..." I gestured at the snow globe, which Carter was now admiring. "How?"

Carter shook the globe. Fake snow swirled inside. Maybe it was my imagination, but I swear I could hear Setne shrieking underwater as he was given the blender tour of his tiny prison.

"I guess the snow globe idea got stuck in my head," Carter said. "When I threw the rope and sprung the trap, the magic conformed to what I was thinking. Anyway, Setne will make a great paperweight."

Sadie snorted, almost nostril-spewing her Ribena. "Poor little Setne—stuck on Carter's desk for eternity, forced to watch him do hours and hours of boring research. It would've been kinder to let Ammit devour his soul."

I didn't know who Ammit was, but I didn't need any more soul-devouring monsters in my life.

"So the trap worked," I said, which I guess was kind of obvious. "I don't need to understand all the details—"

"That's good," Annabeth said. "Since I don't think any of us do."

"—but one thing I've gotta know." I pointed at Sadie. "What did you whisper to Annabeth that turned her into a magician?"

The girls exchanged a smile.

"I told Annabeth my secret name," Sadie said.

"Your what, now?" I asked.

"It's called the *ren*," Sadie explained. "Everyone has one, even if you don't know it. The *ren* is... well, the definition of who you are. Once I shared it, Annabeth had access to my experiences, my abilities, all my general amazingness."

"That was risky." Carter gave me a grim look. "Anyone who knows your *ren* can control you. You never share that information unless you really have to, and only with people you absolutely trust. Sadie found out my secret name last year. My life has sucked ever since."

"Oh, please," Sadie said. "I only use my knowledge for good."

Carter suddenly slapped himself in the face.

"Hey!" he complained.

"Oops, sorry," Sadie said. "At any rate, I *do* trust Annabeth. I knew it would take both of us to create that containment circle. Besides, a Greek demigod casting Egyptian magic—did you see the look on Setne's face? Priceless."

My mouth went dry. I imagined Annabeth invoking hieroglyphs at Camp Half-Blood, blowing up chariots on the racetrack, hurling giant blue fists during capture the flag.

“So my girlfriend is a magician now, like, permanently? Because she was scary enough before.” Annabeth laughed. “Don’t worry, Seaweed Brain. The effect of learning Sadie’s *ren* is already wearing off. I’ll never be able to do any magic on my own.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Okay. So, um...last question.”

I nodded to the crown of Ptolemy, which sat on the parapet next to Sadie. It looked like part of a Halloween costume, not the sort of headgear that could violently rip the world apart. “What do we do with that?”

“Well,” Sadie said, “I could put it on and see what happens.”

“NO!” Carter and Annabeth yelled.

“Kidding,” Sadie said. “Honestly, you two, calm down. I must admit, though, I don’t see why Wadjet and Nekhbet didn’t reclaim their crowns. The goddesses *were* freed, weren’t they?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I sensed that cobra lady Wadjet get expelled when Setne was puking rainbows. Then Nekhbet went back to...wherever goddesses go when they’re not annoying mortals.”

Carter scratched his bandaged head. “So...they just *forgot* their crowns?”

Traces of Nekhbet’s personality lingered in the corners of my mind—just enough to make me uncomfortably sure that the crown of Ptolemy had been left here on purpose.

“It’s a test,” I said. “The Two Ladies want to see what we’ll do with it. When Nekhbet learned that I’d turned down immortality once before, she was kind of offended. I think she’s curious to find out if any of us will go for it.”

Annabeth blinked. “Nekhbet would do that out of *curiosity*? Even if it caused a world-destroying event?”

“Sounds like Nekhbet,” Sadie said. “She’s a malicious old bird. Loves to watch us mortals squabble and kill each other.”

Carter stared at the crown. “But...we know better than to use that thing. Don’t we?” His voice sounded a little wistful.

“For once you’re right, brother, dear,” Sadie said. “As much as I’d love to be a literal goddess, I suppose I’ll have to remain a *figurative* one.”

“I’m going to puke rainbows now,” Carter said.

“So what do we do with the crown?” Annabeth asked. “It’s not the kind of thing we should leave at the Governors Island Lost and Found.”

“Hey, Carter,” I said, “after we defeated that crocodile monster on Long Island, you said you had a safe place to keep its necklace. Could you store the crown, too?”

The Kanes had a silent conversation with each other.

“I suppose we could bring the crown to the First Nome in Egypt,” Carter said. “Our Uncle Amos is in charge there. He has the most secure magic vaults in the world. But nothing is one-hundred-percent safe. Setne’s experiments with Greek and Egyptian magic sent tremors through the Duat. Gods and magicians felt them. I’m sure demigods felt them, too. That kind of power is tempting. Even if we lock the crown of Ptolemy away—”

“Others might try hybrid magic,” Annabeth said.

“And the more it’s tried,” Sadie said, “the more damage could be done to the Duat, and the mortal world, and our sanity.”

We sat in silence as that idea sank in. I imagined what would happen if the kids in the Hecate cabin back at camp heard about Egyptian magicians in Brooklyn, or if Clarisse from the Ares cabin learned how to summon a giant wild boar combat avatar.

I shuddered. “We’ll have to keep our worlds separate as much as possible. The info is too dangerous.”

Annabeth nodded. “You’re right. I don’t like keeping secrets, but we’ll have to be careful who we talk

to. Maybe we can tell Chiron, but—”

“I bet Chiron already knows about the Egyptians,” I said. “He’s a wily old centaur. But, yeah. We’ll have to keep our little task force here on the down-low.”

“Our little task force.” Carter grinned. “I like the sound of that. The four of us can keep in touch. We’ll have to stand ready in case something like this happens again.”

“Annabeth has my number,” Sadie said. “Which, honestly, brother, is a much easier solution than writing invisible hieroglyphs on your friend’s hand. What were you thinking?”

“It made sense at the time,” Carter protested.

We cleaned up our picnic stuff and got ready to go our separate ways.

Carter carefully wrapped the crown of Ptolemy in linen cloth. Sadie gave the Governors Island snow globe a good shake, then stuffed it in her pack.

The girls hugged. I shook Carter’s hand.

With a twinge of pain, I realized how much I was going to miss these kids. I was getting tired of making new friends only to tell them good-bye, especially since some of them never came back.

“Take care of yourself, Carter,” I said. “No more getting roasted in explosions.”

He smirked. “I can’t promise. But call us if you need us, okay? And, uh, thanks.”

“Hey, it was a team effort.”

“I guess. But, Percy...it came down to you being a good person. Setne couldn’t get a handle on you. Honestly, if I’d been tempted with godhood the way you were tempted—”

“You would’ve done the same thing,” I said.

“Maybe.” He smiled, but he didn’t look convinced. “Okay, Sadie. Time to fly. The initiates at Brooklyn House are going to be worried.”

“And Khufu is making Jell-O fruit salad for dinner,” she said. “Should be delicious. Toodle-oo, demigods!”

The Kanes turned into birds of prey and launched themselves into the sunset.

“This has been a weird day,” I told Annabeth.

She slipped her hand into mine. “I’m thinking cheeseburgers for dinner at P. J. Clarke’s.”

“With bacon,” I said. “We’ve earned it.”

“I love the way you think,” she said. “And I’m glad you’re not a god.”

She kissed me, and I decided that I was glad too. A kiss in the sunset and the promise of a good bacon cheeseburger—with that kind of payoff, who needs immortality?

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MAGNIUS
CHASE
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THE SWORD OF SUMMER

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GOOD MORNING! YOU'RE GOING TO DIE.

YEAH, I KNOW. You guys are going to read about how I died in agony, and you're going to be like, "Wow! That sounds cool, Magnus! Can I die in agony too?"

No. Just no.

Don't go jumping off any rooftops. Don't run into the highway or set yourself on fire. It doesn't work that way. You will not end up where I ended up.

Besides, you wouldn't want to deal with my situation. Unless you've got some crazy desire to see undead warriors hacking one another to pieces, swords flying up giants' noses, and dark elves in snappy outfits, you shouldn't even *think* about finding the wolf-headed gates.

My name is Magnus Chase. I'm sixteen years old. This is the story of how my life went downhill after I got myself killed.

My day started out normally enough. I was sleeping on the sidewalk under a bridge in the Public Garden when a guy kicked me awake and said, "They're after you."

By the way, I've been homeless for the past two years.

Some of you may think, *Aw, how sad*. Others may think, *Ha, ha, loser!* But if you saw me on the street, ninety-nine percent of you would walk right past like I'm invisible. You'd pray, *Don't let him ask me for money*. You'd wonder if I'm older than I look, because surely a teenager wouldn't be wrapped in a stinky old sleeping bag, stuck outside in the middle of a Boston winter. *Somebody should help that poor boy!*

Then you'd keep walking.

Whatever. I don't need your sympathy. I'm used to being laughed at. I'm definitely used to being ignored. Let's move on.

The bum who woke me was a guy called Blitz. As usual, he looked like he'd been running through a dirty hurricane. His wiry black hair was full of paper scraps and twigs. His face was the color of saddle leather, flecked with ice. His beard curled in all directions. Snow caked the bottom of his trench coat where it dragged around his feet—Blitz being about five feet five—and his eyes were so dilated, the irises were all pupil. His permanently alarmed expression made him look like he might start screaming any second.

I blinked the gunk out of my eyes. My mouth tasted like day-old hamburger. My sleeping bag was warm, and I really didn't want to get out of it.

“Who’s after me?”

“Not sure.” Blitz rubbed his nose, which had been broken so many times it zigzagged like a lightning bolt. “They’re handing out flyers with your name and picture.”

I cursed. Random police and park rangers I could deal with. Truant officers, community service volunteers, drunken college kids, addicts looking to roll somebody small and weak—all those would’ve been as easy to wake up to as pancakes and orange juice.

But when somebody knew my name and my face—that was bad. That meant they were targeting me specifically. Maybe the folks at the shelter were mad at me for breaking their stereo. (Those Christmas carols had been driving me crazy.) Maybe a security camera caught that last bit of pickpocketing I did in the Theater District. (Hey, I needed money for pizza.) Or maybe, unlikely as it seemed, the police were still looking for me, wanting to ask questions about my mom’s murder....

I packed my stuff, which took about three seconds. The sleeping bag rolled up tight and fit in my backpack with my toothbrush and a change of socks and underwear. Except for the clothes on my back, that’s all I owned. With the backpack over my shoulder and the hood of my jacket pulled low, I could blend in with pedestrian traffic pretty well. Boston was full of college kids. Some of them were even more scraggly and younger-looking than me.

I turned to Blitz. “Where’d you see these people with the flyers?”

“Beacon Street. They’re coming this way. Middle-aged white guy and a teenage girl, probably his daughter.”

I frowned. “That makes no sense. Who—”

“I don’t know, kid, but I gotta go.” Blitz squinted at the sunrise, which was turning the skyscraper windows orange. For reasons I’d never quite understood, Blitz hated the daylight. Maybe he was the world’s shortest, stoutest homeless vampire. “You should go see Hearth. He’s hanging out in Copley Square.”

I tried not to feel irritated. The local street people jokingly called Hearth and Blitz my mom and dad because one or the other always seemed to be hovering around me.

“I appreciate it,” I said. “I’ll be fine.”

Blitz chewed his thumbnail. “I dunno, kid. Not today. You gotta be extra careful.”

“Why?”

He glanced over my shoulder. “They’re coming.”

I didn’t see anybody. When I turned back, Blitz was gone.

I hated it when he did that. Just—*poof*. The guy was like a ninja. A homeless vampire ninja.

Now I had a choice: go to Copley Square and hang out with Hearth, or head toward Beacon Street and try to spot the people who were looking for me.

Blitz’s description of them made me curious. A middle-aged white guy and a teenage girl searching for me at sunrise on a bitter-cold morning. Why? Who were they?

I crept along the edge of the pond. Almost nobody took the lower trail under the bridge. I could hug the side of the hill and spot anyone approaching on the higher path without them seeing me.

Snow coated the ground. The sky was eye-achingly blue. The bare tree branches looked like they’d been dipped in glass. The wind cut through my layers of clothes, but I didn’t mind the cold. My mom used to joke that I was half polar bear.

Dammit, Magnus, I chided myself.

After two years, my memories of her were still a minefield. I stumbled over one, and instantly my composure was blown to bits.

I tried to focus.

The man and the girl were coming this way. The man’s sandy hair grew over his collar—not like an intentional style, but like he couldn’t be bothered to cut it. His baffled expression reminded me of a

substitute teacher's: *I know I was hit by a spit wad, but I have no idea where it came from.* His dress shoes were totally wrong for a Boston winter. His socks were different shades of brown. His tie looked like it had been tied while he spun around in total darkness.

The girl was definitely his daughter. Her hair was just as thick and wavy, though lighter blond. She was dressed more sensibly in snow boots, jeans, and a parka, with an orange T-shirt peeking out at the neckline. Her expression was more determined, angry. She gripped a sheaf of flyers like they were essays she'd been graded on unfairly.

If she was looking for me, I did not want to be found. She was scary.

I didn't recognize her or her dad, but something tugged at the back of my skull...like a magnet trying to pull out a very old memory.

Father and daughter stopped where the path forked. They looked around as if just now realizing they were standing in the middle of a deserted park at no-thank-you o'clock in the dead of winter.

"Unbelievable," said the girl. "I want to strangle him."

Assuming she meant me, I hunkered down a little more.

Her dad sighed. "We should probably avoid killing him. He is your uncle."

"But *two years?*" the girl demanded. "Dad, how could he not tell us for *two years?*"

"I can't explain Randolph's actions. I never could, Annabeth."

I inhaled so sharply, I was afraid they would hear me. A scab was ripped off my brain, exposing raw memories from when I was six years old.

Annabeth. Which meant the sandy-haired man was...*Uncle Frederick?*

I flashed back to the last family Thanksgiving we'd shared: Annabeth and me hiding in the library at Uncle Randolph's town house, playing with dominoes while the adults yelled at each other downstairs.

You're lucky you live with your momma. Annabeth stacked another domino on her miniature building. It was amazingly good, with columns in front like a temple. *I'm going to run away.*

I had no doubt she meant it. I was in awe of her confidence.

Then Uncle Frederick appeared in the doorway. His fists were clenched. His grim expression was at odds with the smiling reindeer on his sweater. *Annabeth, we're leaving.*

Annabeth looked at me. Her gray eyes were a little too fierce for a first grader's. *Be safe, Magnus.*

With a flick of her finger, she knocked over her domino temple.

That was the last time I'd seen her.

Afterward, my mom had been adamant: *We're staying away from your uncles. Especially Randolph. I won't give him what he wants. Ever.*

She wouldn't explain what Randolph wanted, or what she and Frederick and Randolph had argued about.

You have to trust me, Magnus. Being around them...it's too dangerous.

I trusted my mom. Even after her death, I hadn't had any contact with my relatives.

Now, suddenly, they were looking for me.

Randolph lived in town, but as far as I knew, Frederick and Annabeth still lived in Virginia. Yet here they were, passing out flyers with my name and photo on them. Where had they even *gotten* a photo of me?

My head buzzed so badly, I missed some of their conversation.

"—to find Magnus," Uncle Frederick was saying. He checked his smartphone. "Randolph is at the city shelter in the South End. He says no luck. We should try the youth shelter across the park."

"How do we even know Magnus is alive?" Annabeth asked miserably. "Missing for *two years?* He could be frozen in a ditch somewhere!"

Part of me was tempted to jump out of my hiding place and shout, *TA-DA!*

Even though it had been ten years since I'd seen Annabeth, I didn't like seeing her distressed. But after

so long on the streets, I'd learned the hard way: you never walk into a situation until you understand what's going on.

"Randolph is sure," said Uncle Frederick. "Magnus is alive. He's somewhere in Boston. If his life is truly in danger..."

They set off toward Charles Street, their voices carried away by the wind.

I was shivering now, but it wasn't from the cold. I wanted to run after Frederick, tackle him, and demand what was going on. How did Randolph know I was still in town? Why were they looking for me? How was my life in danger now more than on any other day?

But I didn't follow them.

I remembered the last thing my mom ever told me. I'd been reluctant to use the fire escape, reluctant to leave her, but she'd gripped my arms and made me look at her. *Magnus, run. Hide. Don't trust anyone. I'll find you. Whatever you do, don't go to Randolph for help.*

Then, before I'd made it out the window, the door of our apartment had burst into splinters. Two pairs of glowing blue eyes had emerged from the darkness....

I shook off the memory and watched Uncle Frederick and Annabeth walk away, veering east toward the Common.

Uncle Randolph...for some reason, he'd contacted Frederick and Annabeth. He'd gotten them to Boston. All this time, Frederick and Annabeth hadn't known that my mom was dead and I was missing. It seemed impossible, but if it were true, why would Randolph tell them about it now?

Without confronting him directly, I could think of only one way to get answers. His town house was in Back Bay, an easy walk from here. According to Frederick, Randolph wasn't home. He was somewhere in the South End, looking for me.

Since nothing started a day better than a little breaking and entering, I decided to pay his place a visit.