THE SEA OF MONSTERS by Rick Riordan ONE MY BEST FRIEND SHOPS FOR A WEDDING DRESS My nightmare started like this. I was standing on a deserted street in some little beach town. It was the middle of the night. A storm was blowing. Wind and rain ripped at the palm trees along the sidewalk. Pink and yellow stucco buildings lined the street, their windows boarded up. A block away, past a line of hibiscus bushes, the ocean churned. Florida, I thought. Though I wasn't sure how I knew that. I'd never been to Florida. Then I heard hooves clattering against the pavement. I turned and saw my friend Grover running for his life. Yeah, I said hooves. Grover is a satyr. From the waist up, he looks like a typical gangly teenager with a peach-fuzz goatee and a bad case of acne. He walks with a strange limp, but unless you happen to catch him without his pants on (which I don't recommend), you'd never know there was anything unhuman about him. Baggy jeans and fake feet hide the fact that he's got furry hindquarters and hooves. Grover had been my best friend in sixth grade. He'd gone on this adventure with me and a girl named Annabeth to save the world, but I hadn't seen him since last July, when he set off alone on a dangerous quest—a quest no satyr had ever returned from. Anyway, in my dream, Grover was hauling goat tail, holding his human shoes in his hands the way he does when he needs to move fast. He clopped past the little tourist shops and surfboard rental places. The wind bent the palm trees almost to the ground. Grover was terrified of something behind him. He must've just come from the beach. Wet sand was caked in his fur. He'd escaped from somewhere. He was trying to get away from…something. A bone-rattling growl cut through the storm. Behind Grover, at the far end of the block, a shadowy figure loomed. It swatted aside a street lamp, which burst in a shower of sparks. Grover stumbled, whimpering in fear. He muttered to himself, Have to get away. Have to warn them! I couldn't see what was chasing him, but I could hear it muttering and cursing. The ground shook as it got closer. Grover dashed around a street corner and faltered. He'd run into a dead-end courtyard full of shops. No time to back up. The nearest door had been blown open by the storm. The sign above the darkened display window read: ST. AUGUSTINE BRIDAL BOUTIQUE. Grover dashed inside. He dove behind a rack of wedding dresses. The monster's shadow passed in front of the shop. I could smell the thing—a sickening combination of wet sheep wool and rotten meat and that weird sour body odor only monsters have, like a skunk that's been living off Mexican food. Grover trembled behind the wedding dresses. The monster's shadow passed on. Silence except for the rain. Grover took a deep breath. Maybe the thing was gone. Then lightning flashed. The entire front of the store exploded, and a monstrous voice bellowed: "MIIIIINE!" I sat bolt upright, shivering in my bed. There was no storm. No monster. Morning sunlight filtered through my bedroom window. I thought I saw a shadow flicker across the glass—a humanlike shape. But then there was a knock on my bedroom door—my mom called: "Percy, you're going to be late"—and the shadow at the window disappeared. It must've been my imagination. A fifth-story window with a rickety old fire escape…there couldn't have been anyone out there. "Come on, dear," my mother called again. "Last day of school. You should be excited! You've almost made it!" "Coming," I managed. I felt under my pillow. My fingers closed reassuringly around the ballpoint pen I always slept with. I brought it out, studied the Ancient Greek writing engraved on the side: Anaklusmos. Riptide. I thought about uncapping it, but something held me back. I hadn't used Riptide for so long…. Besides, my mom had made me promise not to use deadly weapons in the apartment after I'd swung a javelin the wrong way and taken out her china cabinet. I put Anaklusmos on my nightstand and dragged myself out of bed. I got dressed as quickly as I could. I tried not to think about my nightmare or monsters or the shadow at my window. Have to get away. Have to warn them! What had Grover meant? I made a three-fingered claw over my heart and pushed outward—an ancient gesture Grover had once taught me for warding off evil. The dream couldn't have been real. Last day of school. My mom was right, I should have been excited. For the first time in my life, I'd almost made it an entire year without getting expelled. No weird accidents. No fights in the classroom. No teachers turning into monsters and trying to kill me with poisoned cafeteria food or exploding homework. Tomorrow, I'd be on my way to my favorite place in the world—Camp Half-Blood. Only one more day to go. Surely even I couldn't mess that up. As usual, I didn't have a clue how wrong I was. My mom made blue waffles and blue eggs for breakfast. She's funny that way, celebrating special occasions with blue food. I think it's her way of saying anything is possible. Percy can pass seventh grade. Waffles can be blue. Little miracles like that. I ate at the kitchen table while my mom washed dishes. She was dressed in her work uniform—a starry blue skirt and a red-and-white striped blouse she wore to sell candy at Sweet on America. Her long brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail. The waffles tasted great, but I guess I wasn't digging in like I usually did. My mom looked over and frowned. "Percy, are you all right?" "Yeah…fine." But she could always tell when something was bothering me. She dried her hands and sat down across from me. "School, or…" She didn't need to finish. I knew what she was asking. "I think Grover's in trouble," I said, and I told her about my dream. She pursed her lips. We didn't talk much about the other part of my life. We tried to live as normally as possible, but my mom knew all about Grover. "I wouldn't be too worried, dear," she said. "Grover is a big satyr now. If there were a problem, I'm sure we would've heard from…from camp…" Her shoulders tensed as she said the word camp. "What is it?" I asked. "Nothing," she said. "I'll tell you what. This afternoon we'll celebrate the end of school. I'll take you and Tyson to Rockefeller Center—to that skateboard shop you like." Oh, man, that was tempting. We were always struggling with money. Between my mom's night classes and my private school tuition, we could never afford to do special stuff like shop for a skateboard. But something in her voice bothered me. "Wait a minute," I said. "I thought we were packing me up for camp tonight." She twisted her dishrag. "Ah, dear, about that…I got a message from Chiron last night." My heart sank. Chiron was the activities director at Camp Half-Blood. He wouldn't contact us unless something serious was going on. "What did he say?" "He thinks…it might not be safe for you to come to camp just yet. We might have to postpone." "Postpone? Mom, how could it not be safe? I'm a half-blood! It's like the only safe place on earth for me!" "Usually, dear. But with the problems they're having—" "What problems?" "Percy…I'm very, very sorry. I was hoping to talk to you about this afternoon. I can't explain it all now. I'm not even sure Chiron can. Everything happened so suddenly." My mind was reeling. How could I not go to camp? I wanted to ask a million questions, but just then the kitchen clock chimed the half-hour. My mom looked almost relieved. "Seven-thirty, dear. You should go. Tyson will be waiting." "But—" "Percy, we'll talk this afternoon. Go on to school." That was the last thing I wanted to do, but my mom had this fragile look in her eyes—a kind of warning, like if I pushed her too hard she'd start to cry. Besides, she was right about my friend Tyson. I had to meet him at the subway station on time or he'd get upset. He was scared of traveling underground alone. I gathered up my stuff, but I stopped in the doorway. "Mom, this problem at camp. Does it…could it have anything to do with my dream about Grover?" She wouldn't meet my eyes. "We'll talk this afternoon, dear. I'll explain…as much as I can." Reluctantly, I told her good-bye. I jogged downstairs to catch the Number Two train. I didn't know it at the time, but my mom and I would never get to have our afternoon talk. In fact, I wouldn't be seeing home for a long, long time. As I stepped outside, I glanced at the brownstone building across the street. Just for a second I saw a dark shape in the morning sunlight—a human silhouette against the brick wall, a shadow that belonged to no one. Then it rippled and vanished. TWO I PLAY DODGEBALL WITH CANNIBALS My day started normal. Or as normal as it ever gets at Meriwether College Prep. See, it's this "progressive" school in downtown Manhattan, which means we sit on beanbag chairs instead of at desks, and we don't get grades, and the teachers wear jeans and rock concert T-shirts to work. That's all cool with me. I mean, I'm ADHD and dyslexic, like most half-bloods, so I'd never done that great in regular schools even before they kicked me out. The only bad thing about Meriwether was that the teachers always looked on the bright side of things, and the kids weren't always…well, bright. Take my first class today: English. The whole middle school had read this book called Lord of the Flies, where all these kids get marooned on an island and go psycho. So for our final exam, our teachers sent us into the break yard to spend an hour with no adult supervision to see what would happen. What happened was a massive wedgie contest between the seventh and eighth graders, two pebble fights, and a full-tackle basketball game. The school bully, Matt Sloan, led most of those activities. Sloan wasn't big or strong, but he acted like he was. He had eyes like a pit bull, and shaggy black hair, and he always dressed in expensive but sloppy clothes, like he wanted everybody to see how little he cared about his family's money. One of his front teeth was chipped from the time he'd taken his daddy's Porsche for a joyride and run into a PLEASE SLOW DOWN FOR CHILDREN sign. Anyway, Sloan was giving everybody wedgies until he made the mistake of trying it on my friend Tyson. Tyson was the only homeless kid at Meriwether College Prep. As near as my mom and I could figure, he'd been abandoned by his parents when he was very young, probably because he was so…different. He was six-foot-three and built like the Abominable Snowman, but he cried a lot and was scared of just about everything, including his own reflection. His face was kind of misshapen and brutal-looking. I couldn't tell you what color his eyes were, because I could never make myself look higher than his crooked teeth. His voice was deep, but he talked funny, like a much younger kid—I guess because he'd never gone to school before coming to Meriwether. He wore tattered jeans, grimy size-twenty sneakers, and a plaid flannel shirt with holes in it. He smelled like a New York City alleyway, because that's where he lived, in a cardboard refrigerator box off 72nd Street. Meriwether Prep had adopted him as a community service project so all the students could feel good about themselves. Unfortunately, most of them couldn't stand Tyson. Once they discovered he was a big softie, despite his massive strength and his scary looks, they made themselves feel good by picking on him. I was pretty much his only friend, which meant he was my only friend. My mom had complained to the school a million times that they weren't doing enough to help him. She'd called social services, but nothing ever seemed to happen. The social workers claimed Tyson didn't exist. They swore up and down that they'd visited the alley we described and couldn't find him, though how you miss a giant kid living in a refrigerator box, I don't know. Anyway, Matt Sloan snuck up behind him and tried to give him a wedgie, and Tyson packed. He swatted Sloan away a little too hard. Sloan flew fifteen feet and got tangled in the little kids' tire swing. "You freak!" Sloan yelled. "Why don't you go back to your cardboard box!" Tyson started sobbing. He sat down on the jungle gym so hard he bent the bar, and buried his head in his hands. "Take it back, Sloan!" I shouted. Sloan just sneered at me. "Why do you even bother, Jackson? You might have friends if you weren't always sticking up for that freak." I balled my fists. I hoped my face wasn't as red as it felt. "He's not a freak. He's just…" I tried to think of the right thing to say, but Sloan wasn't listening. He and his big ugly friends were too busy laughing. I wondered if it were my imagination, or if Sloan had more goons hanging around him than usual. I was used to seeing him with two or three, but today he had like, half a dozen more, and I was pretty sure I'd never seen them before. "Just wait till PE, Jackson," Sloan called. "You are so dead." When first period ended, our English teacher, Mr. de Milo, came outside to inspect the carnage. He pronounced that we'd understood Lord of the Flies perfectly. We all passed his course, and we should never, never grow up to be violent people. Matt Sloan nodded earnestly, then gave me a chip-toothed grin. I had to promise to buy Tyson an extra peanut butter sandwich at lunch to get him to stop sobbing. "I…I am a freak?" he asked me. "No," I promised, gritting my teeth. "Matt Sloan is the freak." Tyson sniffled. "You are a good friend. Miss you next year if…if I can't…" His voice trembled. I realized he didn't know if he'd be invited back next year for the community service project. I wondered if the headmaster had even bothered talking to him about it. "Don't worry, big guy," I managed. "Everything's going to be fine." Tyson gave me such a grateful look I felt like a big liar. How could I promise a kid like him that anything would be fine? Our next exam was science. Mrs. Tesla told us that we had to mix chemicals until we succeeded in making something explode. Tyson was my lab partner. His hands were way too big for the tiny vials we were supposed to use. He accidentally knocked a tray of chemicals off the counter and made an orange mushroom cloud in the trash can. After Mrs. Tesla evacuated the lab and called the hazardous waste removal squad, she praised Tyson and me for being natural chemists. We were the first ones who'd ever aced her exam in under thirty seconds. I was glad the morning went fast, because it kept me from thinking too much about my problems. I couldn't stand the idea that something might be wrong at camp. Even worse, I couldn't shake the memory of my bad dream. I had a terrible feeling that Grover was in danger. In social studies, while we were drawing latitude/longitude maps, I opened my notebook and stared at the photo inside—my friend Annabeth on vacation in Washington, D.C. She was wearing jeans and a denim jacket over her orange Camp Half-Blood T-shirt. Her blond hair was pulled back in a bandanna. She was standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial with her arms crossed, looking extremely pleased with herself, like she'd personally designed the place. See, Annabeth wants to be an architect when she grows up, so she's always visiting famous monuments and stuff. She's written that way. She'd e-mailed me the picture I wished Annabeth were here. She'd known Camp Half-Blood hadn't just been my imagination. Annabeth looked when Matt Sloan reached as annoying sometimes. I was about to close my notebook at? She is not your—" "Give it back!" his eyes got wide. "No way, Jackson. Who is they were all wearing those stupid the new kids who must've been visiting, because they were a human beings had names like "HOW SUCKER, SKULL EATER, and JOE BOB. No punch Sloan in the face. "You'r retarded." I had to try really, really hard not to order from Chiron never to take my anger out on regular mortals, no matter how voice whispered, "Percy!" I looked around the locker area, but nobody was paying me any attention. Like any girl at Meriwether would ever be caught dead calling my name. Before I had time to consider whether for the gym, carrying Tyson and me along with them. It was time for PE. Our coach had promised us a free-for-all dodgeball game, and Matt Sloan had promised to kill me. The gym uniform at Meriwether is sky blue, our athletic stuff inside, so we didn't have to jog through Tribeca looking like a bunch of boot-camp hippie children. I changed as quickly as I could in the locker room because I didn't want to deal with Sloan. I was a hanged yet. He was standing by the weight room door, clutching his gym clothes. "Will you…uh…" "Oh. Yeah." I tried not to sound aggravated about it. "Yeah, sure, man." Tyson ducked inside the weight room It kind of awkward doing this, but he asked me to most days. I think it's because he's completely hairy and he's got weird scars on his back that I've never had the courage to ask him about. Anyway, I'd learned the hand signing the doors off lockers. When we got into the gym, Coach Nunley was sitting at his little desk reading Sports Illustrated. Nunley was about a million years old, with bifocals and a long-sleeved T-shirt. Shriveled-up mummy—except Coach Nunley moved a lot less and he never billowed green smoke. Well, at least not that I'd observed. Matt Sloan "Mmm-hmm." Sloan grinned and took charge of the picking. He made me the other team's captain, but it didn't matter who I picked, because all the Tyson, Corey Bailer the computer geek, Raj Mandali the calculus whiz, and a half dozen other kids who always got harassed by Sloan and visitors on Sloan's team were almost as tall and strong-looking as Tyson, and there were six of them. Matt Sloan spilled a cage full of "Mmm-hmm." Because I didn't figure he was talking about himself. "Them." Tyson pointed at Sloan's new friends. "Smell funny." The visitors were raw meat and beat them with sticks. Sloan blew the coach's whistle and the game began. Sloan's team had to crawl behind the wall mat and hide. The rest of my team did their best to cower in fear and not look like in laughter. My eyesight was fuzzy. I felt like I'd just gotten the Heimlich maneuver from a gorilla. I could hardly breathe. Whooom! It hit the wall mat, and Corey Bailer yelped. "Hey!" I yelled at Sloan's team. "You could kill him." I hopped beneath his T-shirt. "I hope so, Perseus Jackson! I hope so!" The way he said my name sent a chill down my own back. No wonder he's well funny. Monsters. All around Matt Sloan, the visitors were growing in size. They were no longer kids. They were eight-foot-tall giants with wild eyes, pointy teeth, and backing away. Sloan dropped his ball. "Whoa! You're not from Detroit! Who…" The other kids on his team started screaming and backing toward the exit, but the giant named Mark Sloan as he was about to leave and hit the door, slamming it shut like magic. Raj and some of the other kids banged on it desperately. "Let them go!" too on his biceps that said: JB luvs Babycakes. "And lose our tasty morsels? No, Sloan wasn't a bad guy. We Laistrygonians are on the Sea God. We don't have time for this," Annabeth said. "We'll talk on the phone balls, perforated like wiffle balls ter line—but these balls weren't made of red rubber. They were bronze, the size of cannon balls, and they were giant friend into Camp Half-Blood. If he freaked out on a regular playground with dodge ball game, he didn't let on. Coach!" I yelled. Nunley looked up sleepily, but if he saw anything abnormal about the kids he saw a few eighth graders ed. "He'll be in trouble, too." "Yeah." Annabeth looked grim. "We definitely need to pound gether the three of us sneaked through the side streets of downtown while alerized we were dealing with ge r backpack. "I hope I have one left." She looked even worse than I'd realized. Sail ed past my shoulder. "Corey!" I piciously like claw marks. "What are you looking for?" I asked. All around room, but with another wave of Joe Bo statement by now. He'd probably twisted the story around so that the gym floor. I reached for Riptide, nt Olympus. It had Zeus's likeness stamped on one side and the in the pletely defenseless. An other fireball came usual, the moment she spoke in the language of Olympus, sizzling holes. Just across the center I n into the street, but instead of clattering on the asphalt, their balls. "Tyson!" I screamed, but it w ectangular pool about the size of a parking space—but caught two fierymetal balls speeding towa mean it looked like it was woven out of smoke, like ys of flame—a sure sign the id. The passenger window rolled down, and an old ?" "Three to Camp Half-Blood," Annabeth said. She and Babycake on. What was it? Pick-on-Big-and-Ugly-Kids Day? "Ex eachers with a or was also smoky gray, but it felt solid enough. The se e court, watching in disbelief as , all crammed in the front seat, each with stringy hair covering whole school could hear the nois the backrest. A prerecorded voice came on over the speaker hed another ball. The other three giant ed I wasn't that desperate…yet. The cab sped around the corner ward the locker room. "Move!" I told my t ve her the eye? I didn't have time to ask questions because th raight at me. I forced myself to wait—one n! I want to bite it." "You bit it last time, Anger!" said the driver se an explosion, so I wasn't surprised wh celerator and rode up on the curb, screeching around another turned just in time to see Tyson punch S l. "No!" screamed Tempest from the middle. "Of course!" scr ht Tyson square in the chest. He slid the l to me, Tyson groaned and grabbed the seat. "Not feeling so g at his feet. Tyson tried to pick it up, but a garbage bag or something?" The three gray ladies were nt!" The giant grinned. "You wish to die fi Sisters Taxi is the fastest way to camp." "Then why di ghed. "My lunch approaches." He raised We've had famous people in this cab!" Anger exclai not a horn—the glowing tip of a blade. Th tooth!" Anger tried to grab at Wasp's mouth, but smoke was my friend Annabeth. Her fac cuses! Turn! That was your turn!" Wasp swe sed a thousand miles by ghosts. Matt Slo e at seventy miles an hour. The three sist ched him in the nose and knocked him fi

ach other as Anger tried to grab at Wasp' s face and Wasp tri ed to grab at Te mpest's. With their hair flyin g and their mouths open, screaming a sters had any teeth except for Wasp, who had one mossy yellow incisor. Instead of eyes, they just had clo sed, sunken eyelids, except for Ang t stared at everything hungrily, as if it could ldn't get enough of anything it saw. Finally Anger, who had the advantage of sight, managed to yank the too ade Wasp so mad she swerved toward the e edge of the Williamsburg Bridge, yelling, "'Ivit back! 'Ivit back!" Tyso n groaned and clutched his stoma we're going to die!" "Don't worry," Annab eth told me, sounding pretty worried. "The Gray Sisters know what they're doing." They're really very w thena, but I wasn't exactly reassured. We were skimming along the edge of a bridge a hundred and thirty feet above the East River. "Yes, wis showing off her newly acquired tooth. "W e know thing s!" "Every street in Manhattan!" Wasp bragged, still hitting her sister. "The capital of N added. Immediately her sisters pummeled d her from either side, screaming, "Be quiet! Be quiet! He didn't even ask yet!" "What?" I said. "Wh ing!" Tempest said. "You're right, boy. It' s nothing!" "Tell me." "No!" they all screamed. "The last time we told, it was horrible!" Tempest said. " ars to find it again!" Wasp moaned. "And speaking of the last time!" "No!" yelled Anger. "Eye!" Wasp yelled. "Gimme!" She whacked her sister Anger on d something flew out of Anger's face. An ger fumbled for it, trying to catch it, but she only managed to bat it with the back of her hand. The s nto the backseat, and straight into my lap . I jumped so hard, my head hit the ceiling and the eyeball rolled away. "I can't see!" all three sisters y Give her the eye!" Annabeth screamed. " I don't have it!" I said. "There, by your foot," Annabeth said. id. "Don't step on it! Get it!" "I'm not picking that up!" nd skidded along with a horrible grinding noise. The whole car shuddered, billowing gray smoke as if it were about to dissolv on warned. "Annabeth," I yelled, "let Tyson use your backpack!" "Are you crazy? Get the eye!" Wasp yanked the wheel, and the ta down the bridge toward Brooklyn, going faster than any human taxi. The Gray Sisters screeched and pummeled each other and cried es. I ripped off a chunk of my tie-dyed T-shirt, which was already falling apart from a ll the burn marks, and used it to pick the eyeball off the somehow knew I had her missing peeper . "Give it back!" "Not until you explain," I told her. "What were you talking about, the location I se ting!" I looked out the window. Sure enough, gh, trees and cars and whole neighborhoods w ere now zipping by in a gray blur. We were already iddle of Long Island. "Percy," Annabeth warned, "they can't find our destination without the eye. We'll just keep accelerating until we have to tell me," I said. "Or I'll open the window" "No!" the Gray Sisters wailed. "Too dangerous! "Wait!" the gray Sisters screamed. "30, 31, 7 indow and throw the eye into oncoming traffic. calling a play. "What do you mean?" 5, 12!" Anger wailed. "That's all we can text 1, 75, 12!" They belted it out like a quarterback " We were off the highway now, zipping n Long Island. I could see Half-Blood Hill ll you. Now give us the eye! Almost to camp! rest—Thalia's tree, which contained y!" Annabeth said more urgently. "Give t ahead of us, with its giant pine tree at the c . I threw the eye into Wasp' d it into her eye socket like somebody pu hem the eye now!" I decided not to argue hoa!" She slammed on the base of Half-Blood Hill in a cloud of smoke and squealed to a ha tting in a contact lens, and blinked. "W he base of Half-Blood Hill. now." "All right," I told the Gray Sisters. " It in the middle of the farm road at the mean." "No time!" Annabeth understood. At the out now." I was about to ask why, when I Now tell me what those numbers ogically speaking, it And they were under attack. FOUR TYSON looked up at Half-Blood Hill and f Half-Blood Hill. The of old ladies, it's bulls. Last summer, I found N PLAYS WITH FIRE Mythology elephants. And rse: two bulls. And not just regular bulls— ght the Minotaur on top of Gray Sisters p hey had to breathe fire, too. As soon as we bronze ones the size of e life was safer. They didn't even wait for the exited the taxi, the ll. What worried me most weren't the bulls the eir extra three-drachma payment. They just left us on the side of the road, Annabeth with nothing but her backpack and knife, Tyson and me still in our burned-up tie-dyed gym clothes. "Oh, man," said Annabeth, who were getting their bronze-plated booties when they charged. ranging all over the hill, even around the back side of the pine tree. That shouldn't have been possible. The camp's magic boundaries didn't allow monsters to cross past Thalia's tree. But the metal bulls were doing it anyway. One of the heroes shouted, "Border patrol, to me!" A girl's voice—gruff and familiar. Border patrol? I thought. The camp didn't have a border patrol. "It's Clarisse," Annabeth said. "Come on, we have to help her." Normally, rushing to Clarisse's aid would not have been high on my "to do" list. She was one of the biggest bullies at camp. The first time we'd met she tried to introduce my head to a toilet. She was also a daughter of Ares, and I'd had a very serious disagreement with her father last summer, so now the god of war and all his children basically hated my guts. Still, she was in trouble. Her fellow warriors were scattering, running in panic as the bulls charged. The grass was burning in huge swathes around the pine tree. One hero screamed and waved his arms as he ran in circles, the horsehair plume on his helmet blazing like a fiery Mohawk. Clarisse's own armor was charred. She was fighting with a broken spear shaft, the other end embedded uselessly in the metal joint of one bull's shoulder. I uncapped my ballpoint pen. It shimmered, growing longer and heavier until I held the bronze sword Anaklusmos in my hands. "Tyson, stay here. I don't want you taking any more chances." "No!" Annabeth said. "We need him." I stared at her. "He's mortal. He got lucky with the dodge balls but he can't—" "Percy, do you know what those are up there? The Colchis bulls, made by Hephaestus himself. We can't fight them without Medea's Sunscreen SPF 50,000. We'll get burned to a crisp." "Medea's what?" Annabeth rummaged through her backpack and cursed. "I had a jar of tropical coconut scent sitting on my night-stand at home. Why didn't I bring it?" I'd learned a long time ago not to question Annabeth too much. It just made me more confused. "Look, I don't know what you're talking about, but I'm not going to let Tyson get fried." "Percy—" "Tyson, stay back." I raised my sword. "I'm going in." Tyson tried to protest, but I was already running up the hill toward Clarisse, who was yelling at her patrol, trying to get them into phalanx formation. It was a good idea. The few who were listening lined up shoulder-to-shoulder, locking their shields to form an ox-hide–and-bronze wall, their spears bristling over the top like porcupine quills. Unfortunately, Clarisse could only muster six campers. The other four were still running around with their helmets on fire. Annabeth ran toward them, trying to help. She taunted one of the bulls into chasing her, then turned invisible, completely confusing the monster. The other bull charged Clarisse's line. I was halfway up the hill—not close enough to help. Clarisse hadn't even seen me yet. The bull moved deadly fast for something so big. Its metal hide gleamed in the sun. It had fist-sized rubies for eyes, and horns of polished silver. When it opened its hinged mouth, a column of white-hot flame blasted out. "Hold the line!" Clarisse ordered her warriors. Whatever else you could say about Clarisse, she was brave. She was a big girl with cruel eyes like her father's. She looked like she was born to wear Greek battle armor, but I didn't see how even she could stand against that bull's charge. Unfortunately, at that moment, the other bull lost interest in finding Annabeth. It turned, wheeling around behind Clarisse on her unprotected side. "Behind you!" I yelled. "Look out!" I shouldn't have said anything, because all I did was startle her. Bull Number One crashed into her shield, and the phalanx broke. Clarisse went flying backward and landed in a smoldering patch of grass. The bull charged past her, but not before blasting the other heroes with its fiery breath. Their shields melted right off their arms. They dropped their weapons and ran as Bull Number Two closed in on Clarisse for the kill. I lunged forward and grabbed Clarisse by the straps of her armor. I dragged her out of the way just as Bull Number Two freight-trained past. I gave it a good swipe with Riptide and cut a huge gash in its flank, but the monster just creaked and groaned and kept on going. It hadn't touched me, but I could feel the heat of its metal skin. Its body temperature could've microwaved a frozen burrito. "Let me go!" Clarisse pummeled my hand. "Percy, curse you!" I dropped her in a heap next to the pine tree and turned to face the bulls. We were on the inside slope of the hill now, the valley of Camp Half-Blood directly below us—the cabins, the training facilities, the Big House—all of it at risk if these bulls got past us. Annabeth shouted orders to the other heroes, telling them to spread out and keep the bulls distracted. Bull Number One ran a wide arc, making its way back toward me. As it passed the middle of the hill, where the invisible boundary line should've kept it out, it slowed down a little, as if it were struggling against a strong wind; but then it broke through and kept coming. Bull Number Two turned to face me, fire sputtering from the gash I'd cut in its side. I couldn't tell if it felt any pain, but its ruby eyes seemed to glare at me like I'd just made things personal. I couldn't fight both bulls at the same time. I'd have to take down Bull Number Two first, cut its head off before Bull Number One charged back into range. My arms already felt tired. I realized how long it had been since I'd worked out with Riptide, how out of practice I was. I lunged but Bull Number Two blew flames at me. I rolled aside as the air turned to pure heat. All the oxygen was sucked out of my lungs. My foot caught on something—a tree root, maybe—and pain shot up my ankle. Still, I managed to slash with my sword and lop off part of the monster's snout. It galloped away, wild and disoriented. But before I could feel too good about that, I tried to stand, and my left