

PERCY JACKSON AND THE STOLEN CHARIOT

by *Rick Riordan*

I was in fifth period science class when I heard these noises outside.

SCRAWK! OW! SCREECH! HIYA! Like somebody was getting attacked by possessed poultry, and believe me, that's a situation I've been in before.

Nobody else in class seemed to notice the commotion. We were doing a lab so everybody was talking, and it wasn't hard for me to go look out the window while I pretended to wash out my beaker.

Sure enough: there was a girl in alley with a sword drawn. She was tall and muscular like a basketball player, with stringy brown hair and jeans and combat boots and a denim jacket. She was hacking at a flock of black birds the size of ravens. Feathers stuck out of her clothes in several places. A cut was bleeding over her left eye. As I watched, one of the birds shot a feather like an arrow and it lodged in her shoulder. She cursed and sliced at the bird, but it flew away.

Unfortunately, I recognized the girl. It was Clarisse, my old enemy from demigod camp. Clarisse usually lived at Camp Half-Blood year-round. I had no idea what she was doing on the Upper East Side in the middle of a school day, but she was obviously in trouble. She wouldn't last much longer.

I did the only the thing I could.

"Mrs. White," I said, "can I go to the restroom? I feel like I'm going to puke."

You know how teachers tell you the magic word is please? That's not true. The magic word is puke. It will get you out of class faster than anything else.

"Go!" Mrs. White said.

I ran out the door, stripping off my safety goggles and gloves and lab apron. I got out my best weapon – a ballpoint pen called Riptide.

Nobody stopped me in the halls. I exited by the gym. I got to the alley just in time to see Clarisse smack a devil bird with the flat of her sword like she was hitting a home run. The bird squawked and spiraled away, slamming against the brick wall and sliding into a trash can. That still left a dozen more swarming around her.

"Clarisse!" I yelled.

She glared at me in disbelief. "Percy? What are you doing –"

She was cut short by a volley of feather arrows that zipped over her head and impaled themselves in the wall.

"This is my school," I told her.

"Just my luck," Clarisse grumbled, but she was too busy fighting to complain much.

I uncapped my pen, which grew into three-foot-long bronze sword, and joined the battle, slashing at the birds and deflecting their feathers off my blade. Together, Clarisse and I sliced and hacked until all the birds were reduced to piles of feathers on ground.

We were both breathing hard. I had a few scratches, but nothing major. I pulled a feather arrow out of my arm. It hadn't gone in very deep. As long as it wasn't poison, I'd be okay. I took a baggie of ambrosia out of my jacket, where I always kept it for emergencies, broke a piece in half and offered some to Clarisse.

"I don't need your help," she muttered, but she took the ambrosia.

We swallowed a few bites – not too much, since the food of the gods can burn you to ashes if you overindulge. I guess that's why you don't see many fat gods. Anyway, in a few seconds our cuts and bruises had disappeared.

Clarissee sheathed her sword and brushed off her denim jacket. "Well . . . see you."

"Hold up!" I said. "You can't just run off."

"Sure I can."

"What's going on? What are you doing away from camp? Why were those birds after you?"

Clarissee pushed me, or tried to. I was too used to her tricks. I just sidestepped and let her stumble past me.

"Come on," I said. "You just about got killed at my school. That makes it my business."

"It does not!"

"Let me help."

She took a shaky breath. I got the feeling she really wanted to punch me out, but at the same time there was a desperate look in her eyes, like she was in serious trouble.

"It's my brothers," she said. "They're playing a prank on me."

"Oh," I said, not really surprised. Clarisse had lots of siblings at Camp Half-Blood. All of them picked on each other. I guess that was no big surprise since they were sons and daughters of the war god Ares.

"Which brothers? Sherman? Mark?"

"No," she said, sounding more afraid than I'd ever heard her. "My immortal brothers. Phobos and Deimos."

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We sat on a bench at the park while Clarisse told me the story. I wasn't too worried about getting back to school. Mrs. White would just assume the nurse sent me home, and sixth period was shop class. Mr. Bell never took attendance.

"So let me get this straight," I said. "You took your dad's car for a joy ride and now it's missing."

"It's not a car," Clarisse growled. "It's a war chariot! And he told me to take it out. It's like . . . a test. I'm supposed to bring it back at sunset. But –"

"Your brothers carjacked you."

"Chariot-jacked me," she corrected. "They're his regular charioteers, see. And they don't like anybody else getting to drive. So they stole the chariot from me and chased me off with those stupid

arrow-throwing birds.”

“Your dad’s pets?”

She nodded miserably. “They guard his temple. Anyway, if I don’t find the chariot . . .”

She looked like she was about to lose it. I didn’t blame her. I’d seen her dad Ares get mad before, and it was not a pretty sight. If Clarisse failed him, he would come down hard on her. Real hard.

“I’ll help you,” I said.

She scowled. “Why would you? I’m not your friend.”

I couldn’t argue with that. Clarisse had been mean to me a million times, but still, I didn’t like the idea of her or anybody else getting beat up by Ares. I was trying to figure out how to explain that to her that when a guy’s voice said, “Aw, look. I think she’s been crying!”

A teenage dude was leaning against the telephone pole. He was dressed in ratty jeans, a black T-shirt and a leather jacket with a bandana over his hair. A knife was stuck in his belt. He had eyes the color of flames.

“Phobos.” Clarisse balled her fists. “Where’s the chariot, you jerk?”

“You lost it,” he teased. “Don’t ask me.”

“You little –” Clarisse drew her sword and charged, but he disappeared as she swung and her blade bit into the telephone pole.

Phobos appeared on the bench next to me. He was laughing, but he stopped when I stuck Riptide’s point against his throat.

“You’d better return that chariot,” I told him. “Before I get mad.”

He sneered and tried to look tough, or as tough as you can with a sword under your chin. “Who’s your little boyfriend, Clarisse? You have to get help fighting your battles now?”

“He’s not my boyfriend!” Clarisse tugged her sword out of the telephone pole. “He’s not even my friend. That’s Percy Jackson.”

Something changed in Phobos’s expression. He looked surprised, maybe even nervous. “The son of Poseidon? The one who made Dad angry? Oh, this is too good, Clarisse. You’re hanging out with a sworn enemy?”

“I’m not hanging out with him!”

Phobos’s eyes glowed bright red. Clarisse screamed. She swatted the air as if she were being attacked by invisible bugs. “Please, no!”

“What are you doing to her?” I demanded.

Clarisse backed up into the street, swinging her sword wildly.

“Stop it!” I told Phobos. I dug my sword a little deeper against his throat, but he simply vanished, reappearing back at the telephone pole.

“Don’t get so excited, Jackson,” Phobos said. “I’m just showing her what she fears.” The glow faded from his eyes.

Clarisso collapsed, breathing hard. “You creep,” she gasped. “I’ll – I’ll get you.”

Phobos turned toward me. “How about you, Percy Jackson? What do you fear? I’ll find out, you know. I always do.”

“Give the chariot back.” I tried to keep my voice even. “I took on your dad once. You don’t scare me.”

Phobos laughed. “Nothing to fear but fear itself. Isn’t that what they say? Well, let me tell you a little secret, half-blood. I am fear. If you want to find the chariot, come and get it. It’s across the water. You’ll find it where the little wild animals live – just the sort of place you belong.”

He snapped his fingers and disappeared in a curtain of yellow vapor.

Now I’ve got to tell you, I’ve met a lot of godlings and monsters I didn’t like, but Phobos took the prize. I didn’t like bullies. I’d never been in the “A” crowd at school, so I’d spent most of my life standing up to punks who tried to frighten me and my friends. The way Phobos laughed at me and made Clarisse collapse just by looking at her . . . I wanted to teach this guy a lesson.

I helped Clarisse up. Her face was still beaded with sweat. “Now are you ready for help?” I asked.

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We took the subway, keeping a lookout for more attacks, but nothing bothered us. As we rode, Clarisse told me about Phobos and Deimos.

“They’re minor gods,” she said. “Phobos is fear. Deimos is terror.”

“What’s the difference?”

She frowned. “Deimos is bigger and uglier, I guess. He’s good at freaking out entire crowds. Phobos is more, like, personal. He can get inside your head.”

“That’s where they get the word phobia?”

“Yeah,” she grumbled. “He’s so proud of that. All those phobias named after him. The jerk.”

“So why don’t they want you driving the chariot?”

“It’s usually a ritual just for Ares’s sons when they turn fifteen. I’m the first daughter to get a shot in a long time.”

“Good for you.”

“Tell that to Phobos and Deimos. They hate me. I’ve got to get the chariot back to the temple.”

“Where is the temple?”

“Pier 86. The Intrepid.”

“Oh.” It made sense, now that I thought about it. I’d never actually been on board the old aircraft carrier, but I knew they used it as some kind of military museum. It probably had a bunch of guns and bombs and other dangerous toys. Just the kind of place a war god would want to hang out.

“We’ve got maybe four hours before sunset,” I guessed. “That should be enough time if we can find the chariot.”

“But what did Phobos mean, ‘over the water’? We’re on an island, for Zeus’s sake. That could be any direction!”

“He said something about wild animals,” I remembered. “Little wild animals.”

“A zoo?”

I nodded. A zoo over the water could be the one in Brooklyn, or maybe . . . someplace harder to get to, with little wild animals. Some place nobody would ever think to look for a war chariot.

“Staten Island,” I said. “They’ve got a small zoo.”

“Maybe,” Clarisse said. “That sounds like the kind of out-of-the-way place Phobos and Deimos would stash something. But if we’re wrong --”

“We don’t have time to be wrong.”

We hoped off the train at Times Square and caught the 1 downtown toward the ferry terminal.

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We boarded the Staten Island Ferry at three-thirty, along with a bunch of tourists who crowded the railings of the top deck, snapping pictures as we passed the Statue of Liberty.

“He modeled that after his mom,” I said, looking up at the statue.

Clarisse frowned at me. “Who?”

“Bartholdi,” I said. “The dude who made the Statue of Liberty. He was a son of Athena and he designed it to look like his mom. That’s what Annabeth told me, anyway.”

Clarisse rolled her eyes. Annabeth was my best friend and a huge nut when it came to architecture and monuments. I guess her egghead facts rubbed off on me sometimes.

“Useless,” Clarisse said. “If it doesn’t help you fight, it’s useless information.”

I could’ve argued with her, but just then the ferry lurched like it had hit a rock. Tourists spilled forward, tumbling into each other. Clarisse and I ran to the front of the boat. The water below us started to boil. Then the head of a sea serpent erupted from the bay.

The monster was at least as big as the boat. It was gray and green with a head like a crocodile and razor-sharp teeth. It smelled . . . well, like something that had just come up from the bottom of New York Harbor. Riding on its neck was a bulky guy in black Greek armor. His face was covered with ugly scars and he held a javelin in his hand.

“Deimos!” Clarisse yelled.

“Hello, sister!” His smile was almost as horrible as the serpent’s. “Care to play?”

The monster roared. Tourists screamed and scattered. I don’t know exactly what they saw. The Mist usually prevents mortals from seeing monsters in their true form, but whatever they saw, they were terrified.

“Leave them alone!” I yelled.

“Or what, son of the sea god?” Deimos sneered. “My brother tells me you’re a wimp! Besides, I love terror. I live on terror!”

He spurred the sea serpent into head-butting the ferry, which sloshed backwards. Alarms blared. Passengers fell over each other trying to get away. Deimos laughed with delight.

“That’s it,” I grumbled. “Clarissee, grab on.”

“What?”

“Grab on to my neck. We’re going for a ride.”

She didn’t protest. She grabbed onto me and I said, “One, two, three – JUMP!”

We leaped off the top deck and straight into the bay, but we were only under for a moment. I felt the power of the ocean surging through me. I willed the water to swirl around me, building force, until we burst out of the bay on top of a thirty-foot-high water spout. I steered us straight toward the monster.

“You think you can tackle Deimos?” I yelled to Clarisse.

“I’m on it!” she said. “Just get me within ten feet.”

We barreled toward the serpent. Just as it bared its fangs, I swerved the water spout to one side and Clarisse jumped. She crashed into Deimos and both of them toppled into the sea.

The serpent came after me. I turned the water spout to face him then summoned all my power and willed the water to even greater heights.

WHOOOOOM!

Ten thousand gallons of salt water crashed into the monster. I leaped over its head, uncapped Riptide and slashed with all my might at the creature’s neck. The monster roared. Green blood spouted from the wound and the serpent sank beneath the waves.

I dove underwater and watched as it retreated back to the open sea. That’s one good thing about sea serpents. They’re big babies when it comes to getting hurt.

Clarissee surfaced near me, spluttering and coughing. I swam over and grabbed her.

“Did you get Deimos?” I asked.

Clarissee shook her head. “The coward disappeared as we were wrestling. But I’m sure we’ll see him again. Phobos, too.”

Tourists were still running around the ferry in a panic, but it didn’t look like anybody was hurt. The boat didn’t seem damaged. I decided we shouldn’t stick around. I held on to Clarisse’s arm and willed the waves to carry us toward Staten Island.

In the west, the sun was going down over the Jersey shore. We were running out of time.

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I’d never spent much time on Staten Island, and I found it was a lot bigger than I thought and not much

fun to walk. The streets curved around confusingly and everything seemed to be uphill. I was dry (I never got wet in the ocean unless I wanted to) but Clarisse's clothes were still sopping wet so she left mucky footprints all over the sidewalk and the bus driver wouldn't let us on the bus.

"We'll never make it in time," she sighed.

"Stop thinking that way." I tried to sound upbeat, but I was starting to have doubts, too. I wished we had reinforcements. Two demigods against two minor gods was not an even match, and when we met Phobos and Deimos together, I wasn't sure what we were going to do. I kept remembering what Phobos had said, How about you, Percy Jackson? What do you fear? I'll find out, you know.

After dragging ourselves halfway up the island past a lot of suburban houses and a couple of churches and a McDonalds, we finally saw a sign that said ZOO. We turned the corner and followed this curvy street with some woods on one side until we came to the zoo entrance.

The lady at the ticket booth looked at us suspiciously, but thank the gods I had enough cash to get us inside.

We walked around the reptile house and Clarisse stopped in her tracks.

"There it is."

It was sitting at a crossroads between the petting zoo and the sea otter pond: a large golden and red chariot tethered to four black horses. The chariot was decorated with amazing detail. It would've been beautiful if all the pictures hadn't shown people dying painful deaths. The horses were breathing fire out of their nostrils.

Families with strollers walked right past the chariot like it didn't exist. I guess the Mist must've been really strong around it, because the chariot's only camouflage was a handwritten note taped to one of the horses' chests that said, OFFICIAL ZOO VEHICLE.

"Where are Phobos and Deimos?" Clarisse muttered, drawing her sword.

I couldn't see them anywhere, but this had to be a trap.

I concentrated on the horses. Usually I could talk to horses, since my dad Poseidon had created them. I said, Hey. Nice fire-breathing horses. Come here!

One of horses whinnied disdainfully. I could understand his thoughts, all right. He called me some names I can't repeat.

"I'll try to get the reins," Clarisse said. "The horses know me. Cover me."

"Right." I wasn't sure how I was supposed to cover her with a sword, but I kept my eyes peeled as Clarisse approached the chariot. She walked around the horses, almost tip-toeing.

She froze as a lady with a three-year-old girl passed by. The girl said, "Pony on fire!"

"Don't be silly, Jessie," the mother said in a dazed voice. "That's an official zoo vehicle."

The little girl tried to protest but the mother grabbed her hand and they kept walking. Clarisse got closer to the chariot. Her hand was six inches from the rail when the horses reared up, whinnying and breathing flames. Phobos and Deimos appeared in the chariot, both of them now dressed in pitch-black battle armor. Phobos grinned, his red eyes glowing. Deimos's scared face looked even more horrible up close.

“The hunt is on!” Phobos yelled. Clarisse stumbled back as he lashed the horses and charged the chariot straight toward me.

Now I’d like to tell you that I did something heroic, like stand up against a raging team of fire-breathing horses with only my sword. The truth is, I ran. I jumped over a trash bin and an exhibit fence, but there was no way I could outrun the chariot. It crashed through the fence right behind me, plowing down everything in its path.

“Percy, look out!” Clarisse yelled, like I needed somebody to tell me that.

I jumped and landed on a rock island in the middle of the otter exhibit. I willed a column of water out of the pond and doused the horses, temporarily extinguishing their flames and sending them into confusion. The otters weren’t really happy with me. They chattered and barked and I figured I’d better get off their island quick before I had crazed sea mammals after me, too.

I ran as Phobos cursed and tried to get his horses under control. Clarisse took the opportunity to jump on Deimos’s back just as he was lifting his javelin. Both of them went tumbling out of the chariot as it lurched forward.

I could hear Deimos and Clarisse starting to fight, sword on sword, but I didn’t have time to worry about it because Phobos was riding after me again. I sprinted toward the aquarium with the chariot right behind me.

“Hey, Percy!” Phobos taunted. “I’ve got something for you!”

I glanced back and saw the chariot melting, the horses turning to steel and folding into each other like clay figures being crumpled. The chariot refashioned itself into a black metal box with caterpillar treads and a turret and a long gun barrel. A tank. I recognized it from this research report I had to do for history class. Phobos was grinning at me from the top of a World War II Panzer.

“Say cheese!” he said.

I rolled to one side as the gun fired.

KA-BOOOOM! A souvenir kiosk exploded, sending fuzzy animals and plastic cups and disposable cameras in every direction. As Phobos re-aimed his gun, I got to my feet and dived into the aquarium.

I wanted to surround myself with water. That always increased my power. Besides, it was possible Phobos couldn’t fit the chariot inside the doorway. Of course, if he blasted through it, that wouldn’t help . . .

I ran through the rooms, washed in weird blue light from the fish tank exhibits. Cuttlefish, clown fish, and eels all stared at me as I raced past. I could hear their little minds whispering, Son of the sea god! Son of the sea god! It’s great when you’re a celebrity to squids.

I stopped at the back of the aquarium and listened. I heard nothing. And then . . . Vroom, Vroom. A different kind of engine.

I watched in disbelief as Phobos came riding through the aquarium on a Harley-Davison. I’d seen this motorcycle before: its black flame-decorated engine, its shotgun holsters, its leather seat that looked like human skin. This was the same motorcycle Ares had ridden when I first met him, but it had never occurred to me that it was just another form of his war chariot.

“Hello, loser,” Phobos said, pulling a huge sword out of its sheath. “Time to be scared.”

I raised my own sword, determined to face him, but then Phobos eyes glowed brighter and I made the mistake of looking into them.

Suddenly I was in a different place. I was at Camp Half-Blood, my favorite place in the world, and it was in flames. The woods were on fire. The cabins were smoking. The dining pavilion's Greek columns had crumbled and the Big House was a smoldering ruin. My friends were on their knees pleading with me. Annabeth, Grover, all the other campers.

Save us, Percy! they wailed. Make the choice!

I stood paralyzed. This was the moment I had always dreaded: the prophecy that was supposed to come about when I was sixteen. I would make a choice that would save or destroy Mount Olympus.

Now the moment was here, and I had no idea what to do. The camp was burning. My friends all looked at me begging for help. My heart pounded. I couldn't move. What if I did the wrong thing?

Then I heard the voices of the aquarium fish: Son of the sea god! Wake!

Suddenly I felt the power of the ocean all around me again, hundreds of gallons of salt water, thousands of fish trying to get my attention. I wasn't at camp. This was an illusion. Phobos was showing me my deepest fear.

I blinked, and saw Phobos's blade coming down toward my head. I raised Riptide and blocked the blow just before it could cut me in two.

I counterattacked and stabbed Phobos in the arm. Golden ichor, the blood of the gods, soaked through his shirt.

Phobos growled and slashed at me. I parried easily. Without his power of fear, Phobos was nothing. He wasn't even a decent fighter. I pressed him back, swiped at his face and gave him a cut across the cheek. The angrier he got, the clumsier he got. I couldn't kill him. He was immortal. But you wouldn't have known that from his expression. The fear god looked afraid.

Finally I kicked him backwards against the water fountain. His sword skittered into the ladies room. I grabbed the straps of his armor and pulled him up to face me.

"You're going to disappear now," I told him. "You're going to stay out of Clarisse's way. And if I see you again, I'm going to give you a bigger scar in a much more painful place!"

He gulped. "There will be a next time, Jackson!"

And he dissolved into yellow vapor.

I turned toward the fish exhibits. "Thanks, guys."

Then I looked at Ares's motorcycle. I'd never ridden an all-powerful Harley-Davison war chariot before, but how hard could it be? I hopped on, started the ignition, and rode out of the aquarium to help Clarisse.

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I had no trouble finding her. I just followed the path of destruction. Fences were knocked down. Animals were running free. Badgers and lemurs were checking out the popcorn machine. A fat-looking leopard was lounging on the park bench with a bunch of pigeon feathers around him.

I parked the motorcycle next to the petting zoo and there were Deimos and Clarisse in the goat area. Clarisse was on her knees. I ran forward but stopped suddenly when I saw how Deimos had changed form. He was Ares now – the tall god of war, dressed in black leather and sunglasses, his whole body smoking with anger as he raised his fist over Clarisse.

“You failed me again!” the war god bellowed. “I told you what would happen!”

He tried to strike her but Clarisse scrambled away, shrieking, “No! Please!”

“Foolish girl!”

“Clarisse!” I yelled. “It’s an illusion. Stand up to him!”

Deimos’s form flickered. “I am Ares!” he insisted. “And you are a worthless girl! I knew you would fail me. Now you will suffer my wrath.”

I wanted to charge in and fight Deimos, but somehow I knew it wouldn’t help. Clarisse had to do it. This was her worst fear. She had to overcome it for herself.

“Clarisse!” I said. She glanced over and I tried to hold her eyes. “Stand up to him!” I said. “He’s all talk. Get up!”

“I – I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. You’re a warrior. Get up!”

She hesitated. Then she began to stand.

“What are you doing?” Ares bellowed. “Grovel for mercy, girl!”

Clarisse took a shaky breath. Very quietly, she said, “No.”

“WHAT?”

She raised her sword. “I’m tired of being scared of you.”

Deimos struck, but Clarisse deflected the blow. She staggered backward but didn’t fall.

“You’re not Ares,” Clarisse said. “You’re not even a good fighter.”

Deimos growled in frustration. When he struck again, Clarisse was ready. She disarmed him and stabbed him in the shoulder – not deep, but deep enough to hurt even a godling.

He yowled in pain and began to glow.

“Look away!” I told Clarisse.

We averted our eyes as Deimos exploded into golden light – his true godly form – and disappeared.

We were alone except for the petting zoo goats who were tugging at our clothes, looking for snacks.

The motorcycle had turned back into a horse-drawn chariot.

Clarisse looked at me cautiously. She wiped the straw and sweat off her face. “You didn’t see that. You didn’t see any of that.”

I grinned. "You did good."

She glanced at the sky, which was turning red behind the trees.

"Get in the chariot," Clarisse said. "We've still got a long ride to make."

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A few minutes later, we reached the Staten Island ferry building and remembered something obvious: We were on an island. The ferry didn't take cars. Or chariots. Or motorcycles.

"Great," Clarisse mumbled. "What do we do now? Ride this thing across the Verrazano Bridge?"

We both knew there wasn't time. There were bridges to Queens and New Jersey, but either way it would take hours to drive the chariot back to Manhattan, even if we could fool people into thinking it was a regular car.

Then I got an idea. "We'll take the direct route."

Clarisse frowned. "What do you mean?"

I closed my eyes and began to concentrate. "Drive straight ahead. Go!"

Clarisse was so desperate she didn't hesitate. She yelled, "Hiya!" and lashed the horses. They charged straight toward the water. I imagined the sea turning solid, the waves becoming a firm surface all the way to Manhattan. The war chariot hit the surf, the horses' fiery breath smoking all around us, and we rode the tops of the waves straight across New York Harbor.

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We arrived at Pier 86 just as the sunset was fading to purple. The U.S.S. Intrepid, temple of Ares, was a huge wall of grey metal in front of us, the flight deck dotted with fighter aircraft and helicopters. We parked the chariot on the ramp and I jumped out. For once, I was glad to be on dry land. Concentrating on keeping the chariot above the waves had been one of the hardest things I'd ever done. I was exhausted.

"I'd better get out of here before Ares arrives," I said.

Clarisse nodded. "He'd probably kill you on sight."

"Congratulations," I said. "I guess you passed your driving test."

She wrapped the reins around her hand. "About what you saw, Percy. What I was afraid of, I mean –"

"I won't tell anybody."

She looked at me uncomfortably. "Did Phobos scare you?"

"Yeah. I saw the camp in flames. I saw my friends all pleading for my help, and I didn't know what to do. For a second, I couldn't move. I was paralyzed. I know how you felt."

She lowered her eyes. "I, uh . . . I guess I should say . . ." The words seemed to stick in her throat. I wasn't sure Clarisse had ever said thank you in her life.

"Don't mention it," I told her.

I started to walk away, but she called out, “Percy?”

“Yeah?”

“When you, uh, had that vision about your friends . . .”

“You were one of them,” I promised. “Just don’t tell anybody, okay? Or I’d have to kill you.”

A faint smile flickered across her face. “See you later.”

“See you.”

And I headed off toward the subway. It had been a long day, and I was ready to get home.

THE END

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