

Percy Jackson and the Bronze Dragon

By Rick Riordan

—For Patrick on his tenth birthday

One dragon can ruin your whole day.

Trust me, as a demigod I've had my share of bad experiences. I've been snapped at, clawed at, blowtorched, and poisoned. I've fought single-headed dragons, double-headed, eight-headed, nine-headed, and the kind with so many heads that if you stopped to count them you'd be pretty much dead.

But that time with the bronze dragon? I thought for sure my friends and I were going to end up as Kibbles 'n' Dragon Bits.

The evening started simply enough.

It was the end of June. I'd come back from my most recent quest about two weeks before, and life at Camp Half-Blood was returning to normal. Satyrs were chasing the dryads. Monsters howled in the woods. The campers were playing pranks on one another, and our camp director, Dionysus, was turning anyone who misbehaved into a shrub. Typical summer-camp stuff.

After dinner, all the campers were hanging out at the dining pavilion. We were all excited because tonight's capture-the-flag was going to be totally vicious.

The night before, Hephaestus's cabin had pulled off a huge upset. They'd captured the flag from Ares—with my help, thank you very much—which meant that tonight the Ares cabin would be out for blood. Well... they're *always* out for blood, but tonight especially.

On the blue team were Hephaestus's cabin, Apollo, Hermes, and me—the only demigod in Poseidon's cabin. The bad news was that for once, Athena and Ares—both war god cabins—were against us on the red team, along with Aphrodite, Dionysus, and Demeter. Athena's cabin held the other flag, and my friend Annabeth was their captain.

Annabeth is *not* somebody you want as an enemy.

Right before the game, she strolled up to me. "Hey, seaweed brain."

"Will you stop calling me that?"

She knows I hate that name, mostly because I never have a good comeback. She's the daughter of Athena, which doesn't give me a lot of ammunition. I mean, Owl-head and Wise Girl are kind of lame insults.

"You know you love it." She bumped me with her shoulder, which I guess was supposed to be friendly, but she was wearing full Greek armor, so it kind of hurt. Her gray eyes sparkled under the helmet. Her blond ponytail curled around one shoulder. It was hard for anyone to look cute in combat armor, but Annabeth pulled it off.

"Tell you what." She lowered her voice. "We're going to crush you tonight, but if you pick a safe position—like right flank, for instance—I'll make sure you don't get pulverized too much."

"Gee, thanks," I said, "but I'm playing to win."

She smiled. "See you on the battlefield."

She jogged back to her teammates, who all laughed and gave her highfives. I'd never seen her so happy, like the chance to beat me up was the best thing that had ever happened to her.

Beckendorf walked up with his helmet under his arm. "She likes you, man."

"Sure," I muttered. "She likes me for target practice."

"Nah, they always do that. A girl starts trying to kill you, you know she's into you."

"Makes a lot of sense."

Beckendorf shrugged. "I know about these things. You ought to ask her to the fireworks."

I couldn't tell if he was serious. Beckendorf was lead counselor for Hephaestus. He was this huge African American dude with a permanent scowl, muscles like a pro ballplayer, and hands calloused from working in the forges his whole life. He'd just turned eighteen and was on his way to NYU in the fall. Since he was older, I usually listened to him about stuff, but the idea of asking Annabeth to the Fourth of July fireworks down at the beach—like, the biggest dating event of the summer—made my stomach do somersaults.

Then Silena Beauregard, the head counselor for Aphrodite, passed by. Beckendorf had had a not-so-secret crush on her for three years. She had long black hair and big brown eyes, and when she walked, the guys tended to watch. She said, "Good luck, Charlie." (Nobody *ever* calls Beckendorf by his first name.) She flashed him a brilliant smile and went to join Annabeth on the red team.

"Uh..." Beckendorf swallowed like he'd forgotten how to breathe.

I patted him on the shoulder. "Thanks for the advice, dude. Glad you're so wise about girls and all. Come on. Let's get to the woods."

Naturally, Beckendorf and I took the most dangerous job.

While the Apollo cabin played defense with their bows, the Hermes cabin would charge up the middle of the woods to distract the enemy. Meanwhile, Beckendorf and I would scout around the left flank, locate the enemy's flag, knock out the defenders, and get the flag back to our side. Simple.

Why the left flank?

"Because Annabeth wanted me to go right," I told Beckendorf, "which means she *doesn't* want us to go left."

Beckendorf nodded. "Let's suit up."

He'd been working on a secret weapon for the two of us: bronze chameleon armor, enchanted to blend into the background. If we stood in front of rocks, our breastplates, helmets, and shields turned gray. If we stood in front of bushes, the metal changed to a leafy green. It wasn't true invisibility, but we'd have pretty good cover, at least from a distance.

"This stuff took forever to forge," Beckendorf warned me. "Don't mess it up!"

"You got it, Captain."

Beckendorf grunted. I could tell he liked being called captain. The rest of the Hephaestus campers wished us well, and we sneaked off into the woods, immediately turning brown and green to match the trees.

We crossed the creek that served as the boundary between the teams. We heard fighting in the distance: swords clashing against shields. I glimpsed a flash of light from some magical weapon, but we saw no one.

"No border guards?" Beckendorf whispered. "Weird."

"Overconfident," I guessed. But I felt uneasy. Annabeth was a great strategist. It wasn't like her to get sloppy on defense, even if her team did outnumber us.

We moved into enemy territory. I knew we had to hurry, because our team was playing a defensive game, and that couldn't last forever. The Apollo kids would get overrun sooner or later. The Ares cabin wouldn't be slowed down by a little thing like arrows.

We crept along the base of an oak tree. Suddenly, a girl's face emerged from the trunk. "Shoo!" she said, then faded back into the bark.

"Dryads," Beckendorf grumbled. "So touchy."

"Am not!" a muffled voice said from the tree.

We kept moving. It was hard to tell exactly where we were. Some landmarks stood out, like the creek and certain cliffs and some really old trees, but the woods tended to shift around. I guess the nature spirits got restless. Paths changed. Trees moved.

Then, suddenly, we were at the edge of a clearing. I knew we were in trouble when I saw the mountain of dirt.

"Holy Hephaestus," Beckendorf whispered. "The Ant Hill."

I wanted to back up and run. I'd never seen the Ant Hill before, but I'd heard stories from the older campers. The mound rose almost to the treetops—four stories at least. Its sides were riddled with tunnels, and crawling in and out were thousands of...

"Myrmekes," I muttered.

That's Ancient Greek for ants, but these things were way more than that. They would've given any exterminator a heart attack.

The Myrmekes were the size of German shepherds. Their armored shells glistened bloodred. Their eyes were beady black, and their razor-sharp mandibles sliced and snapped. Some carried tree branches. Some carried chunks of raw meat that I really didn't want to know about. Most carried bits of metal—old armor, swords, food platters that had somehow found their way out here from the dining pavilion. One ant was dragging the glossy black hood of a sports car.

"They love shiny metal," Beckendorf whispered. "Especially gold. I've heard they have more gold in their nest than Fort Knox."

He sounded envious.

"Don't even think about it," I said.

"Dude, I won't," he promised. "Let's get out of here while we..."

His eyes widened.

Fifty feet away, two ants were struggling to drag a big hunk of metal toward their nest. The thing was the size of a refrigerator. It was all glittery gold and bronze, with weird bumps and ridges down the side and a bunch of wires sticking out the bottom. Then the ants rolled the thing over, and I saw its face.

I just about jumped out of my skin. "That's a—"

"Shhh!" Beckendorf pulled me back into the bushes.

"But that's a—"

"Dragon's head," he said in awe. "Yes. I see it."

The snout was as long as my body. The mouth hung open, showing metal teeth, like a shark's. Its skin was a combination of gold and bronze scales, and its eyes were rubies as big as my fists. The head looked like it had been hacked from its body—chewed by ant mandibles. The wires were frayed and tangled.

The head must've been heavy, too, because the ants were struggling, moving it only a few inches with every tug.

"If they get it to the hill," Beckendorf said, "the other ants will help them. We've got to stop them."

"What?" I asked. "Why?"

"It's a sign from Hephaestus. Come on!"

I didn't know what he was talking about, but I'd never seen Beckendorf look so determined. He sprinted along the edge of the clearing, his armor blending into the trees.

I was about to follow when something sharp and cold pressed against my neck.

"Surprise," Annabeth said, right next me. She must've had her magic Yankees cap on, because she was totally invisible.

I tried to move, but she dug her knife under my chin. Silena appeared out of the woods, her sword drawn. Her Aphrodite armor was pink and red, color-coordinated to match her clothes and makeup. She looked like Guerilla Warfare Barbie.

"Nice work," she told Annabeth.

An invisible hand confiscated my sword. Annabeth took off her cap and appeared before me, smiling smugly. "Boys are easy to follow. They make more noise than a lovesick Minotaur."

My face felt hot. I tried to think back, hoping I hadn't said anything embarrassing. No telling how long Annabeth and Silena had been eavesdropping.

"You're our prisoner," Annabeth announced. "Let's get Beckendorf and—"

"Beckendorf!" For a splitsecond I'd forgotten about him, but he was still forging ahead, straight toward the dragon's head. He was already forty feet away. He hadn't noticed the girls, or the fact that I wasn't behind him.

"Come on!" I told Annabeth.

She pulled me back. "Where do you think you're going, prisoner?"

"Look!"

She peered into the clearing and for the first time seemed to realize where we were. "Oh, Zeus..."

Beckendorf leaped into the open and struck one of the ants. His sword clanged off the thing's carapace. The ant turned, snapping its pincers. Before I could even call out, the ant bit Beckendorf's leg, and he crumpled to the ground. The second ant sprayed goo in his face, and Beckendorf screamed. He dropped his sword and slapped wildly at his own eyes.

I surged forward, but Annabeth pulled me back. "*No*."

"Charlie!" Silena yelled.

"Don't!" Annabeth hissed. "It's already too late!"

"What are you talking about?" I demanded. "We have to—"

Then I noticed more ants swarming toward Beckendorf—ten, twenty. They grabbed him by the armor and dragged him toward the hill so fast he was swept into a tunnel and gone.

"No!" Silena pushed Annabeth. "You *let* them take Charlie!"

"There's no time to argue," Annabeth said. "Come on!"

I thought she was going to lead us on a charge to save Beckendorf, but instead she raced to the dragon's head, which the ants had momentarily forgotten. She grabbed it by the wires and started dragging it toward the woods.

"What are you *doing*?" I demanded. "Beckendorf—"

"Help me," Annabeth grunted. "Quick, before they get back."

"Oh, my gods!" Silena said. "You're more worried about this hunk of metal than Charlie?"

Annabeth spun around and shook her by the shoulders. "Listen, Silena! Those are Myrmekes. They're like fire ants, only a hundred times worse. They bite poison. They spray acid. They communicate with all the other ants and swarm anything that threatens them. If we'd rushed in there to help Beckendorf, we would have been dragged inside, too. We're going to need help—a *lot* of help—to get him back. Now, grab some wires and *pull*!"

I didn't know what Annabeth was up to, but I'd adventured with her long enough to figure she had a good reason. The three of us tugged the metal dragon's head into the woods. Annabeth didn't let us stop until we were fifty yards from the clearing. Then we collapsed, sweating and breathing hard.

Silena started to cry. "He's probably dead already."

"No," Annabeth said. "They won't kill him right away. We've got about half an hour."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"I've read about the Myrmekes. They paralyze their prey so they can soften them up before—"

Silena sobbed. "We have to save him!"

"Silena," Annabeth said. "We're *going* to save him, but I need you to get a grip. There *is* a way."

"Call the other campers," I said, "or Chiron. Chiron will know what to do."

Annabeth shook her head. "They're scattered all over the woods. By the time we got everyone back here, it would be too late. Besides, the entire camp wouldn't be strong enough to invade the Ant Hill."

"Then what?"

She pointed at the dragon's head.

"Okay," I said. "You're going to scare the ants with a big metal puppet?"

"It's an automaton," she said.

That didn't make me feel any better. Automatons were magical bronze robots made by Hephaestus. Most of them were crazed killing machines, and those were the *nice* ones.

"So what?" I said. "It's just a head. It's broken."

"Percy, this isn't just *any* automaton," Annabeth said. "It's the bronze dragon. Haven't you heard the stories?"

I stared at her blankly. Annabeth had been at camp a lot longer than I had. She probably knew tons of stories I didn't.

Silena's eyes widened. "You mean the old guardian? But that's just a legend!"

"Whoa," I said. "What old guardian?"

Annabeth took a deep breath. "Percy, in the days before Thalia's tree—back before the camp had magical boundaries to keep out monsters—the counselors tried all sorts of different ways to protect themselves. The most famous was the bronze dragon. The Hephaestus cabin made it with the blessing of their father. Supposedly, it was so fierce and powerful that it kept the camp safe for over a decade. And then... about fifteen years ago, it disappeared into the woods."

"And you think this is its head?"

"It has to be! The Myrmekes probably dug it up while they were looking for precious metal. They couldn't move the whole thing, so they chewed off the head. The body can't be far away."

"But they chewed it apart. It's useless."

"Not necessarily." Annabeth's eyes narrowed, and I could tell her brain was working overtime. "We could reassemble it. If we could activate it—"

"It could help us rescue Charlie!" Silena said.

"Hold up," I said. "That's a lot of ifs. *If* we find it, *if* we can reactivate it in time, *if* it will help us. You said this thing disappeared fifteen years ago?"

Annabeth nodded. "Some say its motor wore out so it went into the woods to deactivate itself. Or its programming went haywire. No one knows."

"You want to reassemble a haywire metal dragon?"

"We have to try!" Annabeth said. "It's Beckendorf's only hope! Besides, this could be a sign from Hephaestus. The dragon should want to help one of Hephaestus's kids. Beckendorf would want us to try."

I didn't like the idea. On the other hand, I didn't have any better suggestions. We were running out of time, and Silena looked like she was about to go into shock if we didn't do something soon. Beckendorf *had* said something about a sign from Hephaestus. Maybe it was time to find out.

"All right," I said. "Let's go find a headless dragon."

We searched *forever*, or maybe it just seemed that way, because the whole time, I was imagining Beckendorf in the Ant Hill, scared and paralyzed while a bunch of armored critters scuttled around him, waiting for him to be tenderized.

It wasn't hard to follow the ants' trail. They'd dragged the dragon's head through the forest, making a deep rut in the mud, and we dragged the head right back the way they'd come.

We must've gone a quarter of a mile—and I was getting worried about our time—when Annabeth said, "*Di immortalis*."

We'd come to the rim of a crater—like something had blasted a house-size hole in the forest floor. The sides were slippery and dotted with tree roots. Ant tracks led to the bottom, where a large metal mound glinted through the dirt. Wires stuck up from a bronze stump on one end.

"The dragon's neck," I said. "You think the ants made this crater?"

Annabeth shook her head. "Looks more like a meteor blast...."

"Hephaestus," Silena said. "The god must've unearthed this. He wanted us to find the dragon. He wanted Charlie to..." She choked up.

"Come on," I said. "Let's reconnect this bad boy."

Getting the dragon's head to the bottom was easy. It tumbled right down the slope and hit the neck with a loud, metallic *bonk*! Reconnecting it was harder.

We had no tools and no experience.

Annabeth fiddled with the wires and cursed in Ancient Greek. "We need Beckendorf. He could do this in seconds."

"Isn't your mom the goddess of inventors?" I asked.

Annabeth glared at me. "Yes, but I'm good with *ideas*. Not mechanics."

"If I was going to pick one person in the world to reattach my head," I said, "I'd pick you."

I just blurted it out—to give her confidence, I guess—but immediately I realized it sounded pretty stupid.

"Awww. . ." Silena sniffled and wiped her eyes. "Percy, that is *so* sweet!"

Annabeth blushed. "Shut up, Silena. Hand me your dagger."

I was afraid Annabeth was going to stab me with it. Instead she used it as a screwdriver, to open a panel in the dragon's neck. "Here goes nothing," she said.

And she started to splice together the celestial bronze wires.

It took a long time. *Too* long.

I figured capture-the-flag had to be over by now. I wondered how soon the other campers would realize we were missing and come looking for us. Beckendorf probably had five or ten minutes left before the ants got him, if Annabeth's calculations were correct (and they always were).

Finally Annabeth stood up and exhaled. Her hands were scraped and muddy. Her fingernails were wrecked. She had a brown streak across her forehead where the dragon had decided to spit grease at her.

"All right," she said. "It's done, I think...."

"You *think*?" Silena asked.

"It has to be done," I said. "We're out of time. How do you, uh, start it? Is there an ignition switch or something?"

Annabeth pointed to its ruby eyes. "Those turn clockwise. I'm guessing we rotate them."

"If somebody twisted my eyeballs, I'd wake up," I agreed. "What if it goes crazy on us?"

"Then... we're dead," Annabeth said.

"Great," I said. "I'm psyched."

Together we turned the ruby eyes of the dragon. Immediately, they began to glow. Annabeth and I backed up so fast we fell over each other. The dragon's mouth opened, as if it were testing its jaw. The head turned and looked at us. Steam poured from its ears, and it tried to rise.

When it found it couldn't move, the dragon seemed confused. It cocked its head and regarded the dirt. Finally, it realized it was buried. The neck strained once, twice... and the center of the crater erupted.

The dragon pulled itself awkwardly out of the ground, shaking clumps of mud from its body the way a dog might, splattering us from head to toe. The automaton was so awesome none of us could speak. I mean, sure, it needed a trip through the car wash, and there were a few loose wires sticking out here and there, but the dragon's body was amazing—like a high-tech tank with legs. Its sides were plated with bronze and gold scales, encrusted with gemstones. Its legs were the size of tree trunks, and its feet had steel talons. It had no wings—most Greek dragons don't—but its tail was at least as long as its main body, which was the size of a school bus. The neck creaked and popped as it turned its head to the sky and blew a column of triumphant fire.

"Well..." I said in a small voice. "It still works."

Unfortunately, it heard me. Those ruby eyes zeroed in on me, and it stuck its snout two inches from my face. Instinctively, I reached for my sword.

"Dragon, stop!" Silena yelled. I was amazed her voice still worked. She spoke with such command that the automaton turned its attention to her.

Silena swallowed nervously. "We've woken you to defend the camp. You remember? That is your job!"

The dragon tilted its head like it was thinking. I figured Silena had about a fifty-fifty chance of getting blasted with fire. I was considering jumping on the thing's neck to distract it when Silena said, "Charles Beckendorf, a son of Hephaestus, is in trouble. The Myrmekes have taken him. He needs your help."

At the word *Hephaestus*, the dragon's neck straightened. A shiver rippled through its metal body,

throwing a new shower of mud clods all over us.

The dragon looked around, as if trying to find an enemy.

"We have to show it," Annabeth said. "Come on, dragon! This way to the son of Hephaestus! Follow us!"

Just like that, she drew her sword, and the three of us climbed out of the pit.

"For Hephaestus!" Annabeth yelled, which was a nice touch. We charged through the woods. When I looked behind us, the bronze dragon was right on our tail, its red eyes glowing and steam coming out its nostrils.

It was good incentive to keep running fast as we headed for the Ant Hill.

When we got to the clearing, the dragon seemed to catch Beckendorf's scent. It barreled ahead of us, and we had to jump out of its way to avoid getting flattened. It crashed through the trees, joints creaking, feet pounding craters into the ground.

It charged straight for the Ant Hill. At first, the Myrmekes didn't know what was happening. The dragon stepped on a few of them, smashing them to bug juice. Then their telepathic network seemed to light up, like: *Big dragon. Bad!*

All the ants in the clearing turned simultaneously and swarmed the dragon. More ants poured out of the hill—hundreds of them. The dragon blew fire and sent a whole column of them into a panicked retreat. Who knew ants were flammable? But more kept coming.

"Inside, now!" Annabeth told us. "While they're focused on the dragon!"

Silena led the charge; it was the first time I'd ever followed a child of Aphrodite into battle. We ran past the ants, but they ignored us. For some reason, they seemed to consider the dragon a bigger threat. Go figure.

We plunged into the nearest tunnel, and I almost gagged from the stench. Nothing, I mean nothing, stinks worse than a giant ant lair. I could tell they let their food rot before eating it. Somebody seriously needed to teach them about refrigerators.

Our journey inside was a blur of dark tunnels and moldy rooms carpeted with old ant shells and pools of goo. Ants kept surging past us on their way to battle, but we just stepped aside and let them pass. The faint bronze glow of my sword gave us light as we made our way deeper into the nest.

"Look!" Annabeth said.

I glanced into a side room, and my heart skipped a beat. Hanging from the ceiling were huge, gooey sacks—ant larvae, I guess—but that's not what got my attention. The cave floor was heaped with gold coins, gems, and other treasures: helmets, swords, musical instruments, jewelry. They glowed the way magic items do.

"That's just one room," Annabeth said. "There are probably hundreds of nurseries down here, decorated with treasure."

"It's not important," Silena insisted. "We have to find Charlie!"

Another first: a child of Aphrodite uninterested in jewelry.

We forged on. After twenty more feet, we entered a cavern that smelled so bad my nose shut down completely. The remains of old meals were piled as high as sand dunes—bones, chunks of rancid meat, even old camp meals. I guess the ants had been raiding the camp's compost heap and stealing our leftovers. At the base of one of the heaps, struggling to pull himself upright, was Beckendorf. He looked awful, partly because his camouflage armor was now the color of garbage.

"Charlie!" Silena ran to him and tried to help him up.

"Thank the gods," he said. "My—my legs are paralyzed!"

"It'll wear off," Annabeth said, "but we have to get you out of here. Percy, take his other side."

Silena and I hoisted Beckendorf up, and the four of us started back through the tunnels. I could hear distant sounds of battle—metal creaking, fire roaring, hundreds of ants snapping and spitting.

"What's going on out there?" Beckendorf asked. His body tensed. "The dragon! You didn't—reactivate it?"

"Afraid so," I said. "Seemed like the only way."

"But you can't just turn on an automaton! You have to calibrate the motor, run a diagnostic... there's no telling what it'll do! We've got to get out there!"

As it turned out, we didn't need to go anywhere, because the dragon came to us. We were trying to remember which tunnel was the exit when the entire hill exploded, showering us in dirt. Suddenly we were staring at open sky. The dragon was right above us, thrashing back and forth, smashing the Ant Hill to bits as it tried to shake off the Myrmekes crawling all over its body.

"Come on!" I yelled. We dug ourselves out of the dirt and stumbled down the side of the hill, dragging Beckendorf with us.

Our friend the dragon was in trouble. The Myrmekes were biting at the joints of his armor, spitting acid all over him. The dragon stomped and snapped and blew flames, but it couldn't last much longer. Steam was rising from its bronze skin.

Even worse, a few of the ants turned toward us. I guess they didn't like us stealing their dinner. I slashed at one and lopped off its head. Annabeth stabbed another right between the feelers. As the celestial bronze blade pierced its shell, the whole ant disintegrated.

"I—I think I can walk now," Beckendorf said, and immediately fell on his face when we let him go.

"Charlie!" Silena helped him up and pulled him along while Annabeth and I cleared a path through the ants. Somehow, we managed to reach the edge of the clearing without getting bitten or splashed, though one of my sneakers was smoking from acid.

Back in the clearing, the dragon stumbled. A great cloud of acid mist was roiling off its hide.

"We can't let it die!" Silena said.

"It's too dangerous," Beckendorf said sadly. "Its wiring—"

"Charlie," Silena pleaded, "it saved your life! Please? for me."

Beckendorf hesitated. His face was still bright red from the ant spit, and he looked as if he were going to faint any minute, but he struggled to his feet. "Get ready to run," he told us. Then he gazed across the clearing and shouted, "*Dragon! Emergency defense, beta-activate!*"

The dragon turned toward the sound of his voice. It stopped struggling against the ants, and its eyes glowed. The air smelled of ozone, like a thunderstorm.

ZZZZZAAAAAPPP!

Arcs of blue electricity shot from the dragon's skin, rippling up and down its body and connecting with the ants. Some blew up. Others smoked and blackened and fell off, their legs twitching. In a few seconds, there were no more ants on the dragon. The ones that were still alive were in full retreat, scuttling back toward their ruined hill as fingers of electricity zapped them in the butts to prod them along.

The dragon bellowed in triumph. Then it turned its glowing eyes toward us.

"Now," Beckendorf said, "we run."

This time we did not yell, "For Hephaestus!" We yelled, "Heeeelp!"

The dragon pounded after us, spewing fire and zapping lighting bolts over our heads like it was having a great time.

"How do you stop it?" Annabeth yelled.

Beckendorf, whose legs were now working fine (nothing like being chased by a huge monster to get your body back in order) shook his head and gasped for breath. "You shouldn't have turned it on! It's unstable! After a few years, automatons go wild!"

"Good to know," I yelled. "But how do you turn it off?"

Beckendorf looked around wildly. "There!"

Up ahead was an outcropping of rock, almost as tall as the trees. The woods were full of weird rock formations like that, but I'd never seen this one before. It was shaped like a giant skateboard ramp, slanted on one side, with a sheer drop-off on the other.

"You guys, run around to the base of the cliff," Beckendorf said. "Distract the dragon. Keep it occupied!"

"What are you going to do?" Silena said.

"You'll see. Go!"

Beckendorf ducked behind a tree while I turned and yelled at the dragon, "Hey, lizard-lips! Your breath smells like gasoline!"

The dragon spewed black smoke out of its nostrils. It thundered toward me, shaking the ground.

"Come on!" Annabeth grabbed my hand. We ran for the backside of the cliff. The dragon followed.

"We have to hold it here," Annabeth said. The three of us readied our swords.

The dragon reached us and lurched to a stop. It tilted its head like it couldn't believe we'd be so foolish as to fight. Now that it had caught us, there were so many different ways it could kill us it probably couldn't decide.

We scattered as its first blast of fire turned the ground where we'd been standing into a smoking pit of ashes.

Then I saw Beckendorf above us—at the top of the cliff—and I understood what he was trying to do. He needed a clear shot. I had to keep the dragon's attention.

"Yaaaah!" I charged. I brought Riptide down on the dragon's foot and sliced off a talon.

Its head creaked as it looked down at me. It seemed more confused than angry, like, *Why did you cut off my toe?*

Then it opened its mouth, baring a hundred razor-sharp teeth.

"Percy!" Annabeth warned.

I stood my ground. "Just another second..."

"Percy!"

And just before the dragon struck, Beckendorf launched himself off the rocks and landed on the dragon's neck.

The dragon reared back and shot flames, trying to shake Beckendorf, but Beckendorf held on like a cowboy as the monster bucked around. I watched in fascination as he ripped open a panel at the base of the dragon's head and yanked a wire.

Instantly, the dragon froze. Its eyes went dim. Suddenly it was only the statue of a dragon, baring its teeth at the sky.

Beckendorf slid down the dragon's neck. He collapsed at its tail, breathing heavily.

"Charlie!" Silena ran to him and gave him a big kiss on the cheek. "You did it!"

Annabeth came up to me and squeezed my shoulder. "Hey, seaweed brain, you okay?"

"Fine... I guess." I was thinking how close I'd come to being chopped into demigod hash in the dragon's mouth.

"You did great." Annabeth's smile was a lot nicer than that stupid dragon's.

"You, too," I said shakily. "So... what do we do with the automaton?"

Beckendorf wiped his forehead. Silena was still fussing over his cuts and bruises, and Beckendorf looked pretty distracted by the attention.

"We—uh—I don't know," he said. "Maybe we can fix it, get it to guard the camp, but that could take months."

"Worth trying," I said. I imagined having that bronze dragon in our fight against the titan lord Kronos. His monsters would think twice about attacking camp if they had to face *that* thing. On the other hand, if the dragon decided to go berserk again and attack the campers, that would pretty much stink.

"Did you see all the treasure in the Ant Hill?" Beckendorf asked. "The magic weapons? The armor? That stuff could really help us."

"And the bracelets," Silena said. "And the necklaces."

I shuddered, remembering the smell of those tunnels. "I think that's an adventure for later. It would take an army of demigods even to get close to that treasure."

"Maybe," Beckendorf said. "But what a treasure..."

Silena studied the frozen dragon. "Charlie, that was the bravest thing I ever saw—you jumping on that dragon."

Beckendorf swallowed. "Um... yeah. So... will you go to the fireworks with me?"

Silena's face lit up. "Of course, you big dummy! I thought you'd never ask!"

Beckendorf suddenly looked a whole lot better. "Well let's get back, then! I bet the capture-the-flag is over."

I had to go barefoot, because the acid had eaten completely through my shoe. When I kicked it off I realized the goo had soaked into my sock and turned my foot red and raw. I leaned against Annabeth, and she helped me limp through the woods.

Beckendorf and Silena walked ahead of us, holding hands, and we gave them some space.

Watching them, with my arm around Annabeth for support, I felt pretty uncomfortable. I silently cursed Beckendorf for being so brave, and I don't mean for facing the dragon. After three years, he'd finally gotten the courage to ask Silena Beauregard out. It wasn't fair.

"You know," Annabeth said as we struggled along, "it wasn't the bravest thing *I've* ever seen."

I blinked. Had she been reading my thoughts?

"Um... what do you mean?"

Annabeth gripped my wrist as we stumbled through a shallow creek. "You stood up to the dragon so Beckendorf would have his chance to jump—now *that* was brave."

"Or pretty stupid."

"Percy, you're a brave guy," she said. "Just take the compliment. I swear, it is so hard?"

We locked eyes. Our faces were, like, two inches apart. My chest felt a little funny, like my heart was trying to do jumping jacks.

"So..." I said. "I guess Silena and Charlie are going to the fireworks together."

"I guess so," Annabeth agreed.

"Yeah," I said. "Um, about that—"

I don't know what I would've said, but just then, three of Annabeth's siblings from the Athena cabin burst out of the bushes with their swords drawn. When they saw us, they broke into grins.

"Annabeth!" one of them said. "Good job! Let's get these two to jail."

I stared at him. "The game's not over?"

The Athena camper laughed. "Not yet... but soon. Now that we've captured *you*."

"Dude, come on," Beckendorf protested. "We got sidetracked. There was a dragon, and the whole Ant Hill was attacking us."

"Uh-huh," said another Athena guy, clearly unimpressed. "Annabeth, great job distracting them. Worked out perfectly. You want us to take them from here?"

Annabeth pulled away from me. I thought for sure she was going to give us a free walk back to the border, but she drew her dagger and pointed it at me with a smile.

"Nah," she said. "Silena and I can get this. Come on, prisoners. Move it."

I stared at her, stunned. "You *planned* this? You planned this whole thing just to keep us out of the game?"

"Percy, seriously, how could I have planned it? The dragon, the ants—you think I could've figured all that out ahead of time?"

It didn't seem likely, but this was Annabeth. There was no telling with her. Then she exchanged glances with Silena, and I could tell they were trying not to laugh.

"You—you little—" I started to say, but I couldn't think of a name strong enough to call her.

I protested all the way to the jail, and so did Beckendorf. It was totally unfair to be treated like prisoners after all we'd been through.

But Annabeth just smiled and put us in jail. As she was heading back to the front line, she turned and winked. "See you at the fireworks?"

She didn't even wait for my answer before darting off into the woods.

I looked at Beckendorf. "Did she just... ask me out?"

He shrugged, completely disgusted. "Who knows with girls? Give me a haywire dragon, any day."

So we sat together and waited while the girls won the game.