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I 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 trousers on (which I don't recommend), you'd never know there was anything un-human 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.

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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 dived 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 odour only monsters have, like a skunk that's been living off Mexican food.

Grover trembled behind the wedding dresses. The monster's shadow

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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-storey 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

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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 outwards – 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 favourite 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 waffle **Copyrighted Material** 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 dishcloth. 'Ah, dear, about that . . . I got a message from Chiron last night.'

My heart sank. Chiron was the activities director at Camp Half-Blood. **Copyrighted Material** We would like to 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 it 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 travelling 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 goodbye. I jogged downstairs to catch the Number 7.

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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.

2 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 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 **Copyrighted Material** in fancy 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 two metres tall 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 colour 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 panicked. He swatted Sloan away a little too hard. Sloan flew five metres and got tangled in the little kids' tyre 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 under-

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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 trashcan.

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 **Copyrighted Material** copying 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, DC. She was wearing jeans and a denim jacket over her orange Camp Half-Blood T-shirt. Her blonde 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 weird that way. She'd e-mailed me the picture after spring break, and every once in a while I'd look at it just to remind myself she was real and Camp Half-Blood hadn't just been my imagination.

I wished Annabeth were here. She'd know what to make of my dream. I'd never admit it to her, but she was smarter than me, even if she was annoying sometimes.

I was about to close my notebook when Matt Sloan reached over and ripped the photo out of the rings.

'Hey!' I protested.

Sloan checked out the picture and his eyes got wide. 'No way, Jackson. Who is that? She is *not* your –'

'Give it back!' My ears felt hot.

Sloan handed the photo to his ugly buddies, who snickered and started ripping it up to make spit wads. They were new kids at camp because they were

all wearing those stupid HI! MY NAME IS: tags from the admissions office. They must've had a weird sense of humour, too, because they'd all filled in strange names like: MARROW SUCKER, SKULL EATER and JOE BOB. No human beings had names like that.

'These guys are moving here next year,' Sloan bragged, like that was supposed to scare me. 'I bet they can *pay* the tuition, too, unlike your deadbeat friend.'

'He's *not* a deadbeat.' I had to try really, really hard not to punch Sloan in the face.

'You're such a loser, Jackson. Good thing I'm gonna put you out of your misery next period.'

His huge buddies chewed up my photo. I wanted to pulverize them, but I was under strict orders from Chiron never to take my anger out on regular mortals, no matter how obnoxious they were. I had to save my fighting for monsters.

Still, part of me thought, if Sloan only knew who I really was . . .

The bell rang.

As Tyson and I were leaving class, a girl's 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 or not I'd been imagining things, a crowd of kids rushed 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.

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The gym uniform at Meriwether is sky-blue shorts and tie-dyed T-shirts. Fortunately, we did most of 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 about to leave when Tyson called, 'Percy?'

He hadn't changed 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. I stood guard outside the door while he changed. I felt 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 hard way that if people teased Tyson while he was dressing, he'd get upset and start ripping 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 no teeth and a greasy wave of grey hair. He reminded me of the Oracle at Camp Half-Blood – which was a shrivelled-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 said, 'Coach, can I be captain?'

'Eh?' Coach Nunley looked up from his magazine. 'Yeah,' he mumbled. 'Mm-hmm.'

Sloan grinned and started picking. He made

me the other team's captain, but it didn't matter who I picked, because all the jocks and the popular kids moved over to Sloan's side. So did the big group of visitors.

On my side I had Tyson, Corey Bailer the computer geek, Raj Mandali the calculus whiz, and a half-dozen other kids who always got harassed by Sloan and his gang. Normally I would've been okay with just Tyson – he was worth half a team all by himself – but the 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 balls in the middle of the gym.

'Scared,' Tyson mumbled. 'Smell funny.'

I looked at him. 'What smells funny?' Because I didn't figure he was talking about himself.

'Them.' Tyson pointed at Sloan's new friends. 'Smell funny.'

The visitors were cracking their knuckles, eyeing us like it was slaughter time. I couldn't help wondering where they were from. Someplace where they fed kids raw meat and beat them with sticks.

Sloan blew the coach's whistle and the game began. Sloan's team ran for the centre line. On my side, Raj Mandali yelled something in Urdu, probably 'I have to go potty!' and ran for the exit. Corey Bailer tried to crawl behind the wall mat and hide. The rest of my team did their best to cower in fear and not look like targets.

'Tyson,' I said. 'Let's g—'

A ball slammed into my gut. I sat down hard in the middle of the gym floor. The other team exploded in laughter.

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My eyesight was fuzzy. I felt like I'd just got the Heimlich manoeuvre from a gorilla. I couldn't believe anybody could throw that hard.

Tyson yelled, 'Percy, duck!'

I rolled as another dodgeball whistled past my ear at the speed of sound.

Whoom!

It hit the wall mat, and Corey Bailer yelped.

'Hey!' I yelled at Sloan's team. 'You could kill somebody!'

The visitor named Joe Bob grinned at me evilly. Somehow, he looked a lot bigger now . . . even taller than Tyson. His biceps bulged beneath his T-shirt. 'I hope so, Perseus Jackson! I hope so!'

The way he said my name sent a chill down my back. Nobody called me Perseus except those who knew my true identity. Friends . . . and enemies.

What had Tyson said? *They smell funny.*

Monsters.

All around Matt Sloan, the visitors were growing in size. They were no longer kids. They were two-and-a-half-metre-tall giants with wild eyes, pointy teeth and hairy arms tattooed with snakes and hula women and Valentine hearts.

Matt Sloan dropped his ball. 'Whoa! You're not from Detroit! Who . . .'

The other kids on his team started screaming and backing towards the exit, but the giant named Marrow Sucker threw a ball with deadly accuracy. It streaked past Raj Mandali just as he was about to leave and hit the door, slamming it shut like magic. Raj and some of the other kids banged on the door but they didn't budge.

‘Let them go!’ I yelled at the giants.

The one called Joe Bob growled at me. He had a tattoo on his biceps that said: *JB luvs Babycakes*. ‘And lose our tasty morsels? No, Son of the Sea God. We Laistrygonians aren’t just playing for your death. We want lunch!’

He waved his hand and a new batch of dodgeballs appeared on the centre line – but these balls weren’t made of red rubber. They were bronze, the size of cannon balls, perforated like Wiffle balls with fire bubbling out the holes. They must’ve been searing hot, but the giants picked them up with their bare hands.

‘Coach!’ I yelled.

Nunley looked up sleepily, but if he saw anything abnormal about the dodgeball game, he didn’t let on. That’s the problem with mortals. A magical force called the Mist obscures the true appearance of monsters and gods from their vision, so mortals tend to see only what they can understand. Maybe the coach saw a few eighth graders pounding the younger kids like usual. Maybe the other kids saw Matt Sloan’s thugs getting ready to toss Molotov cocktails around. (It wouldn’t have been the first time.) At any rate, I was pretty sure nobody else realized we were dealing with genuine man-eating bloodthirsty monsters.

‘Yeah. Mm-hmm,’ Coach muttered. ‘Play nice.’

And he went back to his magazine.

The giant named Skull Eater threw his ball. I dived aside as the fiery bronze comet sailed past my shoulder.

‘Corey!’ I screamed.

Tyson pulled him out from behind the exercise mat just as the ball exploded against it, blasting the mat to smoking shreds.

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‘Run!’ I told my teammates. ‘The other exit!’

They ran for the locker room, but with another wave of Joe Bob’s hand, that door also slammed shut.

‘No one leaves unless you’re out!’ Joe Bob roared. ‘And you’re not out until we eat you!’

He launched his own fireball. My teammates scattered as it blasted a crater in the gym floor.

I reached for Riptide, which I always kept in my pocket, but then I realized I was wearing gym shorts. I *had* no pockets. Riptide was tucked in my jeans inside my gym locker. And the locker room door was sealed. I was completely defenceless.

Another fireball came streaking towards me. Tyson pushed me out of the way, but the explosion still blew me head over heels. I found myself sprawled on the gym floor, dazed from smoke, my tie-dyed T-shirt peppered with sizzling holes. Just across the centre line, two hungry giants were glaring down at me.

‘Flesh!’ they bellowed. ‘Hero flesh for lunch!’ They both took aim.

‘Percy needs help!’ Tyson yelled, and he jumped in front of me just as they threw their balls.

‘Tyson!’ I screamed, but it was too late.

Both balls slammed into him . . . but no . . . he’d caught them. Somehow Tyson, who was so clumsy he knocked over lab equipment and broke playground structures on a regular basis, had caught two fiery metal balls speeding towards him at a zillion miles an hour. He sent them hurtling back towards their surprised owners, who screamed, ‘BAAAAD!’ as the bronze spheres exploded against their chests.

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The giants disintegrated in twin columns of flame – a sure sign they were monsters, all right. Monsters don't die. They just dissipate into smoke and dust, which saves heroes a lot of trouble cleaning up after a fight.

'My brothers!' Joe Bob the Cannibal wailed. He flexed his muscles and his *Babycakes* tattoo rippled. 'You will pay for their destruction!'

'Tyson!' I said. 'Look out!'

Another comet hurtled towards us. Tyson just had time to swat it aside. It flew straight over Coach Nunley's head and landed in the stands with a huge KA-BOOM!

Kids were running around screaming, trying to avoid the sizzling craters in the floor. Others were banging on the door, calling for help. Sloan himself stood petrified in the middle of the court, watching in disbelief as balls of death flew around him.

Coach Nunley still wasn't seeing anything. He tapped his hearing aid like the explosions were giving him interference, but he kept his eyes on his magazine.

Surely the whole school could hear the noise. The headmaster, the police, somebody would come help us.

'Victory will be ours!' roared Joe Bob the Cannibal. 'We will feast on your bones!'

I wanted to tell him he was taking the dodgeball game way too seriously, but before I could, he hefted another ball. The other three giants followed his lead.

I knew we were dead. Tyson couldn't deflect all those balls at once. His hands *had* to be seriously burned from blocking the first volley. Without my sword . . .

I had a crazy idea.

I ran towards the gym floor.

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‘Move!’ I told my teammates. ‘Away from the door.’

Explosions behind me. Tyson had batted two of the balls back towards their owners and blasted them to ashes.

That left two giants still standing.

A third ball hurtled straight at me. I forced myself to wait – one Mississippi, two Mississippi – then dived aside as the fiery sphere demolished the locker room door.

Now, I figured that the built-up gas in most boys’ locker rooms was enough to cause an explosion, so I wasn’t surprised when the flaming dodgeball ignited a huge *WHOOOOOOOM!*

The wall blew apart. Locker doors, socks, athletic supports and other various nasty personal belongings rained all over the gym.

I turned just in time to see Tyson punch Skull Eater in the face. The giant crumpled. But the last giant, Joe Bob, had wisely held on to his own ball, waiting for an opportunity. He threw just as Tyson was turning to face him.

‘No!’ I yelled.

The ball caught Tyson square in the chest. He slid the length of the court and slammed into the back wall, which cracked and partially crumbled on top of him, making a hole right onto Church Street. I didn’t see how Tyson could still be alive, but he only looked dazed. The bronze ball was smoking at his feet. Tyson tried to pick it up, but he fell back, stunned, into a pile of cinder blocks.

‘Well!’ Joe Bob gloated. ‘I’m the last one standing! I’ll have enough meat to bring Babycakes a doggy bag!’

He picked up another ball and aimed it at Tyson.

‘Stop!’ I yelled. **Copyrighted Material**

The giant grinned. 'You wish to die first, young hero?'

I had to do something. Riptide had to be around here somewhere.

Then I spotted my jeans in a smoking heap of clothes right by the giant's feet. If I could only get there . . . I knew it was hopeless, but I charged.

The giant laughed. 'My lunch approaches.' He raised his arm to throw. I braced myself to die.

Suddenly the giant's body went rigid. His expression changed from gloating to surprise. Right where his belly button should've been, his T-shirt ripped open and he grew something like a horn – no, not a horn – the glowing tip of a blade.

The ball dropped out of his hand. The monster stared down at the knife that had just run him through from behind.

He muttered, 'Ow,' and burst into a cloud of green flame, which I figured was going to make Babycakes pretty upset.

Standing in the smoke was my friend Annabeth. Her face was grimy and scratched. She had a ragged backpack slung over her shoulder, her baseball cap tucked in her pocket, a bronze knife in her hand, and a wild look in her storm-grey eyes, like she'd just been chased a thousand miles by ghosts.

Matt Sloan, who'd been standing there dumbfounded the whole time, finally came to his senses. He blinked at Annabeth, as if he dimly recognized her from my notebook picture. 'That's the girl . . . That's the girl –'

Annabeth punched him in the nose and knocked him flat. 'And *you*,' she told him, 'lay off my friend.'

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The gym was in flames. Kids were still running around screaming. I heard sirens wailing and a garbled voice over the intercom. Through the glass windows of the exit doors, I could see the headmaster, Mr Bonsai, wrestling with the lock, a crowd of teachers piling up behind him.

‘Annabeth . . .’ I stammered. ‘How did you . . . how long have you . . .’

‘Pretty much all morning.’ She sheathed her bronze knife. ‘I’ve been trying to find a good time to talk to you, but you were never alone.’

‘The shadow I saw this morning – that was –’ My face felt hot. ‘Oh my gods, you were looking in my bedroom window?’

‘There’s no time to explain!’ she snapped, though she looked a little red-faced herself. ‘I just didn’t want to –’

‘There!’ a woman screamed. The doors burst open and the adults came pouring in.

‘Meet me outside,’ Annabeth told me. ‘And him.’ She pointed to Tyson, who was still sitting dazed against the wall. Annabeth gave him a look of distaste that I didn’t quite understand. ‘You’d better bring him.’

‘*What?*’

‘No time!’ she said. ‘Hurry!’

She put on her Yankees baseball cap, which was a magic gift from her mom, and instantly vanished.

That left me standing alone in the middle of the burning gymnasium when the headmaster came charging in with half the faculty and a couple of police officers.

‘Percy Jackson?’ Mr Bonsai said. ‘What . . . how . . .’

Over by the broken wall, Tyson groaned and stood up from the pile of **Copyrighted Material** courts.’