

BETWEEN THE PAGES PRESENTS



THE MASK  
COLLECTOR

CASSIE CLAREWATER

THE MASK COLLECTOR  
A CAMP HALF-BLOOD AUSTIN FAN FICTION  
NOVELLA

CASSIE CLAREWATER

[BETWEEN THE PAGES](#)

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Between the Pages Presents

The Mask Collector: A Camp Half-Blood Austin Novella

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# CHAPTER I

NEVER LET A MINOTAUR SNEEZE ON YOU.

I mean, this is sort of good advice in general. If you're close enough to a minotaur for them to sneeze on you, you're probably about to die a horrible death, so getting drenched in minotaur snot isn't your biggest problem. However, I'm not just a random mortal stumbling upon a minotaur. I'm a demigod training out at Camp Half-Blood Austin. Getting up close and personal with monsters is kind of what I do. I still shouldn't have been close enough to a minotaur to get sneezed on though.

I had gone out on patrol with the rest of my cohort the sixth week of camp. While everyone else was freaking out because our patrol leader Livia couldn't seem to make a decision without consulting one of those cursed Magic 8 balls one of the other patrols had found, I heard a noise behind us in the woods. Now, what I should have done was tell my counselor about the sound. What I shouldn't have done was go investigate the noise on my own.

I backed down the path while my counselor John and his Aide Avery were trying to convince Livia to let us keep patrolling the perimeter of camp. Livia was convinced that it was too dangerous, and the Magic 8 ball kept confirming their worst fears. While the rest of my cohort tried to figure

out how to steal the ball from Livia (without touching it and becoming cursed too), no one noticed me slinking away into the trees.

About ten feet down and just out of sight of the path, I found what looked a bit like a game trail if the trail had been made by something about twenty times bigger than a deer. I took a few steps down and realized I was on the right path. I still couldn't see anything, but again I heard a branch snap like someone had stepped on it.

I gripped my practice sword a little tighter and held it up in a guard position. Then, I started down the path carefully placing each foot so I wouldn't make a sound, just the way our patrol leader Livia had taught us. The game trail curved through the woods, the undergrowth and low branches blocking my view. I pushed past a prickly green shrubby thing. (A Demeter cabin kid like Counselor Jefferson would have totally known what kind of plant it was, but I had no idea.) On the other side was a slight clearing with a minotaur pacing around and blowing his nose on the biggest, grossest, dried snot encrusted, placemat sized handkerchief I'd ever seen.

I froze, holding my breath. I'm not really sure what I had expected. We'd been plagued with Smileys and automatons all summer, and there had been this whole thing with Hera and some new kind of monster called the Stitch. So maybe, I thought I'd discover one of them? Thinking back, I had to have been seven different kinds of stupid to go monster hunting on my own. Any of those monsters, even a friendly-ish Smiley, would have been too dangerous for me by myself. A minotaur was downright life threatening.

So far, I'd been lucky. The thing was so busy blowing his nose that he hadn't noticed me. I planned to keep it that way. I tried to subtly back down the path, never taking my eyes off the monster. That meant I didn't see the root stretching across the rocks behind me. I sprawled back onto my butt with the sort of crash that seemed to echo for miles. I managed to keep hold

of my sword—our sword master, Master Da'Mon would have been proud—but it was only a practice sword of plastic and foam. No way was it going to be much use against a minotaur. Especially since that minotaur hadn't missed my noisy meeting with the ground and was now charging straight for me.

I tried to scramble back up in time to at least attempt to beat the monster back, but my feet skidded on the loose stones of the path. It was like my shoes had been coated in ice. I couldn't find traction anywhere. The best I could do was sort of scramble backwards.

The minotaur was almost on me when he suddenly pulled up short. One minute he was a charging bull man, the next he was standing about two feet away doing some sort of weird snorting thing.

I took advantage of the monster's distraction to get up on my feet at last. That meant, that when he sneezed, I was at the perfect level to get a face full of minotaur snot. There was enough snot on my face and in my hair to gross me out for the rest of my life.

That sneeze probably saved me. It surprised the minotaur just long enough for me to follow rule number four of camp: Run. I tore down that path, and for some reason the minotaur didn't chase me. I crashed through the underbrush, smashed into branches, and made so much racket, that it wasn't a huge shock that when I broke back onto the main trail, the rest of my cohort was there armed and ready.

"Cassie, what happened to you?" Avery asked, but I didn't answer.

"Minotaur," I managed to gasp out in a sort of scream. "Minotaur!"

Jefferson and Livia didn't wait for more. With their swords out (real Celestial Bronze sword for Jefferson and Imperial Gold for Livia, not the practice swords campers carry), they ran down the game trail I'd just left. Avery on the other hand got all of us campers running back to camp. It didn't take a lot of persuading. Avery yelled, "Run," and we all did.

Jefferson and Livia got back to the safety of the dining hall almost as quickly as we did. They hadn't found any sign of the minotaur although no one thought I had made it up since I'd reappeared covered in chunky green slime. That was when the lectures started. Everyone, and I mean everyone, was furious that I'd left the cohort to go exploring on my own. Besides being colossally stupid and dangerous, it was also against everything camp stood for. We worked in teams. We didn't go after glory alone. I knew all that, so I'm still not sure what possessed me to go after a potential monster by myself.

I got a stern lecture by Jefferson, banned from patrols for the rest of the summer by Livia, and worst of all kindly reminded by Topher of the ways of camp and the reasons we have the rules we do. Topher is a son of Apollo and Aphrodite, and one of the minor gods that actually runs our camp since Mr. D can't really be bothered and these days spends most of his time going back and forth between Mt. Olympus and the Long Island branch.

Topher as a son of Apollo is also a healer, so he sat me down with the disinfectant from a med kit to help me clean off the minotaur snot. Topher didn't yell at me once. He never raised his voice, he didn't threaten to expel me from camp (although he could have), he didn't do anything except talk to me in his calm, quiet way. But the disappointment practically radiated off him, and I squirmed in my chair from my embarrassment and guilt. I thought of all the punishments I'd gotten, Topher's look of concerned regret over my choices had to be the worst.

At least, I thought that until I woke up the next morning covered in itchy, green spots.



## CHAPTER 2

WHEN NEITHER OF MY MORTAL PARENTS COULD SEE THE SPOTS, I KNEW I was in trouble. Normal diseases are bad enough, but mystical ones are on a whole other level. This one turned out to be like a combination of the flu and the worst case of chickenpox ever. I ran fevers. I felt too tired to move. I itched so much I spent hours in oatmeal baths and dabbing little dots of calamine lotion all over my body.

It got so bad that Topher had to come out from camp to calm my parents down. They couldn't see the spots through the Mist, but they could see me scratching all the time and 103° fevers are scary no matter what causes them. Topher gave me a drop of ambrosia, which helped some, but since this wasn't an injury, I just had to wait for my immune system to kick the minotaur's germs all on its own.

I ended up missing the whole rest of the summer. Was I there when Aphrodite got kidnapped by automatons and had to be saved by campers working with a united Hephaestus and Ares? No. I was home in bed. Did I get to help find the missing priests? No. I was going through interviews I'd done for that camp history I'm writing up for Topher. And when we finally relit Hestia's fire, bringing back the gods and expelling Rictus's automatons once and for all, I was binging *Phineas and Ferb* for the ten thousandth time because no cartoon is better when you're sick.

I could not wait to be out of the house. As soon as the scabs the green spots had turned into fell off and my fever had dropped back to normal, I was back at the park. Of course, the place was pretty deserted. There were some counselors around picking up random swords and shields. Jefferson came over and gave me a welcome back hug and told me the cohort hadn't been the same without me. I ran into Mattie, a Dionysus cabin kid, on her way to the kitchen.

"What are you doing here?" I asked her before realizing how rude I sounded.

She grinned. "Visiting Mr. D while he's in Austin." She looked around to make sure no one was listening before dropping her voice down so I had to lean into hear her. "Mom's making him hangout with me once a week. 'Forcing him to exercise his parental rights,' she calls it. Mr. D is going to teach me how to summon soda."

"I'll teach you anything, brat, if it gets that woman off my back." Mr. D poked his head out of the kitchen and glared at us. "What are you looking at?" he said to me. "Camp ended last week. Shouldn't you be home or at school or doing hard time for the crime of existing?"

"I'm here to see Topher," I said. I held up my folder full of notes for the history. "I'm supposed to interview him again about some of the stuff that happened here four and five years ago."

"A bunch of stupid twerps did a bunch of even stupider things. There. I've saved you a whole day of Topher's blabbing. Thank me and go home."

"Thank you, Mr. D," Topher said from behind me. "As always, your help is invaluable." He somehow managed to sound both sarcastic and sincere at the same time. Mr. D looked flattered and kind of put out like he couldn't tell if Topher was serious or not. Topher finished walking up to us and sort of motioned at the side door of the dining hall with his head. I took the hint and took off without saying bye although I gave Mattie a sort of half wave. She grinned again and wiggled a few fingers back.

Topher followed me over to a table he and Isaiah had set up. Isaiah, our camp director, was working on a laptop on something that had to be really important. Normally, Isaiah is all smiles and friendly jokes, but he barely nodded when I sat down, and his expression never stopped being serious the entire time I was there.

It bothered me. The minor God of Sharpies, Sass, and Paperwork shouldn't be so serious. It didn't work for him. So, as soon as Topher finally finished telling me about the year we beat Lycaon (something I already knew since that had been my first year at camp), I turned to Isaiah and just asked him what was wrong.

Isaiah smiled at my bluntness. "Nothing." Then he sort of sighed. "Nothing we can do anything about."

"He's worried about Rictus," Topher said. "The guy has been plaguing us all year, stealing things, sending curses after us, doing everything he can to disrupt camp. But now, it's like he's disappeared."

"I've been networking with all the demigods in Austin. Our former campers, our current campers, no one's seen him anywhere." Isaiah sat back and crossed his arms and glared at the computer like he blamed it for allowing Rictus to get away.

"There's got to be something we can do."

Both gods shook their heads at me.

"Minor gods." Topher pointed at both himself and Isaiah. "You know Olympus's rules on that."

"No interference," Isaiah reminded me, in case I'd forgotten.

I suddenly got an idea. A crazy, brilliant, longshot sort of idea. I started to smile, and my smile must have been the evil genius kind because both Topher and Isaiah started to look worried.

"You can't interfere, but I'm not a god. I totally can."

"Cassie ..." Isaiah started.

“What?” I asked. “It’s perfect. I had to miss all those quests and monsters while I was sick, but finding Rictus for you? I can totally do that.”

“Cassie,” Isaiah said again. “You’re just getting over a bad case of Chimera Pox. I’m not sure right now is the best time for us to be sending you on a quest.”

“And Rictus might not be a monster, but did you learn nothing about going after bad guys by yourself?” Topher asked.

I fiddled with my pencil for a second. Topher had a point. Isaiah probably had one too. I wasn’t exactly in peak physical shape, and although Rictus was human (we thought), he would still be dangerous. And at Camp Half-Blood Austin, we didn’t go it alone. We were a team and a family.

At that moment, Mr. D said something really sarcastic from the kitchen. It was like his voice kicked my brain into gear.

“Mattie,” I said. “Mattie can go with me on a quest. She’s been on one before, right? She knows all about them.”

Topher looked thoughtful. He sort of stared out the window behind me. “Mattie would be a good choice. She showed a fair amount of common sense when we sent her after that cup of coffee for me.”

Isaiah kind of snorted like he was trying not to laugh, but he didn’t disagree. He also looked more cheerful than I’d seen him all day.

“But, I think maybe someone older might be a good idea.” Topher stood and walked over to the door.

“An adult?” I said in absolute horror. I tried to imagine still being in charge of this quest if Master Thomas or Livia or worst of all Topher himself came along. “I’m thirteen now. I’m more than old enough to run a quest on my own.”

Topher turned back, a worried look on his face. “Thirteen? When did that happen? I could have sworn you were still eleven or maybe twelve.”

“I’m not that small for my age,” I grumbled, but I knew what Topher actually meant. For years now, I’ve been the only unclaimed camper at

Camp Half-Blood Austin. Everyone else knows who their godly parent is, but not me. For the last four years, it's been annoying but not that big of a deal. The gods aren't exactly the best at keeping up with the affairs of mortals, and some of them just flat out forget to check in every decade or so. But these days all of the Greek Gods had promised to claim their kids by the time we turned thirteen. Still, I remained unclaimed.

Topher and Isaiah shared a look I didn't know how to read. Isaiah then shrugged, and Topher shook his head at him. Topher looked back over at me. "It still changes nothing," he said. "You're still as much a part of Camp Half-Blood Austin as anyone here."

Now it was my turn to shrug. It was an old discussion we'd had at the beginning of the summer, and I didn't want to have that talk again. It might not matter to Topher who my godly parent was, but it mattered to me. And since I'd been adopted by my mortal parents out of foster care when I was eight months old, they had no clue who my godly parent could be either. And there was no biological parent to ask. I'd been left on the steps of a fire house days, maybe hours, after my birth. I really was a mystery in every sense. It's an uncomfortable thing to be.

But I didn't need to be claimed to go on a quest, and Topher knew it. He sort of nodded at me like he knew where my thoughts had gone, and then he called Jefferson over.

I frowned but didn't argue with Topher's choice. Like all the counselors, Jefferson was an adult, but he was only like nineteen or twenty, so not too old. Also, I perked up when I realized that he'd have a car. It would have been very awkward to ask Mom to drive Mattie and me all over town searching for a dude obsessed with talking monsters into attacking camp. Mom (and Dad) were very supportive of my demigod side, but they just didn't understand stuff like quests.

Jefferson agreed to supervise us. (The term he used was "babysit," but I bit my tongue and didn't say anything that might jeopardize my brand new,

very important quest.) Mattie was more than excited. She promised Mr. D to tell her mom that he'd been a very attentive parent and all but bounced over to join us.

Isaiah turned his laptop around so that we could see the screen. There were a bunch of blue dots on the map. "These are all the places Rictus has been this past year," he told us. He pointed to a red dot. "And this is an old bunker that the League of Machines and Monsters used to use back when they were still at war with us." The bunker sat in the park on Onion Creek not too far from the big road outside the park gates. "A few hours ago, Cates reported that one of his alarms had gone off at this bunker. The footage from the one creepy doll cam that managed to transmit out of the bunker isn't clear, but we're thinking it might have been Rictus or at least one of his minions trying to find more League tech for them to steal and repurpose. It's our only lead on Rictus." Isaiah looked over at Topher for a moment.

Topher took a sip from his ever present cup of coffee. "Right. We want you to go to the bunker and see if you can figure out what Rictus is up to. It's not a long quest," he said before I could complain, "but that doesn't make it any less important. We need information, and we need it now. Learning Rictus's plan would be a huge deal for us. We've been running around with no clue for too long."

I swallowed, realizing that we'd taken on a lot more than the usual sort of quests to flush monsters out of the woods around camp.

"You got it, boss," I said, imitating Isaiah.

Everyone smiled, and then Mr D yelled from the kitchen, "If you twerps are finally done getting briefed, will you get going already? I have things to do, and I want a twerp free afternoon to do it in."

Topher started to laugh, and Mattie and I scurried out of the dining hall with Counselor Jefferson close on our heels.

## CHAPTER 3

BY THE TIME WE'D HIKE ALL THE WAY OVER TO THE BUNKER, I WAS beginning to wonder if I was strong enough to go out on a major quest after all. It didn't help that we'd been given real, honest to goodness swords instead of our usual foam ones. Celestial Bronze is heavy! Also, Mattie and I had insisted that we carry some of the camp's shields too. Jefferson had shook his head at us and told us shields weren't necessary, but with a shrug he'd let us pick some out from the armory. Mattie and I were super excited. Normally, only the counselors and aides got real swords or got to carry shields on quest. Mattie and I felt we looked very grown up with our gear.

We felt a lot less grown up as we panted and sweated our way around the last curve in the trail before the bunker. To mortals, the place looked like another sheer cliff of granite overlooking Onion Creek. We could see through the Mist to the metal doors embedded into the cliff's side. Normally, those doors would have presented an almost impenetrable barrier between us and whatever League secrets sat inside. The League of Machines and Monsters had once been very old enemies of Camp Half-Blood Austin. Run by a group of disillusioned demigods, the group had been determined to destroy Camp and turn us against our godly parents. They didn't win, and some, like Cates, eventually came over to our side and now help us. I was on a mega quest just this summer, and our cohort was in

some serious trouble when Cates seemed to pop out of nowhere and save the day.

But when they were still our enemies, the original League had made some seriously scary stuff. No one was happy when Mr. Rictus stole some of that tech and started using it against us again. Even though it was August in Austin, so hotter than a pre-heated oven, I shivered a little from nerves. I did not even want to imagine the kind of chaos Rictus could unleash if he'd gotten ahold of even more League tech.

We approached single file with Jefferson in the lead. The doors should have been sealed shut against monsters and mortals alike, but the left hand one had been cracked open about an inch. Jefferson drew his sword and motioned at us to do the same. Mattie and I each pulled ours out into a guard position, and we hefted our shields off our backs and onto our left arms. Slowly we inched closer to the door, but nothing burst out to attack us. With a silent nod, Jefferson flung the door open. Mattie and I braced ourselves for an attack, but nothing happened. The heavy door swung around a little bit for a moment like it was trying to decide if it would swing shut, but it settled into place leaving a gaping black hole in the side of the cliff.

Jefferson gave me a questioning look, and I nodded. My arm holding up my shield shook the tiniest bit, but I pretended to myself that it was just because the shield was heavy. I took a deep breath, and since it was my quest, I took the first step through the door.

I had been expecting to find a pitch-dark room. I had assumed that walking into the bunker would be like walking into a cave. Instead, the hallway we stepped into was lit by some sort of orange emergency lighting. My eyes still needed to adjust after the bright sunlight outside, but I wasn't blind. I could scope out the room for any monster attacks. Fortunately, we were safe.



Mattie and Jefferson followed me through the concrete halls. Metal doors lined each wall at different points, and we stopped to look in each one. We didn't find any monsters. We didn't find much of anything. The place had been stripped of anything of value. Chairs were overturned, and cabinets that might have once held papers or experiments now held a ton of dust. There were empty glass cases and empty metal ones. There was even a room holding cages for monsters, but we were happy to see those were empty too. Cobwebs dangled from the ceiling, and the emergency lighting cast weird shadows that turned out to be ... shadows. If Rictus had been here, it didn't seem like there was anything left for him to steal.

We were pretty deep into the bunker before we saw our first living thing. Well, "living" probably wasn't the right word. There was a small skittering noise in a corner. While Jefferson stood guard in the doorway, Mattie and I went over to investigate. At first we didn't see anything. We looked down and all around the floor, but there was nothing there. Still, a sort of cross between a whirring and a chittering noise finally got Mattie to look up. Above us in the corner moved a small clockwork bug. Made of some sort of bronze-colored metal with too many legs, the bug kept aiming a small black dot at each of us. Mattie and I ducked and raised our shields in case the mechanical menace was about to shoot us.

"Jefferson!" we both yelled.

Jefferson came hurrying over and looked up at where we pointed. He frowned and lowered his sword. "A talos bug," he said almost to himself.

"A what?" Mattie asked.

I came out from under my shield since Jefferson didn't seem scared. He seemed more annoyed than anything.

"A talos bug," Jefferson repeated. He frowned and pulled at the end of his orange camp shirt with his free hand. "They're like an electronic bug you'd find in a spy movie only powered by godly animus. They record video and audio, that sort of thing. The League used to use them to spy on

us when I was a kid, but I thought almost all of them had been destroyed like a decade ago. They were developed by Kedalion, and that dude's now working for Rictus, so this is probably one of their little spy cams." His frown got even bigger.

"Kill it," Mattie yelled, still ducking under her shield. "Kill it before it turns out to be the upgraded killer kind of super bug."

"You're the tallest," I said to Jefferson. "Just slap it with your sword."

"I don't know." Jefferson looked at the bug and then at me. "Topher might want to see this."

"Demigods," growled a voice from the doorway, "do not destroy my work."

## CHAPTER 4

WE WHIRLED AROUND TO FIND A GIANT BLOCKING THE EXIT. CATES stood with his arms crossed, frowning down at us. Cates is like an eighty-five foot giant. Okay, so that might be a huge exaggeration. But he is really tall and as intimidating as an eighty-five foot giant. (Not that I've met any actual giants. Mercifully.)

Mattie let out a little gurgled yelp, and I'm embarrassed to say that at first I ducked down behind my shield again. When I realized that we were not under attack from some kind of monster, I tried to lower it, hoping no one had noticed.

Everyone had totally noticed.

"Jefferson." Cates uncrossed his arms and stepped into the room. He glanced around and wrinkled his forehead. "Where are the rest?"

"There are more bugs?" Mattie squeaked.

"No, your demigods. Where is rest of your cabin?"

Jefferson had lowered his sword and seemed relieved to see Cates. I know I felt better having him there. He was a fierce fighter, and I was glad I'd only known Cates when he was on our side.

Jefferson gave a sort of wave at Mattie and me with his sword. "This is all of them. Summer's over, Cates, remember? Mattie and Cassie are the only ones around to help on this quest."

“Mattie and Cassie.” Cates tried out our names like they were a new kind of ice cream he wasn’t sure he liked. I couldn’t decide if I was proud or terrified that Cates now knew my name. “You okay?”

“Uh,” I said. I know. I’m good under pressure. Not that Mattie did any better. She just stood and stared.

Cates looked up at the bug still clicking away in the corner of the ceiling. “That is one of mine. I ... adapted ... some of my old tech when it no longer served its original purpose.”

Which was stalking campers, I wanted to say, but I kept my big mouth shut. No point in bringing up the past. Topher always says that there’s no one that can’t be redeemed. If he trusted Cates now, so would I.

Cates reached up towards the bug (of course he could reach it), and the little metal thing scurried down his fingers and around his arm. It finally settled on Cates’s shoulder like some sort of pirate captain’s parrot. It even tilted its little automaton head at us. I resisted the urge to shiver.

Cates led us out of the room and down to a larger, better lit space. Actual lights had been turned on here and there was a laptop like Isaiah’s next to some spread out papers on an old metal table.

“I’ve been reviewing the footage from my remaining working dolls,” Cates said.

Mattie and I looked at each other. “Dolls?” Mattie mouthed at me.

“Don’t ask,” said Jefferson.

Cates clicked on a window of his laptop. It showed a tall man in a black and white striped suit rummaging through the empty cabinets of the bunker. When the man turned and the camera caught his front, his white ventilator seemed to glow orange in the emergency lighting. It was definitely Mr. Rictus, and it was Rictus himself, not a minion. When he’d lost the mask last year that had let him control Smileys, he’d lost a large part of his army.

“I wasn’t too concerned,” Cates said. “This bunker was emptied long ago.” He clicked on another video. “Or so I thought.” Cates seemed to be

getting angrier the more he looked at the screen. In this video, Rictus pressed something in his left hand that made a small part of the wall explode out. When the dust had cleared enough for the doll cam, Rictus had reached into a small hole in the wall. He pulled out some kind of object wrapped in cloth like linen. The object wasn't large, maybe about twice the size of Rictus's fist. He pulled down one side of the cloth revealing a bronze machine of some kind.

Cates glowered. "Rictus has stolen the Aeoliplie of Daedalus." He slammed one of his fists down on the metal table. Mattie and I both jumped though we tried to pretend we hadn't. "I had no idea Taylin had found it and hidden it here," Cates said. "He never told me."

"The ae- ... the ae-" I couldn't figure out how to say it.

"The Aeoliplie," Cates repeated. "It's the version of the steam engine invented in ancient times by our Greek forebearers."

"The ancient Greeks," Jefferson rolled his eyes and translated for us.

"However, the one created by Daedalus does not run on heated water like the mortal version. Daedalus created an engine powered by the Mist."

Jefferson whistled, and Mattie gave Cates a wide-eyed stare. "Kind of like the one Leo had for Festus, right?"

"Exactly right," Cates replied.

Cates turned back to the video, and we watched as Rictus finished examining the small engine and stuffed it into a pocket of his suit jacket. When he did, something fluttered out of his pocket to the floor.

"Wait!" I pointed to what looked like a folded piece of paper now lying on the ground of the video. "What's that there?"

Cates motioned to a folded piece of paper on the table. "I went and collected the scrap earlier. It is nothing more than a useless hand drawn map of Austin." He switched camera feeds and glared at the Rictus on the screen leaving the bunker. "I must go after the villain. I cannot allow him to keep a

relic of such power. It belongs to the League, and with the League it must stay.”

“We’ll help,” Mattie offered.

“Absolutely not,” Jefferson said while Cates shook his head.

“I was the one charged with securing the secrets of the League. This failure is mine alone,” Cates said. He stood, towering above us in a majestic sort of way. “I will find the Aeoliplie and restore it to Topher myself.”

“But Topher says we need to work together,” Mattie said. She looked at me, but I shrugged.

“I’m not sure that applies to adult demigods. They kind of do stuff on their own all the time,” I said. “Look at Heracles.”

“And look at Odysseus and his crew or Jason and his Argonauts,” Mattie fired back. “Heroes don’t always have to go it alone.”

Cates stared until Mattie glanced away, clearly uncomfortable. “This is something I must do on my own.” He abruptly turned to Jefferson. “Tell Topher I will be in contact when I have completed my quest.” He scooped up his laptop and stalked out the door before Mattie could protest again.

“That was quite the exit,” I said. I glanced at the table. “But he forgot something.” I reached over and grabbed the folded piece of paper. I opened it and spread it out on the table. Sure enough, it was a hand drawn map of Austin. It was weird though. If stuff hadn’t been labeled, I would have had no idea what the squiggles were supposed to be. There was some kind of tornado looking thing over a dot labeled Hamilton Pool for example. I couldn’t even tell what the weird stick figure thing next to the Cathedral of Junk might be. The label for Hamilton Pool though was underlined like maybe that location was more important than the rest.

“I think Cates left behind a pretty important clue.” I pointed at the underlined Hamilton Pool. “We should go check this place out for him. And Topher,” I added.

Jefferson looked skeptical. “Topher told you to find out what Rictus is up to. Rictus was stealing the Aeoliplie of Daedalus. Quest closed.”

Mattie looked disappointed, but I wasn’t giving up, not yet. “No, Topher specifically said he wanted to know Rictus’s plan. We still have no idea what he’s up to, only that he’s still stealing stuff. And we can’t figure out his plan without finding Rictus.” I pointed to the map. “This is our best way to possibly find him.”

Mattie nodded. “It only makes sense to check out the locations on the map.”

Jefferson still looked doubtful. “There’s more than a dozen spots marked. I’m not chauffeuring you all over town today.”

“Fair,” I said. “Just take us to Hamilton Pool. It’s got to be underlined for a reason. Or maybe the Cathedral of Junk.” I pointed to that label on the map. “It’s written in blue ink instead of black like the rest of the map, almost like it was added later. Maybe that makes it important.”

Jefferson gave a little shudder. “Definitely not the Cathedral of Junk. That place gives me the creeps.” He wrinkled his nose up and then stared at Mattie and me for a long moment. We held our breaths, hoping he’d agree to go with us. “Fine,” he said. “I’ll take you to Hamilton Pool. Maybe we can go swimming or something.”

Mattie and I both cheered, and Jefferson gave us a reluctant smile. “But don’t get your hopes up or anything. I doubt we’re going to find Rictus or anything having to do with him there.” He grabbed the map off the table and stuffed it in the pocket of his cargo shorts with another shake of his head. “It’s probably Rictus’s bucket list of stuff to do while he’s in town.”

Mattie rolled her eyes, but I couldn’t get the grin off my face. I knew that the map was going to be important. I was on a quest after all. We were so going to find Rictus, learn his plan, and save camp, all by ourselves. Nothing was going to get in our way.

## CHAPTER 5

THERE WAS A TON OF TRAFFIC IN OUR WAY.

“It’s a sign,” Jefferson kept saying every time we came to a complete halt for no apparent reason. Mattie, sitting in the back, ignored him and kept reading her book, but I had chosen to ride shotgun up in the front.

“Uh huh,” I said each time.

“It’s a sign from the gods. They don’t want us at Hamilton Pool.”

“Jefferson, the gods don’t interfere,” I pointed out. “We literally just had this conversation with Topher and Isaiah this morning.”

Jefferson snorted and slammed on the brakes before he rear-ended the car in front of us. “The gods can’t be *seen* interfering. We all know they interfere all the time.”

“Just look at the Trojan War,” called Mattie from the back.

“That’s not exactly a modern example.” I went back to staring at the Texas Hill Country and ignoring Jefferson as he listed every time Topher or Isaiah or Mr. D had in fact interfered on our behalf.

We finally pulled into the parking lot for Hamilton Pool. I’d never been so glad to get somewhere in my life. Jefferson’s snarky pessimism had started to rub off on me, so when the parking lot only had a few cars in it, I started to see it as some kind of sign too.



Fortunately, before I could get too paranoid, Mattie pointed out an actual sign across the gate to the trail to the pool.

*Hamilton Pool is currently closed.*

*Due to the unusual freezing weather of 2021, the rocks around Hamilton Pool have become unstable. With constant rocks dropping into the water, it is not currently safe to swim. Please be patient while we work to stabilize the situation. We hope to have the swimming hole open as soon as possible.*

We stared blankly at each other and the padlocked gate for a minute, and then Jefferson shrugged. “Well, we tried.” He glared at his car. “I *love* traffic!”

“Are you kidding me?” I pointed at the three foot gate. It wasn’t exactly the gates of Troy blocking our path. “We still have to investigate. What if this is Rictus’s work?”

Jefferson fidgeted for a moment before sighing. “I’m pretty sure it’s mine.” When both of us looked confused, he added, “The 2021 winter storm. I’m pretty sure that was my fault.”

Mattie and I were both shocked, but no matter how much we pestered him, Jefferson refused to tell us more. I think he was feeling guilty about the storm and not really paying attention to us because we were able to convince Jefferson to let us check out the pool after all. Mattie and I scrambled over the gate, and Jefferson handed us our swords. We didn’t wait for him to clamber over. Instead, we started down the trail. He was a little annoyed with us when he caught up, but at that point we could see into Hamilton Pool and whatever he’d planned to say died away unspoken.

The pool itself looked like a giant caved-in sinkhole. The ground above had given way long ago and crumbled inward to reveal the cavern below. It

was beautiful and looked like it belonged on another planet, not here. A stream from the land up top dropped down into the pool below in a modest waterfall that splashed down near an outcropping of rocks. There were a few mortal trespassers hanging around the edge of the pool, but no one was in the water. That was probably a good thing since every few minutes a rock fell from the overhanging cliff into the pool. Some of the rocks were small pebbles, but we watched a big boulder crash down into the pool too. As we got closer, we realized that the mist hovering above the pool wasn't caused by all the rocks splashing down. It was actually Mist hiding something from the mortals.

We climbed through some of the underbrush, both to avoid the mortals and to get a better look into the pool. Ducking down so the mortals wouldn't see us, we saw past the Mist that had been hiding Rictus's device from the mortals.

A giant circular clockwork mouth complete with razor sharp teeth had been placed in the pool. Its bronze gears clicked in a precise manner and then the mouth of the monster machine irised open. A whirlpool formed, sucking the water into the clockwork creature's mouth. But the thing didn't just gobble the water of the pool and everything in it. Rocks from the overhanging cliff were vacuumed into the whirlpool that had formed.

I glanced over at Jefferson. "I don't think you're to blame for the falling rocks."

Jefferson's face had lost some of its color. "No." He tried to grin at me, but he looked a little sick. "No. I didn't build a mechanical Charybdis to mess with mortals. No." He shook his head like he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"Charybdis," Mattie sort of sighed out. "Of course. That makes sense."

"How?" I turned to Mattie. "How does recreating a mini version of a terrifying sea monster in the middle of Hamilton Pool make any sense?"

“Oh, well, that doesn’t make any sense at all. I have no idea what Rictus is up to.” Mattie pointed at the machine. “But that’s definitely a replica of Charybdis. It’s exactly how Homer describes it in *The Odyssey*.”

“Awesome.”

“We don’t know that Rictus put it there,” Jefferson started. He held up a hand to stop the protests I’d been making. “But since Rictus has shown he has a thing for automatons, it’s a reasonable assumption.”

“But why?” Mattie asked. “What’s the point? Rictus hasn’t shown much interest in messing with mortals, just messing with Camp Half-Blood Austin. Why put this here?”

“Only one way to find out.” I sat my sword down and started taking off my shoes. “We go down there and see.”

## CHAPTER 6

MATTIE AND JEFFERSON DID NOT LIKE MY IDEA. ACTUALLY, THAT'S THE understatement of understatements. They hated it with the sort of burning passion that usually only monsters inspired. Jefferson rather sensibly didn't want to jump into a pool of water that contained a metal monster made up of mostly teeth. Mattie couldn't swim at all, so she was going to be stuck on the shore no matter what. No one was going to let me go in the water by myself.

"I get it," I said when they had stopped (loudly) telling me their problems with my plan. I'd stripped my socks off and stuck them in my shoes. I hated walking barefoot even at home, and the rocks cutting into my feet irritated me. It made me more snappish than normal. "Jumping into water with a monster is a stupid idea, but it's not like we can just leave it there to eat mortals." I pointed down at the sunbathers lying about on the beach. "Sure, no one's getting in the water right now, but how long do you think that's going to last? How long before someone gets sucked into the whirlpool and drowns?" I pointed at a pair of kids that were sort of splashing at the very edge. "We can't let those kids be the first."

Jefferson and Mattie sort of shut up at that. "She kind of has a point," Mattie said to Jefferson. "This might not be the quest Topher intended, but he'd never let us leave something dangerous like this."

Jefferson nodded, and his look turned calculating. He sized up the mortals down on the beach. “Yeah, but those adults are never going to let us go in there, not with falling rocks. We need a distraction.”

Mattie sighed. “Then I guess it’s a good thing you’ve got a Dionysus cabin kid with you. My siblings haven’t been starting spontaneous dance parties every day for nothing.” She rubbed her hands together like a bad guy in a low budget movie. Her grin turned a little wicked too. “And Mr. D did just teach me to summon soda this morning.”

“You’re going to magic up some soda?” I was impressed.

Mattie shook her head, but she wasn’t really paying attention to me. “It’s more turning water into pop,” she said. “What?” she asked when I giggled. “Dad is totally East Coast. It’s what he calls it.” She handed Jefferson her sword and started down the path. “Give me five minutes to set up.”

Normally, Mattie doesn’t really fit in with the other Dionysus cabin kids. She’s not real outgoing with strangers, and she spends a lot of time on her own reading. She gets mistaken for Athena cabin a lot, actually. But today, she was one hundred percent her dad’s daughter.

Jefferson and I followed her down the path and got as close to the pool as we dared. While we waited to wade in, Mattie went up to some kid with speakers and talked them into blasting electronic dance music. At first some of the adults looked annoyed, but then she told them to look in their water bottles. Everyone was amazed to find their favorite sodas instead of boring water. Within minutes, most the people were up dancing, the few that weren’t were talking to one another, and absolutely no one was looking at the water.

While we waited, I tried really hard to control the water like a Poseidon cabin kid. Sure, Poseidon had never claimed me, but if I was going to develop a godly superpower, now seemed a good time. Nothing happened.

The water remained still and calm. Up on the beach, Mattie ramped the party up another level by starting a limbo contest.

Jefferson and I looked at each other, and Jefferson swung his sword around a couple of times to loosen his wrist. Then we both waded into the water.

Hamilton Pool is roughly a circle with the beach sticking into it at one end. It sort of makes the water look a bit like a pie with a piece missing. The fake Charybdis sat in the center of the circle, which meant we didn't have to swim out too far once we left the beach. This was a good thing because it's really hard to swim while holding a sword. Jefferson actually had two—his in his hand, and Mattie's strapped to his back. I'm surprised he was able to swim at all.

Hamilton Pool is nearly twenty-five feet deep, but luckily for us, the machine was only about six feet under the surface. That was probably why it was powerful enough to suck rocks down off the overhanging cliff. The clockwork mechanism was clicking away, but the mouth remained shut. I dove down through the water with Jefferson right behind me. We circled the monster, and Jefferson poked at it with his sword, but nothing happened. We came up for air, and without speaking dove back down. It occurred to me that while we might not be able to destroy the machine, we might be able to keep it from working. I jammed my sword between a pair of gears. John saw what I was doing and jammed his and Mattie's between two other pairs. We swam back up to the surface to get another breath and see what would happen.

Our swords were made of Celestial Bronze, but it kind of looked like mechanical Charybdis was too. The gears strained, but they couldn't break our swords. It also didn't stop working. We must not have shut down the key gears.

The clicking noises increased, and the mouth began to crank open. Jefferson and I raced for the shore, but to our surprise the whirlpool didn't

start. The surface of the water remained calm. Jefferson agreed to check it out with me, so we swam back over. The mouth was straining, but it had gotten stuck less than halfway open.

“Jamming the gears does work,” I yelled at Jefferson. “We just need to jam them more.”

Jefferson considered, and then he sort of scooped up some of the water and examined it, even while he was treading water. I can’t tread water without moving my arms, so I was deeply impressed. He murmured at the water for a second, and it was like the water in his hands started to faintly glow green. When he stopped talking, his hands were full of small aquatic plants.

“The algae have agreed to evolve,” he told me. “They’re also willing to help choke the gears until the machine breaks. They don’t approve of the new intruder in their midst.” He shook his head, sending little droplets of water flying from his hair. “They don’t like the machine messing with their ecosystem. Can’t say I blame them.” He gently lowered the plants into the water where they began to sink. “I’ll need to get closer to the machine to help the algae evolve in the right places.”

I’d been watching the machine straining against our swords. Mine seemed to be wiggling loose, and the mouth seemed to be opening just a little wider. “We need to hurry.”

On the beach, Mattie had been giving us worried glances, but a man started turning our direction. “Who loves Karaoke?” Mattie yelled. She started belting Katy Perry’s *Fireworks* along with the music on the radio. Jefferson groaned, but the man turned back to the party. I still had the bad suspicion he’d noticed us swimming out under the overhang though.

Jefferson dove down, and I followed him to the device. I tried wedging my sword in even further, but the gears fought me. I swam back a little bit and tried to focus. Around me the water glowed green again as Jefferson used the powers he’d inherited from his mom Demeter to encourage the

plants to grow. They were growing too, only not quite fast enough. The mouth had clicked open a bit more, and a weak but noticeable whirlpool had begun to form.

That was when something weird happened (as if a clockwork Charybdis getting gummed up with evolving algae wasn't weird enough). I reached out my right arm towards Jefferson and his plants and wished he could go faster. To my surprise, it was kind of like he did. It was like I was watching a movie and had increased the speed by a hundred and fifty percent. Unfortunately, the gears on Charybdis seemed to speed up to. That annoyed me, so I pointed my left arm at the gears, and told them to slow down. They did. I was so shocked, I dropped my arms and almost gasped which would have been a pretty stupid thing to do underwater.

With my focus broken, everything went back to normal. Trying to convince myself I hadn't imagined it, I extended both of my arms again. This time I had to do a weird balancing act in my mind where I told Jefferson and the plants to go fast while willing the gears to go slow. It was surreal to watch. Jefferson swam around at double speed while the gears clicked by in super slow mo. I was only able to keep it up for a few seconds before I felt completely drained and also needed to breathe. I dropped my arms and kicked for the surface.

Jefferson came up for air pretty much the same second I did. He looked satisfied but as tired as I felt. All he said to me was, "Look."

Down beneath us, the clockwork monster strained to open its mouth, but the algae-turned-giant algae had done too good of a job growing between the gears. They had choked the very insides of the machine so that nothing could move, and the machine began to leak black smoke as if something was burning even under water. Within minutes all sound and motion had grounded to a halt, and the monster reduced to a lifeless lump of Celestial Bronze, good for nothing more than being melted back down in Hephaestus cabin's smithy.



Exhausted, I floated in the water on my back for a minute while Jefferson did the same next to me. I tried to figure out what had just happened. Had I really affected the speed stuff would go? It sure had felt like it. I had definitely made John go faster and the gears go slower. Like every kid at camp, I knew all the Greek gods inside and out. The Goddess of Speed was Nike. Did that mean I was one of Nike's kids? It was possible, but it still didn't seem quite right. All of her kids were really fast, and I'd never won a race in my life. I'd also never heard of them affecting someone else's speed. But just because I'd never heard of it didn't mean it hadn't happened. Even though I tried to will it away, I could feel a little bit of hope starting to burn in my chest. I could handle being one of Nike's kids.

I drifted out from under the rock overhang, and for a second I could have sworn I saw the silhouette of a man standing on the edge of the cliff. He was built like a line backer and carried a long walking stick that towered over his head. I squinted, trying to get a better look at the guy, but he seemed to have disappeared. I shrugged and wondered if I was getting a relapse of Chimera Pox. True, I hadn't hallucinated when I'd been sick before, but fevers can do weird things to the brain.

Below us the water began to churn, and I panicked for a second thinking that Charybdis had overcome the plants and had somehow come back to life. Next to me, Jefferson seemed to be having the same kind of worries. We both took off, trying to swim for shore, but the whirlpool was too fast and too powerful. Jefferson's look of horror had to match mine as we were swept back down and towards the mouth.

And then, the whirlpool was gone, and once again we were bobbing on the surface.

"What just happened?" I asked, but Jefferson shook his head. He'd been studying the water. "Look," he said.

I took a deep breath, and stuck my head back under the water. To my relief, the machine hadn't started working again. Instead, it almost seemed

to be folding in on itself like now the mouth was sucking itself into a whirlpool. We had felt it at first, but now the whirlpool seemed to only exist deep under the water as if the machine was sinking to the very depths of Hamilton Pool. It was really weird to watch and even harder to explain. One minute there was a giant machine, the next it was like the Celestial Bronze had dissolved—only Celestial Bronze doesn't do that. The only thing left was a green dot, the color of an old penny.

Jefferson dove all the way down and grabbed the dot. It had been near the bottom of the pool, so it was bigger than it had appeared. He joined me at the surface holding a small round mask the color of the Statue of Liberty.

Without saying a word, he swam for the beach, and I followed. We crawled out, so tired we could barely move, and laid on the edge for a moment. Pretty much as soon as we were out of the water, Mattie appeared next to us. She picked up the mask where Jefferson had dropped it on the sand. She twisted it around and peered through the two eye holes.

"Is this a mask?" she asked. She knocked at the surface, and it gave out a strange metallic clang that startled all of us. Mattie nearly dropped it. "It's so weird. Except for the eye holes there's nothing on it. No mouth, no nose." She shook her head. "Weird."

"Thank you for getting this for me." A long thin arm in a black and white striped suit reached over Mattie's shoulder and plucked the mask out of her hands.

## CHAPTER 7

MATTIE SCREAMED, I CHOKED, AND ONLY JEFFERSON TRIED TO DO something useful. He tried to scramble to his feet, but he was still too drained from sending so much energy to the plants.

Mr. Rictus laughed at us, not the least bit intimidated. I wished I still had my sword to at least threaten him with it, but I had the bad feeling that this would have just amused him too.

“Thank you for disabling the little ... guard dog,” he said after a moment’s reflection. “I do like my masks.” With another laugh, he made a gesture with his left hand, and some sort of portal thing opened up behind him.

It was similar to the BELCH that Mr. D had developed for demigod travel although he pretty much never let anyone use it. (There had been a weird rumor a couple of years ago that Mattie had been through the BELCH while on a quest to keep Topher from turning into a dragon, but she just rolled her eyes if you asked her about it, so no one knew if it was true.)

The BELCH Mr. D had made created a portal the color of ripe grapes and smelled kind of like his favorite diet Coke. This portal was a sickly yellow, sort of the color of the disgraced priest Pontifex’s suit. In fact, when Pontifex still worked for Nero before he started (begrudgingly) helping

camp, he had traveled through a similar portal that Nero had created. Did that mean that Pontifex was bad again? Was he helping Rictus?

Mr. Rictus stepped through the portal, and Mattie seemed to pull herself together. As the only one of us still standing, she lunged for the portal, but it popped closed before she was anywhere near it.

“What just happened?” she asked.

“How did we miss a seven foot tall guy in a suit and giant ventilator mask hanging around the beach?” I asked instead. “Mattie, was he here the whole time?”

“Give me a little credit,” she said. “I would have noticed those stripes anywhere. And no,” she added before I could ask, “I didn’t see any portals open up either.”

For a second, I wondered if Rictus could have been the guy I’d seen up on the cliff, but the build was all wrong. Rictus was the sort of thin that made you think of a Halloween decoration. The guy on the cliff had the sort of build that would intimidate a football player.

“Why would Mr. Rictus want that mask?” I asked. “Do you think it controls something like his Smiley mask did?”

Nobody answered, but none of us needed to. Rictus had created plenty of havoc with his last mask. A mask that controlled something green—like a zombie or maybe the snake-like dracaenas—would be very bad news.

Jefferson dragged himself to his feet and sort of stumbled over to where we’d hidden our shoes and socks and stuff we hadn’t wanted to get wet. He brought it back over and handed me my shoes before dumping the stuff in his shoe out onto the sand. A bunch of golden drachmas and the map Cates had found at the bunker dropped down, but I didn’t really pay them any attention.

“That portal looked an awful lot like the BELCH,” Mattie said, confirming that unlike me, she’d actually seen it before. “I wonder if we can use it to follow Rictus. Grey!” she yelled out.

“Wait,” said Jefferson, but it was too late. A sparkly purple vortex started forming between us and the still partying mortals. Fortunately, they wouldn’t be able to see the BELCH through the Mist. But if they had looked over, we would have looked weird talking to the air instead of each other.

The BELCH opened and a small metallic bird flew out and landed on Mattie’s shoulder. She made an oofing sort of sound and staggered under the bird’s weight. It was a sort of clockwork owl, but one clearly powered by something other than electricity. It had that faint glow of a minor god, and pure intelligence shown from his eyes. This wasn’t some sort of robot running on very advanced AI. This was a living machine.

“Mattie,” said the owl. “It’s been too long.” It turned its head so that its yellow glowing eyes stared at me and then Jefferson. “Cassie, Jefferson. How can I help?”

“Hi, Grey,” Mattie said. She sort of ruffled the owl’s metallic feathers, and he hooted in appreciation. “We need you to track a portal.”

“Wait, what?”

It took a little while for Mattie and me to explain what we wanted and why. Finally, Grey made us tell him the whole story from the beginning. Jefferson never once said a word, only stood there with his arms crossed and an annoyed expression on his face. He didn’t even cheer up when I told the others about his brilliant idea with the plants. Mattie and I told Grey every detail—well, almost every detail. I didn’t tell them about my possible weird power to affect the speed of things. That was something I wanted to keep to myself, at least for now.

Grey tilted his head to one side, considering. “That’s a lot to take in,” he said. “You’ve had a busy day, demigods.” He made a small whirring sound as he thought. It was like we could actually hear the gears in his mind turning. “I wish I could help you, but I don’t have a way to track any portals other than the BELCH. If he’d used ours or any variation of ours, I could

tell you where this Rictus had gone without any problem. But it sounds like he was using some sort of independent trans-dimensional vortex.” Grey shook his head. “I no can do.”

Mattie looked as disappointed as I felt, but Jefferson looked relieved. “Finally this quest is over,” he said.

“What!” Both Mattie and I kind of yelled at the same time. A couple of mortals glanced over for a moment with confused expressions like they could hear us but not see us.

“Mist,” Grey whispered. “The BELCH makes it.”

We nodded and waited for the mortals to look away again.

“How can you think the quest is over?” I asked Jefferson. “We still don’t know anything.”

Jefferson looked at me like I’d just announced that the gods weren’t real.

“Cassie,” he said. He turned to Mattie who was standing next to me, her arms crossed and a ferocious glare on her face. “Mattie. We know all sorts of stuff at this point.” He started ticking them off on his fingers. “Rictus is still after tech. He’s planting new, monstrous inventions, and collecting masks. He has access to portals. It’s time for us to get back to camp and report back to Topher and Isaiah.”

“I can send your report for you,” Grey interrupted. He made that whirring sound again. “There. Isaiah’s getting an email with everything you two just told me.”

Jefferson looked put out, but I beamed at Grey. “Thanks!” I turned back to Jefferson. “See, we can keep going. I mean yes, we’ve confirmed that Rictus wants League tech and has a thing for masks, but we knew all that even before we left the dining hall this morning. Rictus once used a Smiley controlling mask, and he steals relics and tech whenever he can. We still don’t know his plan.”

“Cassie, we just fought a replica of Charbydis. I think we’ve done more than our share of questing today. We’ve definitely done more than Topher and Isaiah ever meant for you to do.” He groaned when I tried to cut in. He shook his head to shut me up. “Besides, we have no idea where Rictus went. Grey can’t track a random portal.”

“It’s true,” Grey chirped out.

I kicked at the sand, realizing Jefferson was right. We had hit a dead end. Rictus could have gone anywhere in the world through his portal, and we just didn’t have any way of knowing where he’d popped out. John was also right that we’d already gone above and beyond with our quest. Destroying clockwork monsters hadn’t been part of the plan when we’d trudged over to the League’s bunker to check it out. Still, even though we had accomplished so much, it didn’t feel like our quest had succeeded. It didn’t feel like it should be over. But without another clue, there really wasn’t much more we could do other than head back to camp.

I sighed, ready to tell Jefferson it was time to drive home.

“Wait,” Mattie called out. She bent over, and Grey fell off her shoulder. He made an irritated clicking sound as he caught himself with his wings and flew over to perch on a rock. Mattie pulled something out of the sand and stood back up. “Wait, we forgot about the map.”

“Of course, the Cathedral of Junk,” I said before Mattie could even unfold the map. “It was written in a different ink. That has to mean it’s important.”

“That doesn’t mean Rictus went there,” Grey pointed out. “You can’t open a BELCH in the Cathedral itself. There are too many protections around it.”

Mattie had been staring at the map. She pointed to the weird stick figure thing drawn next to the Cathedral of Junk label. “That doesn’t mean there won’t be a clue there.” She then pointed at the tornado that had been drawn

next to the Hamilton Pool label. “Is it just me or does that look like a whirlpool? And didn’t you just destroy a whirlpool monster?”

I leaned closer to get a better look. Mattie was right. “Then, maybe there’s another Rictus monster at the Cathedral.” I tapped the map. “What if it’s protecting another relic, too?”

Grey gave a sort of owl shrug. “It’s possible. Your logic makes sense.”

“No,” said Jefferson. He rubbed his arms and shivered slightly in his wet clothes. I realized that despite being just as wet, my clothes weren’t bothering me. For a second I wondered if I could use my Nike speed powers to dry my clothes off faster, but I remembered how drained I’d gotten in the water. I decided to save my energy.

“Just no,” Jefferson repeated. “I absolutely will not go to the Cathedral of Junk. No negotiations. I’m done.”

“Fine.” Mattie turned her back on Jefferson. “Grey, we’ll be needing to use the BELCH.”

My mouth sort of dropped open. Despite knowing that the BELCH was literally for teleporting around, it had never occurred to me that we could just use it to get where we needed to go.

Grey looked a little offended. “The BELCH isn’t a taxi service. You can’t just order it around.”

Mattie threw her arms up in the air. “What are you talking about? You used it to drop me on Hermes on top of the UT Clock Tower.”

“He did what?” I gasped, but they both ignored me.

Grey sniffed. “That was different. You were on a quest. BELCH travel is permitted on quests.”

“What do you think we’re on right now?”

Grey’s glare was as intense as Mattie’s. I kind of felt like they were going to burn each other up. “I know this is a quest,” he said, “but it’s not yours.”



“Oh.” The pieces all fell into place. “Grey,” I asked, “would you mind opening up a portal to the Cathedral of Junk?”

The BELCH continued to swirl purple motes in the air, but there was a soft whirring sound to it as if it had changed locations. Grey gave a satisfied nod. “Done.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Jefferson said. He crossed his arms and went to stand between us and the portal. “We are not going before we report back to Topher.”

I didn’t get a chance to argue back. I didn’t get to make any great points or sway Jefferson with my passionate logical words. I didn’t get to do anything because from behind us came a giant fracturing sound as if someone had decided to crack the Earth like it was a giant egg. We whirled around to face the water just in time to see part of the rock overhanging Hamilton Pool split and a small section of rock drop. It hit the water with a splash, creating a tiny tsunami.

“No,” Jefferson yelled. Behind us mortals screamed, and parents yelled at their kids to stay back.

Grey cocked his head. “The shale beneath the overhang appears to be failing. I wonder why.”

“Maybe that last whirlpool was too much for it?” Mattie asked, but no one answered her.

Jefferson shoved past us and ran for the water until he was standing ankle deep. He bowed his head as if in prayer and then raised it and both his arms. There was another cracking sound, but this time no rocks fell. Instead, roots from the surrounding bushes and trees began growing through the rocks from the sides. They grew at such a rate, it was like watching a sped up time lapse movie, only it was happening in real time. I stretched my own arms out and pointed them at Jefferson to help him help the roots grow even faster.

The roots sped up, weaving around the rocks and overhang until an impenetrable net held the rocks in place. With a final creaking sound, the roots and rocks seemed to settle, and nothing more fell.

I dropped my arms, a little drained, but Jefferson fell to his knees, his head bowed. He'd used up all his remaining energy (and some of mine) saving the overhang. With a sigh, he sort of toppled into a sitting position, his head bowed over his feet.

I took a step back and then another.

"Come on, Mattie," I said as quietly as possible. "We need to go."

Jefferson still heard me. He raised his head. "Cassie, no."

I shook my head and took another few steps towards the BELCH. Jefferson tried to stand and come after me, but his legs couldn't hold him. He sat back down with a grunt.

"It's okay. I'm not alone." I waved at Mattie who looked unsure but determined and at Grey who hooted. "We'll just check out the Cathedral and come right back. You're probably right that Rictus isn't there, but it's our only clue, and we can't ignore it."

Jefferson tried to interrupt me, but I didn't let him. "And after what you just did, you can't come. It would be too much for you."

I turned and walked for the BELCH. I don't know what Mattie saw in my face when she looked at me, but she looked a little worried and less determined than she had before. But she turned and crossed into the BELCH. Right behind her, Grey flew in too.

At the last second, I turned and gave Jefferson a smile. "It'll be okay. I'm sure of it. It's my quest after all."

Jefferson tried to stand again but still couldn't. "Cassie."

I don't know what else he tried to say to me. When I stepped into the BELCH, his voice disappeared.

## CHAPTER 8

I DO NOT RECOMMEND PORTAL TRAVEL UNLESS YOU ARE THE SORT THAT enjoys spinning and twisting out of control and landing on the other side feeling like you took a bad ride in a broken blender. I am not that sort of person. I stumbled out of the BELCH and promptly leaned over and gagged. Nothing came up, but I was still mortified. It didn't help that I was also feeling a little guilty over leaving Jefferson. Mattie patted my back until I had my stomach back under control. She hadn't seemed to be affected by the experience.

When I could stand back up again, I realized that Grey had brought us pretty close to the Cathedral, even if he hadn't been able to drop us off inside. The chain link fence stood less than a few feet away, the Cathedral's fearsome guard dog just on the other side. Except, the dog wasn't fearsome at all. It was flat out asleep.

"Ready?" Mattie asked me. She still looked a little concerned, like she half-expected me to toss up my breakfast all over her shoes or maybe she still wasn't sure if we'd done the right thing coming here.

"Let's do this." I reached for the gate, determined to prove to Jefferson that we had needed to investigate, but Grey stopped me by settling on top of the gate instead. He made a pecking motion with his beak when I tried to open the gate anyway.

“Wait,” he said. “Do you two know the rules?”

“Rules?” I asked.

Mattie shrugged. “Sure. Pet the dog, don’t take more than one thing, no fighting.”

Grey groaned. “It’s a bit more complicated than that.” When I looked confused, he added, “Okay, pet the dog is pretty much just pet the dog.” He glanced over and rolled his eyes at the snoring pup. “Not that Sleeping Beauty there will even notice. But the other two things are pretty important. We’ll only be able to leave with one item. That’s one item for the whole group.”

I snapped my mouth shut. I had hoped it was one item each.

“And the Cathedral is neutral ground,” Grey continued. “That means no fighting, but it also means no one can hurt anyone else. No matter who we see or what monsters are in there, we can’t fight them.”

“What happens if we do?” I asked.

Grey seemed to gaze away into the distance. “Nothing good.”

I swallowed hard and nodded, but even that unpleasant warning wasn’t going to stop me from figuring out Rictus’s plan. I reached out and opened the gate.

We stepped through and immediately followed rule number one. We each took a turn petting the dog. That wasn’t so bad. The dog was big with longish hair (I had no idea what type it was). The hair was soft, and the dog did wake up enough to wag its tail. For just a moment, mid wag, the dog’s shape blurred to a shape that was amorphous and very dark and un-dog-like. Just as quickly it was a dog again. I blinked and quickly moved away from the entrance into the Cathedral itself.

When I think of cathedrals, I think of huge stone buildings with gloomy halls and pointed windows. The Cathedral of Junk is nothing like that. For one thing, it’s completely outside and filled with structures made from all sorts of stuff. There’s everything from old license plates to coffee mugs to

old broken machines lining the walls. Nothing is sorted exactly although some areas are arranged by color. (I especially like the blue section.)

As Mattie and I wandered through aisle after aisle of stuff, we came across all sorts of cool and wonderful things. We passed an empty Hollower belt and several canopic jars. Not surprisingly, a mummy lurked in the corridor not far from those items.

The stuff was cool, but the monsters scattered about were not. Lycaon's werewolf kids might not be able to bite us here, but it was still scary saying "Excuse me" as we slipped past them. There was at least one Gorgon sorting through a collection of curling irons—which seemed pretty weird seeing as she has snakes on her head instead of hair. We even came across a minotaur poking around in one of the piles of TVs. The minotaur sneezed, and I realized it was the guy that had gotten me sick a couple of weeks ago. We didn't stick around to ask what he was doing. I made Mattie run away down the next aisle before I could catch Chimera Pox again.

As cool as all the stuff was, we didn't see anything that made us think Rictus had been there or would even want to visit. There weren't any valuable relics to take like we'd had in the camp Archives. Rictus didn't need any of the stuff here to build his various machines. He seemed to already have access to plenty of stuff. I'd pretty much given up hope that we'd find anything useful when we turned down into the next corridor.

Next to me, Mattie froze, and I had to work really hard to keep from turning and running back into the next aisle.

"Oh my," Grey said. He settled on a precarious tower of microwaves. They shifted but didn't fall.

At the end of the corridor, just in front of some kind of small room or alcove, stood a giant dog. A giant three headed dog. A giant three headed dog made of clicking metal gears with a Celestial Bronze skin.

"Good grief," I grumbled after I got a grip on myself. "Rictus made a clockwork Cerberus."

## CHAPTER 9

THE CERBERUS MACHINE CAUGHT WIND OF US AND STARTED TO growl. A dog the size of a cow is going to be pretty scary even when it doesn't have three heads. When those three heads growl at you and bare their razor-sharp metal teeth? Terrifying. Mattie grabbed my arm, and I yelped. My heart rate had kicked up, and I felt like I was having trouble breathing.

The clockwork dog began to pace down the aisle towards us.

Slowly, Mattie and I backed into the other hallway. I managed to do it without tripping on anything, so that was an improvement. Grey hooted twice, and then he flew into the hallway with us.

"It's gone back to guarding the room," Grey said. "It's not chasing you."

Mattie and I both slumped a bit in relief. I hadn't realized just how tightly my muscles had been clenched. Now that I might not have to run for my life at any moment, I could relax a fraction.

"Clearly, Rictus has something important in that room," Mattie said. She leaned against one of the walls. It turned out to be a lot sturdier than it appeared since none of the old signposts fell down on her.

"Yeah," I agreed, "but knowing that doesn't do us a ton of good. We need to get in that room."

"Which means we need to get past that dog," Mattie finished for me.

All of us stood and thought, Grey with his little metal bird brain whirling.

“How does someone get past the real Cerberus?” I asked Mattie. “You know, the one that guards the gates of the Underworld.”

Mattie shrugged. “Different ways. You can throw some food for the heads to fight over.”

“Gee, if only I carried juicy steaks on me.”

Mattie didn’t really seem to appreciate my sarcasm. “Orpheus played Cerberus a tune that put the heads to sleep.” She kicked her foot against the wall behind her causing a few of the signs to rattle. “But Orpheus was the greatest musician of all time. I don’t really see either of us coming close to his level. Unless ...” Mattie gave me a considering look. “Unless you have some musical talent I don’t know about?”

“Nope.” I hated bursting her bubble, but I was no child of Apollo.

Mattie sighed and leaned her head back against the wall. That was when Grey cleared his throat.

“I may be able to help,” he said.

“How?”

“I have a recording of Orpheus playing his lute. Maybe we could play it for the metal monster and see if it works.”

“I’m sorry, you have what?” I was pretty sure I hadn’t heard him right. Orpheus had been gone for millennia, and Grey wasn’t that old. How would he have a recording?

“A recording of Orpheus.” When we both continued to stare at him, Grey shifted around on his perch and wouldn’t look at either of us. “How I got it isn’t important.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Mattie muttered.

“The point is, I can play it. Should we try?” Grey finally looked down at both of us again, his golden eyes darting back and forth between us.

I shrugged. “Might as well. What harm can it do?”

Mattie nodded, we leaned around the junk to peer into the other corridor. Once again, clockwork Cerberus sat in front of the little room. Two of his heads were staring off into space like the monster was bored (if clockwork monsters can get bored), but the middle head stared down the hallway with a sort of ferocious intensity that had me shivering.

“Good luck, Grey,” I said.

Grey clicked at us for a second like he was considering his next move, then he flew into the aisle. He landed on the back of a car’s fender and opened his mouth. Instead of his own voice or his constant clicking or whirring, music began to fill the air.

Music wasn’t really the right word for it. The sounds coming from Grey went beyond music. It was the sort of thing my mortal mom would have called “transcendent.” This wasn’t like listening to the greatest pianist play Mozart. This was like listening to a picture book angel strumming on their harp.

Beside me, Mattie began to sag as if she were getting more and more tired by the second. I didn’t feel sleepy at all. I felt energized, alert, ready to take on the world. Unfortunately, Orpheus’s music seemed to affect the metal Cerberus the same way it affected me. Rather than going to sleep like the real dog had for Orpheus, it bounded down the hall, growling and barking, and snapping its three sets of fangs at Grey.

Grey gave a little yelp that cut off the music. This didn’t stop the charging three headed dog. With another yelp, Grey realized the biting heads were coming straight for him. He took off down the corridor, his metal wings flapping like his life depended on it. He tore past the entrance to our hallway and kept going, only turning left down a different hallway when he reached a dead end.

Cerberus charged past us too, barking and with one of its heads howling. The dog slammed into the dead end, not being as agile as Grey, before taking off after the little owl.



“Should we help Grey?” Mattie asked me. She didn’t sound very confident.

“Are you kidding?” I asked. “How? Besides, this is our chance.” With the dog gone from its post, we sprinted down the deserted corridor into the small room. It really was more like an alcove. It was only about three feet deep and two feet wide. The walls were covered in old movie posters, and there was a small pedestal in the center kind of like the one in the very beginning of the very first Indiana Jones movie.

Instead of a golden idol on this pedestal, another mask sat in its place. This one was made in a shade of black so deep it was as if someone had crafted the night sky into a mask the size and shape of a figure eight laying on its side. White ribbons dangled from either side of the mask for tying it in place, but they seemed unnecessary almost like the mask would be drawn to the wearer’s face. Unlike the mask in Hamilton Pool, power radiated off of this one. I took a step back, overwhelmed.

Mattie took a step into the room, reaching for the mask.

“I don’t think,” I started to say, but I didn’t get the chance to finish. The second Mattie’s finger touched the mask, she flew back across the room, landing against the edge of the doorway. She slid to the floor, and I bent down to see if she was okay.

To my relief, she was breathing and still awake.

“That packs a punch,” she wheezed out at me.

“Tsk, tsk,” said a voice on our left. “Do they teach you nothing at that camp of yours?” Mr. Rictus stepped past us and used a handkerchief to pull the mask off its pedestal. “You never touch an unclaimed object of such power with your bare hand.” He shook his head.

I lunged at the mask and tried to grab it out of his hands. He held the mask still covered by the handkerchief up over his head, and since he was nearly seven feet tall that meant, there was no way I could reach it. Even if

I'd been as tall as Jefferson instead of short for my age, I wouldn't have been able to grab it back.

Rictus tsked at me again. "Perhaps camp isn't the problem. You don't seem to be a very good listener, little Cassie Clarewater."

I froze for a second, a little freaked out that Mr. Rictus knew my name. I'd never met him before, never been this close to him. It wasn't like we'd ever been introduced. The thought that he had so much intel on camp that he knew all of us by name? Chilling idea.

"That mask is ours." I ground my teeth and glanced around for some kind of weapon. The room had a movie theme, so there weren't any convenient swords or spears laying around.

"No." Rictus gave me a stern look. "Masks fall in my domain." He gave the one in his hand a fond look before stuffing it into the inside pocket of his suit jacket. "Especially this one." His stern look returned, and he bent down to lecture me like an impatient kindergarten teacher. "And an object with this much power is much too dangerous for children like you." He patted the spot on his suit where the mask now hid. "It's much safer with me."

I'm not sure if it was the fact he kept calling us children or the condescension or what, but something about Rictus made Mattie snap. One moment she was still on the floor trying to catch her breath, and the next she let out a ferocious roar like a wounded mountain lion and tackled the man around his knees.

Mr. Rictus was shocked and stumbled back against the alcove's wall, but he didn't fall down. He had his hands full though with a hissing, screaming Mattie. I used that moment to grab up a broken looking umbrella propped up on a shelf and smacked Mr. Rictus with it like I was trying to score a home run at a baseball game.

Rictus had gone back to being amused like we were toddlers just being oh, so adorable. It wasn't until one of the spokes on my umbrella caught on

the edge of his sleeve, ripping his suit, that he started to get annoyed.

“Enough of this,” he said. He motioned with his left hand again, and both Mattie and I froze in place. People talk about being frozen all the time, but even when you’re scared out of your mind, you can still breathe and blink and think. We literally froze as if everything about us had been turned to stone.

Rictus sort of picked me up and moved me to the side before stepping out of Mattie’s grip around his legs. “Are we done here yet?” He gestured with his hand, and Mattie and I could move enough to breathe again and to think. I shook my head no.

Rictus sighed. “So stubborn.” He took the umbrella out of my hand and cracked it over his knee splitting it into a bunch of pieces.

While he stood studying us for a moment as if trying to decide what to do with us, I studied him. We really didn’t know very much about Mr. Rictus other than the fact that he had restarted a version of the League of Machines and Monsters. Since the original League had been founded by children of Hephaestus, I think we had all assumed that Rictus was one of them too. However, the level of magic he was doing went well beyond that of a normal demigod. Even the children of Hecate couldn’t just freeze someone with a flick of their wrists. They needed all sorts of preparations and spells.

“What do you want?” I managed to croak out.

“You’ll see,” Rictus said with a laugh. He gestured again, a slightly different hand movement, and the yellow portal appeared behind him. Grey wasn’t strong enough to open a portal within the Cathedral, but Rictus could. My blood seemed to run a little colder through my veins.

Rictus made one final gesture with his left hand, and Mattie and I slumped to the floor. He stepped through the portal taking the latest mask and his secrets with him.

I crawled over to Mattie to see if she was okay, but she waved me back. She pointed at the portal. “No time,” she croaked. Between getting flung into the wall and frozen by Rictus, she was worse off than me.

The portal still flickered in front of us, but it might not be there much longer. If I was going to go after Rictus, I had to go now.

“But,” I said to Mattie. “We don’t go by ourselves, not after monsters, certainly not after powerful magic users that have spent the summer messing with camp.”

“Think this may be the exception,” Mattie muttered. She seemed to be doing a little better, but she definitely wasn’t in fighting shape. “This may be our only chance, and I can’t come. Topher will understand. Go, and I’ll pray to Dad and get him to send Grey to you for help.”

I looked at the portal, its poisonous yellow swirls glittering in the Cathedral’s light. For the first time since I’d decided to stalk a minotaur by myself, I didn’t want to be the one being brave. I didn’t want the glory of saving camp, the honor of completing a successful quest. But Mattie was also right. This might be our only chance to find out what Rictus was up to, why he wanted so many masks, what he had planned. And Rictus was turning out to be more powerful than even Topher and Isaiah realized. He might be more powerful than the gods knew.

So, even though it was dangerous, even though I knew it could very well be a trap, I stood, took a deep breath, and ran as fast and as hard as I could into the yellow portal.

## CHAPTER 10

I DIDN'T DO ANY BETTER WITH THIS PORTAL THAN I HAD WITH THE BELCH. In fact, the yellow made everything worse. I sort of fell out of the portal onto my knees and dry heaved at the floor. This time when I felt a hand patting my back, I knew it wasn't Mattie.

I tried to do this fancy wrestling flip maneuver thing on Rictus that our hand-to-hand combat instructor Cat had taught us. Problem was I hadn't been very good at it during training, and so I utterly failed when I tried using it on Rictus. I ended up flailing around on my back while Rictus stared down at me.

"Gods above and below," he muttered. "You're more trouble than the Æsir and Vanir combined."

He left me trying to struggle to my feet even though the waves of nausea had me wanting to just lay there on my back for the rest of my life. I pulled myself up and finally bothered to look around. The portal I'd followed Rictus through had vanished, stranding me in a room with no windows or doors, at least not ones I could see. The room was rather a sort of wide hallway with the walls stretching on forever. If there was an end to the room, I couldn't find it. Everything disappeared into a sort of gloom as if Rictus had taken an underground cavern and given it straight walls. It was

cold enough to be an underground cave. I shivered in my damp camp shirt and shorts.

Then, I really looked at the walls. I stopped shivering from the cold and started shivering from fear. Display cases covered the walls, stretching with them into infinity. In every case sat a mask. There was every kind from the small little domino masks that just go around a person's eyes to the huge long beaked masks medieval doctors wore during the plague. There were ceremonial masks from all over the world, and cheap little plastic masks from superhero Halloween costumes. Expensive masks covered in gold and jewels sat next to cheap things made of paper and staples. I could have handled that Rictus kept a mask museum if he hadn't had mystical masks too. Some masks, like the one he'd taken from the Cathedral of Junk radiated power. But those were not the worst. The worst were the hundreds of Smiley and Frownie masks wiggling about in their cases.

I wanted to take a step back, but the wall behind me was covered in masks too. I turned back as Rictus finished placing the new mask in one of the few empty cases. He clicked the case shut, and I decided to try to rush him while his back was still to me. I ran, hoping to tackle him the same way Mattie had back at the Cathedral. I tried not to think about Mattie and how I'd had to leave her there injured or worse. Grey was there and would help. I had to believe that. I couldn't do anything for her now except stop the guy that had been trying to ruin our lives for the past few summers. I channeled all of my frustration and helplessness and pure fear into my run and bent low to grab Rictus and bring him down.

Rictus turned and his left hand reached out and caught me by the back of the shirt. He picked me up and dangled me like a naughty kitten and shook his head at me. Only, it wasn't Rictus's head. The person wasn't Rictus at all. For one thing, he had gotten twice as tall as Rictus and more filled out. His hair had changed from dark to a reddish color while his skin (already pale) had become almost translucent so that his blue veins gave it

an almost bluish tint. His ventilator was gone, so I could see his whole face and the amused look he gave me.

I stopped struggling and sort of hung in the air in shock. “Who are you?”

The man looked a bit disappointed. “Still haven’t figured it out, my child? I’m a shape shifting giant.” He gestured down at himself, and I realized he no longer wore Rictus’s black and white striped suit. Instead he wore some sort of brown suede or maybe velvet (I’m not good with fabrics) pants under a sort of tunic shirt covered in little designs. No, not designs. Runes. I recognized them, even if I couldn’t read them.

“How many shape shifting giants are there?” he continued.

“Loki,” I said. “You’re Loki.”

“Very good.” Loki let go of my shirt, dropping me back to the ground.

I landed with a thud that shook my teeth, but I was still too shaken to find myself in the presence of an actual Frost Giant to notice. “You’re the sworn enemy of the gods.” I backed away until I’d run up against some of the display cases. “You’re pure evil, worse than even someone like Mr. Rictus.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Pure evil? That’s going a little far, don’t you think? And I’m not the sworn enemy of the ‘gods.’” He made air quotes with his fingers. “I mean, they aren’t exactly noble celestial beings or something. Not like *your* Olympians.” He sort of gave me an odd pointed look, and I didn’t like the way he had stressed “your.” Before I could answer, he continued, “But yes, I do have some issues with the immortals of Asgard and Vanaheim, but, again, sworn enemy seems a tad dramatic.”

The case behind me wiggled slightly, and with a quick glance, I discovered I had retreated up against a case with a Smiley mask. It was lunging and knocking itself against the glass as if trying to get at me. I took a couple of steps away from it, but that only brought me closer to Loki. He grinned at my discomfort.

“Poor child,” he said to me. “Beset on all sides.”

I stood there in silence, staring. I was so, so out of my league. A charging minotaur had been bad, chasing down Mr. Rictus without Jefferson had been worse. But this? Face to face and alone with one of the most famous bad guys in all of human history? This was beyond anything I’d ever trained for at camp.

Camp. Memories of camp and my friends in all the cabins and cohorts, of images of my counselors and aides, of the instructors, of Topher and Isaiah flooded me. Sure, this was a bigger bad than I had anticipated, but he was still a threat to camp and everything we stood for. He couldn’t be allowed to keep these powerful masks. He couldn’t be allowed to pretend to be Mr. Rictus. (Or had he been Rictus all along?) He couldn’t be allowed to keep threatening camp. Without saying a word, I raised my fists and crouched into one of the fighting stances Cat had taught us.

Loki glared at me, and then he sort of sighed to himself and shook his head. “Well, I will give you credit for persistence.” He clapped his hands together and then pulled them apart as if he were pulling on a piece of taffy. Between his hands appeared a long wooden staff. He twirled it twice. Then, to my shock he tossed it to me.

I barely managed to catch it I was so surprised. I fumbled, but the staff stayed in my hands.

“Oh, that bodes well.” Loki’s sarcasm brought me back from staring at the weapon. I stared at him instead.

“Is it just me or are you shorter?” Loki seemed to have morphed from giant tall to human tall.

“It only seemed fair,” Loki said. He glanced down at himself, and his tunic faded and then turned the same orange of my shirt. He looked back up and smiled. “No distractions, I promise. This will be a fair fight. Well, as fair as a fight between a little demigod and me can be.”

I did not feel reassured.



With a battle cry that I assumed was in whatever language Frost Giants spoke, Loki lunged at me.

I ducked and spun the staff. We aren't really taught how to fight with staves at Camp Half-Blood Austin. We tend to use more swords and bows and arrows and the occasional spear. A staff though isn't all that different from a spear, just without, you know, the pointy end.

However, I was not one of the kids that had been training with spears. I slashed at Loki, but I missed him by about a mile. I'm exaggerating, but the room was big enough, it felt like there were miles between us.

Loki dodged, and the next thing I knew, I was again flat on my back on the floor. I hadn't seen him come at me that time. I hadn't felt the shove when it happened although my chest hurt from where his hands must have come into contact with me. For the first time it occurred to me that I had challenged a god, an actual god, no matter what Loki said.

Loki had retreated to the other side of the room while I got back on my feet. He rolled his eyes when I readied my staff against him.

"I grow tired of this," he told me. He cracked his knuckles. "We end this now." He charged at me again.

## CHAPTER II

THIS TIME I DIDN'T TRY TO FIGHT BACK, AT LEAST NOT WITH THE STAFF. I dropped it on the ground and held out both my hands at Loki as if I could stop him with them alone. Then I willed and wished and prayed as hard as I could to Nike to slow Loki down.

Loki was a full on god, so he was much stronger than the clockwork Charybdis in Hamilton Pool. I was a lot more desperate though, so I could actually feel the waves of energy leaving me this time and slamming into Loki. I couldn't stop him entirely, but I slowed him down until he could barely move forward.

"What the?" Loki said, but the words were long and drawn out until he almost sounded like a cartoon. Very, very slowly, his arms crept up in front of him, until he'd made a sign like a Capital T. "Time out," he drawled out.

I dropped my hands, and the waves of energy stopped. I nearly also dropped from exhaustion, but my legs managed to hold me. Relieved that I wasn't about to spend even more time on Loki's floor, I stayed as alert as my tired body would allow. I never took my eyes off Loki, but he wasn't paying any attention to me. He studied each of his fingers and then took a few practice hops like he was testing to see if he'd come back to full speed.

"Oh, my child," he finally said. He seemed to study me for a moment, and then he smiled. I'd never seen such a smile of pure joy. It changed his

changeable face completely. He almost looked like someone I could trust.

“It’s been a very long time since I’ve seen a demigod with that particular talent.” He was all but jumping up and down in glee. “This tells me everything. Everything!” He clapped his hands together and did a couple steps of a jig.

“Tells you what?” I didn’t actually care. I just wanted to keep him talking. “Monologuing” is what Isaiah calls it back at camp. Whenever we can, we try to get the bad guys to brag about their plans. For one thing, it gives us much needed intel. For another, it meant we could stand and rest. I needed as much time as I could to regain my energy. I didn’t think my fight with Loki was over. Far from it.

“It tells me exactly who your parents are, not that I ever really had any doubts,” he added.

I froze. I stopped concentrating on rebuilding my strength and instead focused on Loki’s actual words. “My parents?”

“I know it must have been hard being unclaimed all these years. I am sorry about that, but it was necessary.” Loki’s smile faded, and he actually looked contrite. He also seemed to be having a hard time looking me in the face.

“What makes you think I’m unclaimed?”

Loki’s expression turned to pity. “Oh, little Cassiopeia, I know everything about you.”

My stomach seemed to drop out the bottom of my feet all the way to the center of the Earth. No one, I mean no one other than my parents, knew my real name. I hated it even more than I hated Loki right now. (And that’s saying something.) Whenever people forced me to use my full name, I always lied and said it was Cassandra.

“Has it ever occurred to you, my little starshine, that the reason the Greek gods never claimed you is because neither of your parents is a Greek?”

Of course, it had occurred to me. It was one of my greatest fears: that I didn't really belong at Camp Half-Blood Austin. I just refused to believe it might be true.

"The gods are busy," I said, but I didn't sound convincing. Loki reached out like he wanted to pat me on the back, or worse, hug me. I shrank back a bit, and Loki's hand dropped.

"You're a mortal demigod all right, just not a Greek one. Godly parent, fae mother. You are an unusual one for the Greeks to take in, but of course, Topher has always liked his strays." Loki rolled his eyes. "Do you think Isaiah will let you stay on when Topher finally leaves to set up his next camp?"

There was too much there to unpack. "Fae mother? Topher leaving?"

Loki ignored my second question. "I said you were a *mortal* demigod. I never said you were a human one." He smirked as I physically jerked back as if he'd hit me with more than words. "The gods don't often come into contact with Faerie. You are very rare and special indeed."

"Who are my parents?" I couldn't stand another minute of his wild statements.

"Well, your mother was a lovely Fae woman, handmaiden for Queen Mab. Her name escapes me at the moment, embarrassing I agree, but I do have so many friends in all the Fae courts and of course a number of the human ones as well."

I didn't bother hiding my opinion of that. Luckily for me, Loki ignored my eye roll.

"As for your father, I'm a little disappointed you haven't figured it out for yourself by now. I mean, surely, you've wondered why I allowed you to follow me here, why I've allowed you to see one of my most sacred spaces." He gestured at the rows and rows of masks hanging around us. "I am the King of Masks, of any who would deceive the world around them.

After all, we all wear masks, I'm just more honest in admitting I assume them."

"You? Honest?" My fists clenched, and I struggled to force myself to relax my fingers. "Tell me who my father is!" My voice rose in volume and pitch until I was almost yelling.

"Simple, my child." Loki swept me a low, almost courtly bow. "Me."

## CHAPTER 12

FOR A MINUTE, I BELIEVED HIM. AFTER ALL THESE YEARS, THE RELIEF from finally being claimed was immense. I felt my knees weaken a bit, but I still managed to stay standing. Loki as my dad wasn't what I had been expecting. It certainly wasn't what I had wished for, but just having some answers felt right.

But then I realized that the answer itself felt wrong. Deep in my gut, I knew Loki wasn't my dad. I'd never really related to the Hermes kids or the Dionysus kids. They were all amazing and great and the best cousins I could have, but I wasn't one of them. Hermes was a trickster god, and Mr. D was one of the ultimate gods of chaos. Loki was both, so any kid of his would surely have an affinity for at least one of those cabins, wouldn't they?

No matter how much I wanted to be claimed by one of the gods, any of the gods, I knew that Loki wasn't my father. That like everything else he'd said and done that day, this was just another one of his lies.

"No," I shook my head, refusing to accept him as a parent.

Loki glared for a moment, looking more than a little irritated. "Why are all my kids always so put out to learn I'm their dad? You'd think someone would be excited for once."

“Can you really blame them?” I asked. “But you’re not my dad. I don’t know who it is. I just know it’s not you.”

Loki didn’t answer, only gave me a skeptical look.

“It’s not.” I wasn’t sure why I felt the need to defend myself, but it was like the words had started spilling out of my mouth on their own. “I don’t like pranks. I’m not the biggest rule follower, but I don’t break them for fun. Rules are there for a reason.”

Loki looked physically ill at the thought.

“I can’t change shape, I really like the truth, and I’m not a big manipulator of anything.”

Loki’s frown turned into a smirk. “Not true at all, my little one. Look at how you manipulated time around me.”

“Manipulated time?” Was that what I was doing? Did I slow time down around Loki and that was why he moved so slow?

“Oh, yes. Like I said, very rare talent.”

I brushed off his praise. I literally swiped my hand as if knocking away a pesky fly. “Whether manipulating time or manipulating speed, it doesn’t matter.” I pointed my finger at him. “The problem is that you’re manipulating me.” My voice shook even though I was trying harder than anything not to show Loki how much this all hurt. “You’re trying to trick me into helping you or trusting you or something by claiming me and giving me the thing I want most.”

Loki looked sad again. “And yet, even when I freely offer myself as a parent, it isn’t good enough.” For a moment he seemed not to see me anymore. His eyes glazed over like the person he was examining was himself. Then, he seemed to shake out of it. His eyes narrowed as they focused on me. “But whether or not I physically sired you, Cassiopeia Clarewater, I am claiming you. You and all the other offspring of those power-mad Greek Gods.”

He began advancing on me again. I held up my hands to try and slow him or time or whatever it was I could do, only nothing happened. After recovering from Chimera Pox, an unplanned swim in Hamilton's Pool, and using my mysterious powers three times in one day, I didn't have enough energy anymore. No waves of power pulsed out from me this time. All I could do was back away as Loki advanced.

Loki began walking a little faster. "You tell your precious Mr. D, and Topher, and Isaiah, and any other godly Greek scum that their days running little summer camps for the spawn of their masters is coming to an end. Tell them that even though their Baldur is dead, I am finally free, and I bring the coming storm. Gather their forces if they wish, but it will do them no good. I claim you all."

By that point, he was walking towards me so fast, I was all but sprinting backwards. I slammed into the wall behind me, knocking the breath out of my lungs. Unfortunately, I knocked one of the display cases off the wall. It tumbled down, barely missing my head. It shattered at my feet, and the mask inside rocked for a moment on the ground. Not just the mask, the *Smiley* mask from inside the case rocked for a moment on the ground, and then with a giggle, it flew up and attached itself to my face.

My scream was cut off as the Smiley mask began to fuse to my skin. I could feel my mind starting to slip away from me as if my thoughts were melting into colorful spirals of nothing. I giggled, and my last thought—as my head swiveled on its own without any conscious thought from me—was that Loki looked surprised. He hadn't expected a Smiley mask to eat me. I giggled again, and my mind drifted all the way into the nothing ...

... only to be yanked back into myself as the mask came tearing off my face.

"More trouble than you're worth," Loki was saying. I gazed around trying to remember how to be me again. I assumed Loki was talking to me, but when my eyes managed to focus on him, Loki was holding the Smiley



mask by his finger and thumb and yelling at it. He emphatically pointed his finger in the Smiley mask's face and delivered it a scathing lecture while the mask squirmed and looked embarrassed.

"Thank you?" I said.

Loki looked startled for a second like he'd forgotten I was there. Then he glared at the mask and gave it another little shake. "If my toys can't play nicely together, they aren't going to be allowed to play at all." He stuffed the mask into a pocket inside his tunic, then reached out a hand to help me up. That was when I realized that for the third time, I had ended up on my back on Loki's floor.

"My poor little child." He wiggled his fingers at me, inviting me to take them.

I swiped at his hand, but I was so weak, I'm not even sure he could feel me trying to bat away his fingers. "I'm not your child or anything else. I refuse to be claimed by you." I meant to sound defiant, but I simply sounded sad.

Loki's anger seemed to have been spent on yelling at the mask. He didn't flare up or yell at me again like I had expected. Instead, he gave me a sad smile, one that nearly broke my heart. I wondered if he ever showed his real emotions or if this was another of his manipulative shape-shifting masks.

"My brave little Cassie. So full of spunk. Keep it up, my child, if you can. You're going to need it."

Before I could give him a scathing comeback, the ground opened up beneath me, and I plummeted away from his deceptive smiles.

## CHAPTER 13

I STARED AT THE SWIRLING YELLOW VORTEX ABOVE ME, THE ONE I HAD just fallen through, until it disappeared into nothing. I shut my eyes and let the sun beat down on me for a moment, warming me back up after the chill in Loki's Mask Museum. Finally, I sat up and looked around. To my relief I was by the stone wall that marks one of the boundaries to Camp Half-Blood Austin. Loki hadn't dropped me back in the Cathedral of Junk or somewhere else on the planet. He'd basically brought me home.

I dragged myself to my feet and headed back to the dining hall where I figured I'd find Topher or Isaiah or at least some people. At that point even Mr. D's not so friendly glare would have been a welcome sight. I moved as fast as I could, but it wasn't very fast. It felt like it took me days to walk back, but it was probably less than half an hour.

The moment I stepped out of the trees and onto the last path, a ferocious barking started. I froze and then shrank back into the trees slightly. I could see the dining hall, it was just at the end of the path, but a giant, metal three headed dog stood between me and it. Mechanical Cerberus stood there blocking the path and barking his three heads off.

"You have to be kidding me." I was so tired, I kind of wanted to burst into tears. The dining hall was just right there.

“Down boy,” Mattie yelled from somewhere. She came running out the side door from the kitchen, the one campers are never, ever supposed to use. “Down, Cerberus.”

The dog stopped barking and sat on his metallic rump. His tail wagged up a small dust storm.

“That’s my good boy.” Mattie stopped to give all three heads a pat. “That’s my very good boy. Good Cerberus.”

“Mattie, what the?”

Mattie cut me off before I could finish my thought. “Cassie, thank the gods you’re back.”

“I’m not sure the gods had much to do with it,” I said sourly. I trudged over to her. She seemed fully healed from our run in with fake Rictus at the Cathedral of Junk. In fact, she was doing a whole lot better than me. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

Mattie shrugged and walked with me back to the dining hall. “Grey fetched Topher and he gave me some ambrosia.” Mattie made a face. “I’m going to be sore for awhile, and I think I’ll spend the rest of the summer safely at home, but I’m going to live.”

I swallowed hard and pushed away the memory of Mattie slumped against the wall in the Cathedral. “Good. I’m so glad.”

By that point, nearly everyone left at camp had come running up to see me. Counselor Jefferson hugged me again, and he managed to not to tell me “I told you so.” He’d been right. We shouldn’t have gone to the Cathedral of Junk.

“But Mattie,” I asked as Isaiah led me back into the dining hall and the tables and chairs set up in there. “What’s the deal with the new guard dog?”

“Cerberus?” Mattie asked like there was some other guard dog I might be talking about. “I’ve adopted him. He’s the sweetest little love bug robot you’ll ever find. You just have to rub his belly the right way and give him treats. I brought him home from the Cathedral as our one thing.”

“Of course, you did.”

Topher had stood up from his laptop when I’d come into the room. Now he came towards me with his first aid kit, ready to check me out.

“I’m not hurt,” I told him.

He looked at me for a moment. “Not physically.” He gave me one more look and sent everyone except Isaiah and Mr. D from the room. I didn’t argue with him. Loki’s message had been for those three after all.

Once we were alone with the doors and windows shut and fans blowing on us full blast, Topher turned to me. “Jefferson and Mattie have told us already what happened at the bunker and Hamilton Pool and the Cathedral. Now, tell us what hurt you.” He held up a hand to cut off my protests that I hadn’t been hurt. “Tell us what or maybe who hurt you, Cassie. I’m a healer. I can see the bruises even when they don’t mark the physical body.”

I nodded but didn’t speak for a second.

“What did Rictus do after you followed him through the portal?” Isaiah prompted in the gentlest possible way.

I laughed even though there was nothing funny about it at all. “Oh, it wasn’t Rictus. It was so much worse.”

And then I told them about my experience with Loki. I told them everything—about the masks, about my new found power, about what Loki’d said about my parents, about his message to the gods of Camp Half-Blood Austin that Loki had delivered at the end.

When I finally finished, Topher and Isaiah sat in stunned silence, but Mr. D slammed his can of diet Coke on the table, sloshing brown soda out of the little slit in the top.

“Loki. That little poser. He only wishes he could be half the god I am.” Mr. D surged to his feet and stormed around the dining hall. “I invented wine and drunken revelry. I invented theatre and the arts. I’ve created more chaos in my time than Loki ever will in his, and that little punk thinks he can threaten me? Thinks he can bring some kind of storm down on me?”

Mr. D's fury was a physical entity at that point, shoving over empty chairs and rattling the shelves lining either side of the room, even though he only paced right in front of the kitchen. Mr. D pointed at me. "You twerps are my twerps and my family's twerps, and no one gets to claim you but us." He turned to Topher and Isaiah. "I have to talk to your parents." Without another word, Mr. D was gone.

"Did he just go to Olympus?" I asked.

Isaiah shrugged. "Maybe. But I'm pretty sure Mom is spending summer in Ibiza."

Topher shrugged. "She can be anywhere. You know what Mom's like. I'm not sure he meant Aphrodite specifically though. He's probably gone to consult or maybe warn the other Olympians."

They turned back to me. "Loki didn't say anything else?" Isaiah asked. "Didn't explain what he meant by Baldur?"

"No idea."

"No one around here is dead or has died. We haven't lost anyone." Topher tapped on the table and stared off into space. "But whatever his cryptic message means, it's clearly a threat." He sighed. "Rictus is still out there with his reborn League of Machines and Monsters. And now Loki is threatening us in some way." He gave us a sort of half smile. "Never a dull moment at camp."

"Swords up," muttered Isaiah, but it wasn't his usual battle cry. More like a sarcastic plea for patience.

I still responded "Hellas" which made him smile. Both he and Topher got up to leave, but I stopped Topher.

"Can I ask you something?" I asked him once he'd sat back down.

"Always."

"Does Loki ever tell the truth or is everything he says a lie?"

Topher sighed like he already knew where I was going with this. "That's the problem with Loki. Everything he says is a mixture of truth, half-truths,

and lies. It makes him so hard to trust, yet you can't just discount him completely."

"Then I might really be a monster?"

Tophers reeled back a bit, shocked. "Monster?"

"He said I wasn't human," I said in a very low voice. "What else is there?"

Tophers rested his hand on the top of my bowed head for a second, the way he did when he was healing someone even though I didn't have the kind of hurts that could be helped that way.

"I don't know if your mother was Fae," he said at last. "I don't know what pantheon your godly parent is from, but no matter what you are, you are a part of this family. You are part of Camp Half-Blood Austin, and we don't have monsters here." He grinned. "We have a lot of non-humans, but none of us are monsters. But I may be a little biased. Remember? I'm not human."

My eyes widened as I realized he was right. Besides being a minor god, Tophers could turn himself into a satyr, although I'd never seen it happen. Maybe being human wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

Outside a car horn honked, and Isaiah stuck his head back in the room. "Cassie, your parents are here."

The timing was too weird, but also it kind of reminded me that godly parents weren't everything. I had some pretty awesome mortal ones who had taken having a demigod kid in stride. Someday I would figure out my godly side, even my mortal one if it turned out I really was Fae. It didn't have to be today.

"I'll reach out to my Fae contacts. Loki isn't the only one with friends in the Courts." Tophers's snide little aside showed me how rattled he really was.

Mom honked her car horn again.

“Stay out of trouble,” Topher told me. “And don’t go looking for it,” he added with a knowing glance. “I’ll let you know as soon as I hear something.”

I nodded and ran for the car. As I pulled open the back door to climb in, I glanced back. Mattie was playing fetch with her new pet or toy or whatever it was. Jefferson was helping Paul at the small smithy we kept at camp, and Topher and Isaiah were talking about something serious based on their expressions. Glancing at the car, my mom fiddled with something on her phone, while my dad gave camp a bemused shrug. With the Mist, all he could see were some people hanging around a park information building. He knew Camp was there, but he couldn’t see it. Still, he took me every day because I loved it here so much.

And I did love camp, every part of it. So, whatever Rictus or Loki or any other monster had planned against the place, I’d help work with the others to stop. Topher had once said that Camp was a special place worth remembering, and he was right. But it was also a place worth saving for the future, and no one was going to harm it. Not on my watch.

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