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(with Mark Oshiro)

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# PERCY JACKSON

AND THE OLYMPIANS

## THE LAST OLYMPIAN

# RICK RIORDAN



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To Mrs Pabst, my eighth-grade English teacher,  
who started me on the road to *Camp Half-Blood*

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## I GO CRUISING WITH EXPLOSIVES

The end of the world started when a pegasus landed on the hood of my car.

Up until then, I was having a great afternoon. Technically I wasn't supposed to be driving because I wouldn't turn sixteen for another week, but my mom and my stepdad, Paul, took my friend Rachel and me to this private stretch of beach on the South Shore and Paul let us borrow his Prius for a short spin.

Now I know you're thinking, Wow, that was really irresponsible of him, blah, blah, blah, but Paul knows me pretty well. He's seen me slice up demons and leap out of exploding school buildings, so he probably figured taking a car a few hundred metres wasn't exactly the most dangerous thing I'd ever done.

Anyway, Rachel and I were driving along. It was a hot August day. Rachel's red hair was pulled back in a ponytail and she wore a white blouse over her swimsuit. I'd never seen her in anything but ratty T-shirts and paint-splattered jeans before, and she looked like a million golden drachmas.

'Oh, pull up right there!' she told me.

We parked on a ridge overlooking the Atlantic. The sea is always one of my favourite places, but today it was especially nice – glittery green and smooth as glass, as though my dad was keeping it calm just for us.

My dad, by the way, is Poseidon. He can do stuff like that.

'So,' Rachel smiled at me. 'About that invitation.'

'Oh . . . right.' I tried to sound excited. I mean, she'd asked me to her family's vacation house on St Thomas for three days. I didn't get a lot of offers like that. My family's idea of a fancy vacation was a weekend in a rundown cabin on Long Island with some movie rentals and a couple of frozen pizzas, and here Rachel's folks were willing to let me tag along to the Caribbean.

Besides, I seriously needed a vacation. This summer had been the hardest of my life. The idea of taking a break even for a few days was really tempting.

Still, something big was supposed to go down any day now. I was 'on call' for a mission. Even worse, next week was my birthday. There was this prophecy that said when I turned sixteen, bad things would happen.

'Percy,' Rachel said, 'I know the timing is bad. But it's *always* bad for you, right?'

She had a point.

'I really want to go,' I promised. 'It's just —'

'The war.'

I nodded. I didn't like talking about it, but Rachel knew. Unlike most mortals, she could see through the Mist — the magic veil that distorts human vision. She'd seen monsters. She'd met some of the other demigods who were fighting the Titans and their allies. She'd even been there last summer when the chopped-up Lord Kronos rose out of his coffin in a terrible new form, and she'd earned my permanent respect by nailing him in the eye with a blue plastic hairbrush.

She put her hand on my arm. 'Just think about it, okay? We don't leave for a couple of days. My dad . . .' Her voice faltered.

'Is he giving you a hard time?' I asked.

Rachel shook her head in disgust. 'He's trying to be *nice* to me, which is almost worse. He wants me to go to Clarion Ladies' Academy in the autumn.'

'The school where your mom went?'

'It's a stupid finishing school for society girls, all the way in New Hampshire. Can you see me in finishing school?'

I admitted the idea sounded pretty dumb. Rachel was into urban art projects and feeding the homeless and going to protest rallies to 'Save the Endangered Yellow-Bellied Sap Sucker' and stuff like that. I'd never even seen her wear a dress. It was hard to imagine her learning to be a socialite.

She sighed. 'He thinks if he does a bunch of nice stuff for me, I'll feel guilty and give in.'

'Which is why he agreed to let me come with you guys on vacation?'

'Yes . . . but, Percy, you'd be doing me a huge favour. It would be *so* much better if you were with us. Besides, there's something I want to talk —' She stopped abruptly.

'Something you want to talk about?' I asked. 'You mean . . . so serious we'd have to go to St Thomas to talk about it?'

She pursed her lips. 'Look, just forget it for now. Let's pretend we're a couple of normal people. We're out for a drive, and we're watching the ocean, and it's nice to be together.'

I could tell something was bothering her, but she put on a brave smile. The sunlight made her hair look like fire.

We'd spent a lot of time together this summer. I hadn't exactly planned it that way, but the more serious things got at camp, the more I found myself needing to call up Rachel and get away, just for some breathing room. I needed to remind myself the mortal world was still out here, away from all the monsters using me as their personal punching bag.

'Okay,' I said. 'Just a normal afternoon and two normal people.'

She nodded. 'And so . . . hypothetically, if these two people liked each other, what would it take to get the stupid guy to kiss the girl, huh?'

'Oh . . .' I felt like one of Apollo's sacred cows – slow, dumb and bright red. 'Um . . .'

I can't pretend I hadn't thought about Rachel. She was so much easier to be around than . . . well, than some other girls I knew. I didn't have to work hard, or watch what I said, or wrack my brain trying to figure out what she was thinking. Rachel didn't hide much. She let you know how she felt.

I'm not sure what I would've done next, but I was so distracted I didn't notice the huge black form swooping down from the sky until four hooves landed on the hood of the Prius with a WUMP-WUMP-CRUNCH!

*Hey, boss, a voice said in my head. Nice car!*

Blackjack the pegasus was an old friend of mine, so I tried not to get too annoyed by the craters he'd just put in the hood, but I didn't think Paul Blofis would be real stoked.

'Blackjack,' I sighed. 'What are you –'

Then I saw who was riding on his back, and I knew my day was about to get a lot more complicated.

'Sup, Percy.'

Charles Beckendorf, senior counsellor for the Hephaestus cabin, would make most monsters cry for their mommies. He was huge, with ripped muscles from working in the forges every summer. He was two years older than me and one of the camp's best armour-smiths. He made some seriously ingenious mechanical stuff. A month before, he'd rigged a Greek fire bomb in the bathroom of a tour bus that was carrying a bunch of monsters across country. The explosion took out a whole legion of Kronos's evil meanies as soon as the first harpy went *flush*.

Beckendorf was dressed for combat. He wore a bronze breastplate and war helm with black camo pants and a sword strapped to his side. His explosives bag was slung over his shoulder.

'Time?' I asked.

He nodded grimly.

A lump formed in my throat. I'd known this was coming. We'd been planning it for weeks, but I'd half hoped it would never happen.

Rachel looked up at Beckendorf. 'Hi.'

'Oh, hey. I'm Beckendorf. You must be Rachel. Percy's told me . . . uh, I mean he mentioned you.'

Rachel raised an eyebrow. 'Really? Good!' She glanced at Blackjack, who was clopping his hooves against the hood of the Prius. 'So I guess you guys have to go save the world now.'

'Pretty much,' Beckendorf agreed. I looked at Rachel helplessly. 'Would you tell my mom —'

'I'll tell her. I'm sure she's used to it. And I'll explain to Paul about the hood.'

I nodded my thanks. I figured this might be the last time Paul loaned me his car.

'Good luck,' Rachel kissed me before I could even react. 'Now get going, half-blood. Go kill some monsters for me.'

My last view of her was sitting in the shotgun seat of the Prius, her arms crossed, watching as Blackjack circled higher and higher, carrying Beckendorf and me into the sky. I wondered what Rachel wanted to talk to me about, and whether I'd live long enough to find out.

'So,' Beckendorf said. 'I'm guessing you don't want me to mention that little scene to Annabeth.'

'Oh, gods,' I muttered. 'Don't even think about it.'

Beckendorf chuckled, and together we soared out over the Atlantic.

It was almost dark by the time we spotted our target. The *Princess Andromeda* glowed on the horizon — a huge cruise ship lit up yellow and white. From a distance, you'd think it was just a party ship, not the headquarters for the Titan lord. Then, as you got closer, you might notice the giant figurehead — a dark-haired maiden in a Greek chiton, wrapped in chains with a look of horror on her face, as if she could smell the stench of all the monsters she was being forced to carry.

Seeing the ship again twisted my gut into knots. I'd

almost died twice on the *Princess Andromeda*. Now it was heading straight for New York.

'You know what to do?' Beckendorf yelled over the wind.

I nodded. We'd done dry runs at the dockyards in New Jersey, using abandoned ships as our targets. I knew how little time we would have. But I also knew this was our best chance to end Kronos's invasion before it ever started.

'Blackjack,' I said, 'set us down on the lowest stern deck.'

*Gotcha, boss*, he said. *Man, I hate seeing that boat.*

Three years ago, Blackjack had been enslaved on the *Princess Andromeda* until he'd escaped with a little help from my friends and me. I figured he'd rather have his mane braided like My Little Pony than be back here again.

'Don't wait for us,' I told him.

*But, boss —*

'Trust me,' I said. 'We'll get out by ourselves.'

Blackjack folded his wings and plummeted towards the boat like a black comet. The wind whistled in my ears. I saw monsters patrolling the upper decks of the ship — *dracaenae* snake-women, hellhounds, giants, and the humanoid sea-lion demons known as telkhines — but we zipped by so fast none of them raised the alarm. We shot down the stern of the boat and Blackjack spread his wings, lightly coming to a landing on the lowest deck. I climbed off, feeling queasy.

*Good luck, boss*, Blackjack said. *Don't let 'em turn you into horsemeat!*

With that, my old friend flew off into the night. I took my pen out of my pocket, uncapped it, and Riptide sprang

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to full size — one metre of deadly celestial bronze glowing in the dusk.

Beckendorf pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. I thought it was a map or something. Then I realized it was a photograph. He stared at it in the dim light — the smiling face of Silena Beauregard, daughter of Aphrodite. They'd started going out last summer, after years of the rest of us saying, 'Duh, you guys like each other!' Even with all the dangerous missions, Beckendorf had been happier this summer than I'd ever seen him.

'We'll make it back to camp,' I promised.

For a second I saw worry in his eyes. Then he put on his old confident smile.

'You bet,' he said. 'Let's go blow Kronos back into a million pieces.'

Beckendorf led the way. We followed a narrow corridor to the service stairwell, just like we'd practised, but we froze when we heard noises above us.

'I don't care what your nose says!' snarled a half-human, half-dog voice — a telkhine. 'The last time you smelled half-blood, it turned out to be a meatloaf sandwich!'

'Meatloaf sandwiches are good!' a second voice snarled. 'But this is half-blood scent, I swear. They are on board!'

'Bah, your *brain* isn't on board!'

They continued to argue, and Beckendorf pointed downstairs. We descended as quietly as we could. Two floors down, the voices of the telkhines started to fade.

Finally we came to a metal hatch. Beckendorf mouthed the words, *Engine room*.

It was locked, but Beckendorf pulled some chain cutters

out of his bag and split the bolt like it was made of butter.

Inside, a row of yellow turbines the size of grain silos churned and hummed. Pressure gauges and computer terminals lined the opposite wall. A telkhine was hunched over a console, but he was so involved with his work he didn't notice us. He was about a metre and a half tall, with slick black sea-lion fur and stubby little feet. He had the head of a Dobermann, but his clawed hands were almost human. He growled and muttered as he tapped on his keyboard. Maybe he was messaging his friends on uglyface.com.

I stepped forward and he tensed, probably smelling something was wrong. He leaped sideways towards a big red alarm button, but I blocked his path. He hissed and lunged at me, but one slice of Riptide and he exploded into dust.

'One down,' Beckendorf said. 'About five thousand to go.' He tossed me a jar of thick green liquid — Greek fire, one of the most dangerous magical substances in the world. Then he threw me another essential tool of demigod heroes — duct tape.

'Slap that one on the console,' he said. 'I'll get the turbines.'

We went to work. The room was hot and humid, and in no time we were drenched in sweat.

The boat kept chugging along. Being the son of Poseidon and all, I have perfect bearings at sea. Don't ask me how, but I could tell we were at 40.19° north, 71.90° west, making eighteen knots an hour, which meant the ship would arrive in New York Harbor by dawn. This would be our only chance to stop it.

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I had just attached a second jar of Greek fire to the control panels when I heard the pounding of feet on metal steps – so many creatures coming down the stairwell I could hear them over the engines. Not a good sign.

I locked eyes with Beckendorf. ‘How much longer?’

‘Too long.’ He tapped his watch, which was our remote control detonator. ‘I still have to wire the receiver and prime the charges. Ten more minutes at least.’

Judging from the sound of the footsteps, we had about ten seconds.

‘I’ll distract them,’ I said. ‘Meet you at the rendezvous point.’

‘Percy –’

‘Wish me luck.’

He looked like he wanted to argue. The whole idea had been to get in and out without being spotted. But we were going to have to improvise.

‘Good luck,’ he said.

I charged out of the door.

Half a dozen telkhines were tromping down the stairs. I cut through them with Riptide faster than they could yelp. I kept climbing – past another telkhine who was so startled he dropped his Li'l Demons lunchbox. I left him alive – partly because his lunchbox was cool, partly so he could raise the alarm and hopefully get his friends to follow me rather than head towards the engine room.

I burst through a door onto deck six and kept running. I’m sure the carpeted hall had once been very plush, but over the last three years of monster occupation the wallpaper, carpet and stateroom doors had been clawed up

and slimed so it looked like the inside of a dragon’s throat (and, yes, unfortunately I speak from experience).

Back on my first visit to the *Princess Andromeda*, my old enemy Luke had kept some dazed tourists on board for show, shrouded in Mist so they didn’t realize they were on a monster-infested ship. Now, I didn’t see any sign of tourists. I hated to think what had happened to them, but I kind of doubted they’d been allowed to go home with their bingo winnings.

I reached the promenade, a big shopping mall that took up the whole middle of the ship, and I stopped cold. In the middle of the courtyard stood a fountain. And in the fountain squatted a giant crab.

I’m not talking ‘giant’ like \$7.99 all-you-can-eat Alaskan king crab. I’m talking ‘giant’ like bigger than the fountain. The monster rose over three metres out of the water. Its shell was mottled blue and green, its pincers longer than my body.

If you’ve ever seen a crab’s mouth, all foamy and gross with whiskers and snapping bits, you can imagine this one didn’t look any better blown up to billboard size. Its beady black eyes glared at me, and I could see intelligence in them – and hate. The fact that I was the son of the sea god was not going to win me any points with Mr Crabby.

‘FFFFFFffffff,’ it hissed, sea foam dripping from its mouth. The smell coming off it was like a garbage can full of fish sticks that had been sitting in the sun all week.

Alarms blared. Soon I was going to have lots of company and I had to keep moving.

‘Hey, crabby.’ I inched around the edge of the courtyard. ‘I’m just gonna scoot around you so –’