

The Lightning Thief - Chapter 21 - I Settle My Tab

It's funny how humans can wrap their mind around things and fit them into their version of reality. Chiron had told me that long ago. As usual, I didn't appreciate his wisdom until much later. According to the L.A. news, the explosion at the Santa Monica beach had been caused when a crazy kidnapper fired a shotgun at a police car. He accidentally hit a gas main that had ruptured during the earthquake.

This crazy kidnapper (a.k.a. Ares) was the same man who had abducted me and two other adolescents in New York and brought us across country on a ten-day odyssey of terror.

Poor little Percy Jackson wasn't an international criminal after all. He'd caused a commotion on that Greyhound bus in New Jersey trying to get away from his captor (and afterward, witnesses would even swear they had seen the leather-clad man on the bus—"Why didn't I remember him before?"). The crazy man had caused the explosion in the St. Louis Arch. After all, no kid could've done that. A concerned waitress in Denver had seen the man threatening his abductees outside her diner, gotten a friend to take a photo, and notified the police. Finally, brave Percy Jackson (I was beginning to like this kid) had stolen a gun from his captor in Los Angeles and battled him shotgun-to-rifle on the beach. Police had arrived just in time. But in the spectacular explosion, five police cars had been destroyed and the captor had fled. No fatalities had occurred. Percy Jackson and his two friends were safely in police custody.

The reporters fed us this whole story. We just nodded and acted tearful and exhausted (which wasn't hard), and played victimized kids for the cameras.

"All I want," I said, choking back my tears, "is to see my loving stepfather again. Every time I saw him on TV, calling me a delinquent punk, I knew ... somehow ... we would be okay. And I know he'll want to reward each and every person in this beautiful city of Los Angeles with a free major appliance from his store. Here's the phone number." The police and reporters were so moved that they passed around the hat and raised money for three tickets on the next plane to New York.

I knew there was no choice but to fly. I hoped Zeus would cut me some slack, considering the circumstances. But it was still hard to force myself on board the flight.

Takeoff was a nightmare. Every spot of turbulence was scarier than a Greek monster. I didn't unclench my hands from the armrests until we touched down safely at La Guardia. The local press was waiting for us outside security, but we managed to evade them thanks to Annabeth, who lured them away in her invisible Yankees cap, shouting, "They're over by

the frozen yogurt! Come on!" then rejoined us at baggage claim.

We split up at the taxi stand. I told Annabeth and Grover to get back to Half-Blood Hill and let Chiron know what had happened. They protested, and it was hard to let them go after all we'd been through, but I knew I had to do this last part of the quest by myself. If things went wrong, if the gods didn't believe me ... I wanted Annabeth and Grover to survive to tell Chiron the truth.

I hopped in a taxi and headed into Manhattan.

Thirty minutes later, I walked into the lobby of the Empire State Building.

I must have looked like a homeless kid, with my tattered clothes and my scraped-up face. I hadn't slept in at least twenty-four hours.

I went up to the guard at the front desk and said, "Six hundredth floor."

He was reading a huge book with a picture of a wizard on the front. I wasn't much into fantasy, but the book must've been good, because the guard took a while to look up. "No such floor, kiddo."

"I need an audience with Zeus."

He gave me a vacant smile. "Sorry?"

"You heard me."

I was about to decide this guy was just a regular mortal, and I'd better run for it before he called the straitjacket patrol, when he said, "No appointment, no audience, kiddo. Lord Zeus doesn't see anyone unannounced."

"Oh, I think he'll make an exception." I slipped off my backpack and unzipped the top.

The guard looked inside at the metal cylinder, not getting what it was for a few seconds. Then his face went pale. "That isn't..."

"Yes, it is," I promised. "You want me take it out and—"

"No! No!" He scrambled out of his seat, fumbled around his desk for a key card, then handed it to me. "Insert this in the security slot. Make sure nobody else is in the elevator with you."

I did as he told me. As soon as the elevator doors closed, I slipped the key into the slot. The card disappeared and a new button appeared on the console, a red one that said 600.

I pressed it and waited, and waited. Muzak played. "Raindrops keep falling on my head...."

Finally, ding. The doors slid open. I stepped out and almost had a heart attack.

I was standing on a narrow stone walkway in the middle of the air. Below me was Manhattan, from the height of an airplane. In front of me, white marble steps wound up the spine of a cloud, into the sky. My eyes followed the stairway to its end, where my brain just could not accept what I saw.

Look again, my brain said.

We're looking, my eyes insisted. It's really there.

From the top of the clouds rose the decapitated peak of a mountain, its summit covered with snow. Clinging to the mountainside were dozens of multileveled palaces—a city of mansions—

all with white-columned porticos, gilded terraces, and bronze braziers glowing with a thousand fires. Roads wound crazily up to the peak, where the largest palace gleamed against the snow.

Precariously perched gardens bloomed with olive trees and rosebushes. I could make out an open-air market filled with colorful tents, a stone amphitheater built on one side of the mountain, a hippodrome and a coliseum on the other. It was an Ancient Greek city, except it wasn't in ruins. It was new, and clean, and colorful, the way Athens must've looked twenty-five hundred years ago.

This place can't be here, I told myself. The tip of a mountain hanging over New York City like a billion-ton asteroid? How could something like that be anchored above the Empire State Building, in plain sight of millions of people, and not get noticed? But here it was. And here I was.

My trip through Olympus was a daze. I passed some giggling wood nymphs who threw olives at me from their garden. Hawkers in the market offered to sell me ambrosia-on-a-stick, and a new shield, and a genuine glitter-weave replica of the Golden Fleece, as seen on Hephaestus-TV. The nine muses were tuning their instruments for a concert in the park while a small crowd gathered—satyrs and naiads and a bunch of good-looking teenagers who might've been minor gods and goddesses. Nobody seemed worried about an impending civil war. In fact, everybody seemed in a festive mood. Several of them turned to

watch me pass, and whispered to themselves.

I climbed the main road, toward the big palace at the peak. It was a reverse copy of the palace in the Underworld.

There, everything had been black and bronze. Here, everything glittered white and silver. I realized Hades must've built his palace to resemble this one. He wasn't welcomed in Olympus except on the winter solstice, so he'd built his own Olympus underground. Despite my bad experience with him, I felt a little sorry for the guy. To be banished from this place seemed really unfair. It would make anybody bitter.

Steps led up to a central courtyard. Past that, the throne loom.

Room really isn't the right word. The place made Grand Central Station look like a broom closet. Massive columns rose to a domed ceiling, which was gilded with moving constellations.

Twelve thrones, built for beings the size of Hades, were arranged in an inverted U, just like the cabins at Camp Half-Blood. An enormous fire crackled in the central hearth pit. The thrones were empty except for two at the end: the head throne on the right, and the one to its immediate left. I didn't have to be told who the two gods were that were sitting there, waiting for me to approach. I came toward them, my legs trembling.

The gods were in giant human form, as Hades had been, but I could barely look at them without feeling a tingle, as if my body were starting to burn. Zeus, the Lord of the Gods, wore a dark blue pinstriped suit. He sat on a simple throne of solid platinum. He had a well-trimmed beard, marbled gray and black like a storm cloud. His face was proud and handsome and grim, his eyes rainy gray.

As I got nearer to him, the air crackled and smelled of ozone.

The god sitting next to him was his brother, without a doubt, but he was dressed very differently. He reminded me of a beachcomber from Key West. He wore leather sandals, khaki Bermuda shorts, and a Tommy Bahama shirt with coconuts and parrots all over it. His skin was deeply tanned, his hands scarred like an old-time fisherman's. His hair was black, like mine. His face had that same brooding look that had always gotten me branded a rebel. But his eyes, sea-green like mine, were surrounded by sun-crinkles that told me he smiled a lot, too.

His throne was a deep-sea fisherman's chair. It was the simple swiveling kind, with a black leather seat and a built-in holster for a fishing pole. Instead of a pole, the holster held a bronze trident, flickering with green light around the tips.

The gods weren't moving or speaking, but there was tension in the air, as if they'd just finished an argument.

I approached the fisherman's throne and knelt at his feet. "Father." I dared not look up. My heart was racing. I could feel the energy emanating from the two gods. If I said the wrong thing, I had no doubt they could blast me into dust. To my left, Zeus spoke. "Should you not address the master of this house first, boy?"

I kept my head down, and waited.

"Peace, brother," Poseidon finally said. His voice stirred my oldest memories: that warm glow I remembered as a baby, the sensation of this god's hand on my forehead, "The boy defers to his father. This is only right."

"You still claim him then?" Zeus asked, menacingly. "You claim this child whom you sired against our sacred oath?"

"I have admitted my wrongdoing," Poseidon said. "Now I would hear him speak."

Wrongdoing.

A lump welled up in my throat. Was that all I was? A wrongdoing? The result of a god's mistake? "I have spared him once already," Zeus grumbled. "Daring to fly through my domain ... pah! I should have blasted him out of the sky for his impudence."

"And risk destroying your own master bolt?" Poseidon asked calmly. "Let us hear him out, brother."

Zeus grumbled some more. "I shall listen," he decided. "Then I shall make up my mind whether or not to cast this boy down from Olympus."

"Perseus," Poseidon said. "Look at me."

I did, and I wasn't sure what I saw in his face. There was no clear sign of love or approval.

Nothing to encourage me. It was like looking at the ocean: some days, you could tell what mood it was in. Most days, though, it was unreadable, mysterious.

I got the feeling Poseidon really didn't know what to think of me. He didn't know whether he was happy to have me as a son or not. In a strange way, I was glad that Poseidon was so distant.

If he'd tried to apologize, or told me he loved me, or even smiled, it would've felt fake. Like a human dad, making some lame excuse for not being around. I could live with that. After all, I wasn't sure about him yet, either.

"Address Lord Zeus, boy," Poseidon told me. "Tell him your story." So I told Zeus everything, just as it had happened. I took out the metal cylinder, which began sparking in the Sky God's presence, and laid it at his feet.

There was a long silence, broken only by the crackle of the hearth fire.

Zeus opened his palm. The lightning bolt flew into it. As he closed his fist, the metallic points flared with electricity, until he was holding what looked more like the classic thunderbolt, a twenty-foot javelin of arcing, hissing energy that made the hairs on my scalp rise.

"I sense the boy tells the truth," Zeus muttered. "But that Ares would do such a thing ... it is most unlike him."

"He is proud and impulsive," Poseidon said. "It runs in the family."

"Lord?" I asked.

They both said, "Yes?"

"Ares didn't act alone. Someone else—something else— came up with the idea."

I described my dreams, and the feeling I'd had on the beach, that momentary breath of evil that had seemed to stop the world, and made Ares back off from killing me.

"In the dreams," I said, "the voice told me to bring the bolt to the Underworld. Ares hinted that he'd been having dreams, too. I think he was being used, just as I was, to start a war."

"You are accusing Hades, after all?" Zeus asked.

"No," I said. "I mean, Lord Zeus, I've been in the presence of Hades. This feeling on the beach was different. It was the same thing I felt when I got close to that pit. That was the entrance to Tartarus, wasn't it? Something powerful and evil is stirring down there ... something even older than the gods."

Poseidon and Zeus looked at each other. They had a quick, intense discussion in Ancient Greek. I only caught one word. Father.

Poseidon made some kind of suggestion, but Zeus cut him off. Poseidon tried to argue. Zeus held up his hand angrily. "We will speak of this no more," Zeus said. "I must go personally to purify this thunderbolt in the waters of Lemnos, to remove the human taint from its metal." He rose and looked at me. His expression softened just a fraction of a degree. "You have done me a service, boy. Few heroes could have accomplished as much."

"I had help, sir," I said. "Grover Underwood and Annabeth Chase—"

"To show you my thanks, I shall spare your life. I do not trust you, Perseus Jackson. I do not like what your arrival means for the future of Olympus. But for the sake of peace in the family, I shall let you live."

"Um ... thank you, sir."

"Do not presume to fly again. Do not let me find you here when I return. Otherwise you shall taste this bolt. And it shall be your last sensation."

Thunder shook the palace. With a blinding flash of lightning, Zeus was gone.

I was alone in the throne room with my father. "Your uncle," Poseidon sighed, "has always had a flair for dramatic exits. I think he would've done well as the god of theater."

An uncomfortable silence.

"Sir," I said, "what was in that pit?"

Poseidon regarded me. "Have you not guessed?"

"Kronos," I said. "The king of the Titans."

Even in the throne room of Olympus, far away from Tartarus, the name Kronos darkened the room, made the hearth fire seem not quite so warm on my back.

Poseidon gripped his trident. "In the First War, Percy, Zeus cut our father Kronos into a thousand pieces, just as Kronos had done to his own father, Ouranos. Zeus cast Kronos's remains into the darkest pit of Tartarus. The Titan army was scattered, their mountain fortress on Etna destroyed, their monstrous allies driven to the farthest corners of the earth. And yet Titans cannot die, any more than we gods can. Whatever is left of Kronos is still alive in some hideous way, still conscious in his eternal pain, still hungering for power."

"He's healing," I said. "He's coming back." Poseidon shook his head. "From time to time,

over the eons, Kronos has stirred. He enters men's nightmares and breathes evil thoughts. He wakens restless monsters from the depths. But to suggest he could rise from the pit is another thing."

"That's what he intends, Father. That's what he said."

Poseidon was silent for a long time.

"Lord Zeus has closed discussion on this matter. He will not allow talk of Kronos. You have completed your quest, child. That is all you need to do."

"But—" I stopped myself. Arguing would do no good. It would very possibly anger the only god who I had on my side. "As ... as you wish, Father."

A faint smile played on his lips. "Obedience does not come naturally to you, does it?"

"No ... sir."

"I must take some blame for that, I suppose. The sea does not like to be restrained." He rose to his full height and took up his trident. Then he shimmered and became the size of a regular man, standing directly in front of me. "You must go, child. But first, know that your mother has returned."

I stared at him, completely stunned. "My mother?"

"You will find her at home. Hades sent her when you recovered his helm. Even the Lord of Death pays his debts."

My heart was pounding. I couldn't believe it. "Do you ... would you ..."

I wanted to ask if Poseidon would come with me to see her, but then I realized that was ridiculous. I imagined loading the God of the Sea into a taxi and taking him to the Upper East Side. If he'd wanted to see my mom all these years, he would have. And there was Smelly Gabe to think about.

Poseidon's eyes took on a little sadness. "When you return home, Percy, you must make an important choice. You will find a package waiting in your room."

"A package?" "You will understand when you see it. No one can choose your path, Percy. You must decide."

I nodded, though I didn't know what he meant.

"Your mother is a queen among women," Poseidon said wistfully. "I had not met such a mortal woman in a thousand years. Still ... I am sorry you were born, child. I have brought you a hero's fate, and a hero's fate is never happy. It is never anything but tragic."

I tried not to feel hurt. Here was my own dad, telling me he was sorry I'd been born. "I don't mind, Father."

"Not yet, perhaps," he said. "Not yet. But it was an unforgivable mistake on my part."

"I'll leave you then." I bowed awkwardly. "I—I won't bother you again."

I was five steps away when he called, "Perseus."

I turned.

There was a different light in his eyes, a fiery kind of pride. "You did well, Perseus. Do not misunderstand me. Whatever else you do, know that you are mine. You are a true son of the Sea God."

As I walked back through the city of the gods, conversations stopped. The muses paused their concert. People and satyrs and naiads all turned toward me, their faces filled with respect and gratitude, and as I passed, they knelt, as if I were some kind of hero.

* * * Fifteen minutes later, still in a trance, I was back on the streets of Manhattan.

I caught a taxi to my mom's apartment, rang the doorbell, and there she was—my beautiful mother, smelling of peppermint and licorice, the weariness and worry evaporating from her face as soon as she saw me.

"Percy! Oh, thank goodness. Oh, my baby."

She crushed the air right out of me. We stood in the hallway as she cried and ran her hands through my hair. I'll admit it—my eyes were a little misty, too. I was shaking, I was so relieved to see her.

She told me she'd just appeared at the apartment that morning, scaring Gabe half out of his wits. She didn't remember anything since the Minotaur, and couldn't believe it when Gabe told her I was a wanted criminal, traveling across the country, blowing up national monuments. She'd been going out of her mind with worry all day because she hadn't heard the news. Gabe had forced her to go into work, saying she had a month's salary to make up and she'd better get started.

I swallowed back my anger and told her my own story. I tried to make it sound less scary than it had been, but that wasn't easy. I was just getting to the fight with Ares when Gabe's voice interrupted from the living room. "Hey, Sally! That meat loaf done yet or what?"

She closed her eyes. "He isn't going to be happy to see you, Percy. The store got half a million phone calls today from Los Angeles ... something about free appliances."

"Oh, yeah. About that..."

She managed a weak smile. "Just don't make him angrier, all right? Come on."

In the month I'd been gone, the apartment had turned into Gabeland. Garbage was ankle deep on the carpet. The sofa had been reupholstered in beer cans. Dirty socks and underwear hung off the lampshades.

Gabe and three of his big goony friends were playing poker at the table.

When Gabe saw me, his cigar dropped out of his mouth. His face got redder than lava. "You got nerve coming here, you little punk. I thought the police—"

"He's not a fugitive after all," my mom interjected. "Isn't that wonderful, Gabe?"

Gabe looked back and forth between us. He didn't seem to think my homecoming was so wonderful.

"Bad enough I had to give back your life insurance money, Sally," he growled. "Get me the phone. I'll call the cops."

"Gabe, no!"

He raised his eyebrows. "Did you just say 'no'? You think I'm gonna put up with this punk again? I can still press charges against him for ruining my Camaro." "But—"

He raised his hand, and my mother flinched.

For the first time, I realized something. Gabe had hit my mother. I didn't know when, or how much. But I was sure he'd done it. Maybe it had been going on for years, when I wasn't around.

A balloon of anger started expanding in my chest. I came toward Gabe, instinctively taking my pen out of my pocket.

He just laughed. "What, punk? You gonna write on me? You touch me, and you are going to jail forever, you understand?"

"Hey, Gabe," his friend Eddie interrupted. "He's just a kid."

Gabe looked at him resentfully and mimicked in a falsetto voice: "Just a kid."

His other friends laughed like idiots.

"I'll be nice to you, punk." Gabe showed me his tobacco-stained teeth. "I'll give you five minutes to get your stuff and clear out. After that, I call the police."

"Gabe!" my mother pleaded.

"He ran away," Gabe told her. "Let him stay gone."

I was itching to uncap Riptide, but even if I did, the blade wouldn't hurt humans. And Gabe, by the loosest definition, was human.

My mother took my arm. "Please, Percy. Come on. We'll go to your room."

I let her pull me away, my hands still trembling with rage.

My room had been completely filled with Gabe's junk. I here were stacks of used car batteries, a rotting bouquet of sympathy flowers with a card from somebody who'd seen his Barbara Walters interview.

"Gabe is just upset, honey," my mother told me. "I'll talk to him later. I'm sure it will work out."

"Mom, it'll never work out. Not as long as Gabe's here." She wrung her hands nervously. "I can ... I'll take you to work with me for the rest of the summer. In the fall, maybe there's another boarding school—"

"Mom."

She lowered her eyes. "I'm trying, Percy. I just... I need some time."

A package appeared on my bed. At least, I could've sworn it hadn't been there a moment before.

It was a battered cardboard box about the right size to fit a basketball. The address on the mailing slip was in my own handwriting: The Gods Mount Olympus 600th Floor, Empire State Building New York, NY With best wishes, PERCY JACKSON Over the top in black marker, in a man's clear, bold print, was the address of our apartment, and the words: RETURN TO SENDER.

Suddenly I understood what Poseidon had told me on Olympus.

A package. A decision.

Whatever else you do, know that you are mine. You are a true son of the Sea God.

I looked at my mother. "Mom, do you want Gabe gone? "Percy, it isn't that simple. I—" "Mom, just tell me. That jerk has been hitting you. Do you want him gone or not?"

She hesitated, then nodded almost imperceptibly. "Yes, Percy. I do. And I'm trying to get up my courage to tell him. But you can't do this for me. You can't solve my problems."

I looked at the box.

I could solve her problem. I wanted to slice that package open, plop it on the poker table, and take out what was inside. I could start my very own statue garden, right there in the living room.

That's what a Greek hero would do in the stories, I thought. That's what Gabe deserves.

But a hero's story always ended in tragedy. Poseidon had told me that.

I remembered the Underworld. I thought about Gabe's spirit drifting forever in the Fields of Asphodel, or condemned to some hideous torture behind the barbed wire of the Fields of Punishment—an eternal poker game, sitting up to his waist in boiling oil listening to opera music.

Did I have the right to send someone there? Even Gabe? A month ago, I wouldn't have hesitated. Now ...

"I can do it," I told my mom. "One look inside this box, and he'll never bother you again."

She glanced at the package, and seemed to understand immediately. "No, Percy," she said, stepping away. "You can't."

"Poseidon called you a queen," I told her. "He said he hadn't met a woman like you in a

thousand years.”

Her cheeks flushed. "Percy—"

"You deserve better than this, Mom. You should go to college, get your degree. You can write your novel, meet a nice guy maybe, live in a nice house. You don't need to protect me anymore by staying with Gabe. Let me get rid of him."

She wiped a tear off her cheek. "You sound so much like your father," she said. "He offered to stop the tide for me once. He offered to build me a palace at the bottom of the sea. He thought he could solve all my problems with a wave of his hand."

"What's wrong with that?" Her multicolored eyes seemed to search inside me. "I think you know, Percy. I think you're enough like me to understand. If my life is going to mean anything, I have to live it myself. I can't let a god take care of me ... or my son. I have to ... find the courage on my own. Your quest has reminded me of that."

We listened to the sound of poker chips and swearing, ESPN from the living room television.

"I'll leave the box," I said. "If he threatens you ..."

She looked pale, but she nodded. "Where will you go, Percy?"

"Half-Blood Hill."

"For the summer ... or forever?"

"I guess that depends."

We locked eyes, and I sensed that we had an agreement. We would see how things stood at the end of the summer.

She kissed my forehead. "You'll be a hero, Percy. You'll be the greatest of all."

I took one last look around my bedroom. I had a feeling I'd never see it again. Then I walked with my mother to the front door.

"Leaving so soon, punk?" Gabe called after me. "Good riddance."

I had one last twinge of doubt. How could I turn down the perfect chance to take revenge on him? I was leaving here without saving my mother.

"Hey, Sally," he yelled. "What about that meat loaf, huh?"

A steely look of anger flared in my mother's eyes, and I thought, just maybe, I was leaving her in good hands after all. Her own.

"The meat loaf is coming right up, dear," she told Gabe. "Meat loaf surprise." She looked at me, and winked.

The last thing I saw as the door swung closed was my mother staring at Gabe, as if she were contemplating how he would look as a garden statue.