

The Lightning Thief - Chapter 22 - The Prophecy Comes True

We were the first heroes to return alive to Half-Blood Hill since Luke, so of course everybody treated us as if we'd won some reality-TV contest. According to camp tradition, we wore laurel wreaths to a big feast prepared in our honor, then led a procession down to the bonfire, where we got to burn the burial shrouds our cabins had made for us in our absence.

Annabeth's shroud was so beautiful—gray silk with embroidered owls—I told her it seemed a shame not to bury her in it. She punched me and told me to shut up.

Being the son of Poseidon, I didn't have any cabin mates, so the Ares cabin had volunteered to make my shroud. They'd taken an old bedsheet and painted smiley faces with X'ed-out eyes around the border, and the word LOSER painted really big in the middle.

It was fun to burn.

As Apollo's cabin led the sing-along and passed out s'mores, I was surrounded by my old Hermes cabinmates, Annabeth's friends from Athena, and Grover's satyr buddies, who were admiring the brand-new searcher's license he'd received from the Council of Cloven Elders. The council had called Grover's performance on the quest "Brave to the point of indigestion. Horns-and-whiskers above anything we have seen in the past."

The only ones not in a party mood were Clarisse and her cabinmates, whose poisonous looks told me they'd never forgive me for disgracing their dad.

That was okay with me.

Even Dionysus's welcome-home speech wasn't enough to dampen my spirits. "Yes, yes, so the little brat didn't get himself killed and now he'll have an even bigger head. Well, huzzah for that. In other announcements, there will be no canoe races this Saturday..." I moved back into cabin three, but it didn't feel so lonely anymore. I had my friends to train with during the day. At night, I lay awake and listened to the sea, knowing my father was out there. Maybe he wasn't quite sure about me yet, maybe he hadn't even wanted me born, but he was watching. And so far, he was proud of what I'd done.

As for my mother, she had a chance at a new life. Her letter arrived a week after I got back to camp. She told me Gabe had left mysteriously—disappeared off the face of the planet, in fact.

She'd reported him missing to the police, but she had a funny feeling they would never find him.

On a completely unrelated subject, she'd sold her first life-size concrete sculpture, entitled *The Poker Player*, to a collector, through an art gallery in Soho. She'd gotten so much money for it, she'd put a deposit down on a new apartment and made a payment on her first semester's tuition at NYU. The Soho gallery was clamoring for more of her work, which they called "a huge step forward in super-ugly neorealism."

But don't worry, my mom wrote. I'm done with sculpture. I've disposed of that box of tools you left me. It's time for me to turn to writing.

At the bottom, she wrote a P.S.: Percy, I've found a good private school here in the city. I've put a deposit down to hold you a spot, in case you want to enroll for seventh grade. You could live at home. But if you want to go year-round at Half-Blood Hill, I'll understand.

I folded the note carefully and set it on my bedside table. Every night before I went to sleep, I read it again, and I tried to decide how to answer her.

On the Fourth of July, the whole camp gathered at the beach for a fireworks display by cabin nine. Being Hephaestus's kids, they weren't going to settle for a few lame red-white-and-blue explosions. They'd anchored a barge offshore and loaded it with rockets the size of Patriot missiles. According to Annabeth, who'd seen the show before, the blasts would be sequenced so tightly they'd look like frames of animation across the sky. The finale was supposed to be a couple of hundred-foot-tall Spartan warriors who would crackle to life above the ocean, fight a battle, then explode into a million colors.

As Annabeth and I were spreading a picnic blanket, Grover showed up to tell us good-bye.

He was dressed in his usual jeans and T-shirt and sneakers, but in the last few weeks he'd started to look older, almost high-school age. His goatee had gotten thicker. He'd put on weight. His horns had grown at least an inch, so he now had to wear his rasta cap all the time to pass as human.

"I'm off," he said. "I just came to say ... well, you know." I tried to feel happy for him. After all, it wasn't every day a satyr got permission to go look for the great god Pan. But it was hard saying good-bye. I'd only known Grover a year, yet he was my oldest friend.

Annabeth gave him a hug. She told him to keep his fake feet on.

I asked him where he was going to search first.

"Kind of a secret," he said, looking embarrassed. "I wish you could come with me, guys, but humans and Pan ..."

"We understand," Annabeth said. "You got enough tin cans for the trip?"

"Yeah."

"And you remembered your reed pipes?"

"Jeez, Annabeth," he grumbled. "You're like an old mama goat."

But he didn't really sound annoyed.

He gripped his walking stick and slung a backpack over his shoulder. He looked like any hitchhiker you might see on an American highway—nothing like the little runty boy I used to defend from bullies at Yancy Academy.

"Well," he said, "wish me luck."

He gave Annabeth another hug. He clapped me on the shoulder, then headed back through the dunes.

Fireworks exploded to life overhead: Hercules killing the Nemean lion, Artemis chasing the boar, George Washington (who, by the way, was a son of Athena) crossing the Delaware.

"Hey, Grover," I called.

He turned at the edge of the woods.

"Wherever you're going—I hope they make good enchiladas."

Grover grinned, and then he was gone, the trees closing around him.

"We'll see him again," Annabeth said. I tried to believe it. The fact that no searcher had ever come back in two thousand years ...

well, I decided not to think about that. Grover would be the first. He had to be.

July passed.

I spent my days devising new strategies for capture-the-flag and making alliances with the

other cabins to keep the banner out of Ares's hands. I got to the top of the climbing wall for the first time without getting scorched by lava.

From time to time, I'd walk past the Big House, glance up at the attic windows, and think about the Oracle. I tried to convince myself that its prophecy had come to completion.

You shall go west, and face the god who has turned.

Been there, done that—even though the traitor god had turned out to be Ares rather than Hades.

You shall find what was stolen, and see it safe returned.

Check. One master bolt delivered. One helm of darkness back on Hades's oily head.

You shall be betrayed by one who calls you a friend.

This line still bothered me. Ares had pretended to be my friend, then betrayed me. That must be what the Oracle meant...

And you shall fail to save what matters most, in the end.

I had failed to save my mom, but only because I'd let her save herself, and I knew that was the right thing.

So why was I still uneasy? The last night of the summer session came all too quickly.

The campers had one last meal together. We burned part of our dinner for the gods. At the bonfire, the senior counselors awarded the end-of-summer beads.

I got my own leather necklace, and when I saw the bead for my first summer, I was glad the firelight covered my blushing. The design was pitch black, with a sea-green trident shimmering in the center. "The choice was unanimous," Luke announced. "This bead commemorates the first Son of the Sea God at this camp, and the quest he undertook into the darkest part of the Underworld to stop a war!"

The entire camp got to their feet and cheered. Even Ares's cabin felt obliged to stand.

Athena's cabin steered Annabeth to the front so she could share in the applause.

I'm not sure I'd ever felt as happy or sad as I did at that moment. I'd finally found a family, people who cared about me and thought I'd done something right. And in the morning, most

of them would be leaving for the year.

* * * The next morning, I found a form letter on my bedside table.

I knew Dionysus must've filled it out, because he stubbornly insisted on getting my name wrong: Dear _____ Peter Johnson _____, If you intend to stay at Camp Half-Blood year-round, you must inform the Big House by noon today. If you do not announce your intentions, we will assume you have vacated your cabin or died a horrible death. Cleaning harpies will begin work at sundown. They will be authorized to eat any unregistered campers. All personal articles left behind will be incinerated in the lava pit.

Have a nice day! Mr. D (Dionysus) Camp Director, Olympian Council #12 That's another thing about ADHD. Deadlines just aren't real to me until I'm staring one in the face. Summer was over, and I still hadn't answered my mother, or the camp, about whether I'd be staying. Now I had only a few hours to decide.

The decision should have been easy. I mean, nine months of hero training or nine months of sitting in a classroom—duh. But there was my mom to consider. For the first time, I had the chance to live with her for a whole year, without Gabe. I had a chance be at home and knock around the city in my free time. I remembered what Annabeth had said so long ago on our quest: The real world is where the monsters are. That's where you learn whether you're any good or not.

I thought about the fate of Thalia, daughter of Zeus. I wondered how many monsters would attack me if I left Half-Blood Hill. If I stayed in one place for a whole school year, without Chiron or my friends around to help me, would my mother and I even survive until the next summer? That was assuming the spelling tests and five-paragraph essays didn't kill me. I decided I'd go down to the arena and do some sword practice. Maybe that would clear my head.

The campgrounds were mostly deserted, shimmering in the August heat. All the campers were in their cabins packing up, or running around with brooms and mops, getting ready for final inspection. Argus was helping some of the Aphrodite kids haul their Gucci suitcases and makeup kits over the hill, where the camp's shuttle bus would be waiting to take them to the airport.

Don't think about leaving yet, I told myself. Just train.

I got to the sword-fighters arena and found that Luke had had the same idea. His gym bag was plopped at the edge of the stage. He was working solo, whaling on battle dummies with a sword I'd never seen before. It must've been a regular steel blade, because he was slashing the dummies' heads right off, stabbing through their straw-stuffed guts. His orange

counselor's shirt was dripping with sweat. His expression was so intense, his life might've really been in danger. I watched, fascinated, as he disemboweled the whole row of dummies, hacking off limbs and basically reducing them to a pile of straw and armor.

They were only dummies, but I still couldn't help being awed by Luke's skill. The guy was an incredible fighter. It made me wonder, again, how he possibly could've failed at his quest.

Finally, he saw me, and stopped mid-swing. "Percy." "Um, sorry," I said, embarrassed. "I just—"

"It's okay," he said, lowering his sword. "Just doing some last-minute practice."

"Those dummies won't be bothering anybody anymore."

Luke shrugged. "We build new ones every summer."

Now that his sword wasn't swirling around, I could see something odd about it. The blade was two different types of metal—one edge bronze, the other steel. Luke noticed me looking at it. "Oh, this? New toy. This is Backbiter."

"Backbiter?"

Luke turned the blade in the light so it glinted wickedly. "One side is celestial bronze. The other is tempered steel. Works on mortals and immortals both."

I thought about what Chiron had told me when I started my quest—that a hero should never harm mortals unless absolutely necessary.

"I didn't know they could make weapons like that."

"They probably can't," Luke agreed. "It's one of a kind."

He gave me a tiny smile, then slid the sword into its scabbard. "Listen, I was going to come looking for you. What do you say we go down to the woods one last time, look for something to fight?"

I don't know why I hesitated. I should've felt relieved that Luke was being so friendly. Ever since I'd gotten back from the quest, he'd been acting a little distant. I was afraid he might resent me for all the attention I'd gotten.

"You think it's a good idea?" I asked. "I mean—"

"Aw, come on." He rummaged in his gym bag and pulled out a six-pack of Cokes. "Drinks are on me."

I stared at the Cokes, wondering where the heck he'd gotten them. There were no regular mortal sodas at the camp store. No way to smuggle them in unless you talked to a satyr, maybe.

Of course, the magic dinner goblets would fill with anything you want, but it just didn't taste the same as a real Coke, straight out of the can.

Sugar and caffeine. My willpower crumbled.

"Sure," I decided. "Why not?"

We walked down to the woods and kicked around for some kind of monster to fight, but it was too hot. All the monsters with any sense must've been taking siestas in their nice cool caves. We found a shady spot by the creek where I'd broken Clarisse's spear during my first capture the flag game. We sat on a big rock, drank our Cokes, and watched the sunlight in the woods.

After a while Luke said, "You miss being on a quest?"

"With monsters attacking me every three feet? Are you kidding?"

Luke raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, I miss it," I admitted. "You?"

A shadow passed over his face.

I was used to hearing from the girls how good-looking Luke was, but at the moment, he looked weary, and angry, and not at all handsome. His blond hair was gray in the sunlight. The scar on his face looked deeper than usual. I could imagine him as an old man.

"I've lived at Half-Blood Hill year-round since I was fourteen," he told me. "Ever since Thalia ... well, you know. I trained, and trained, and trained. I never got to be a normal teenager, out there in the real world. Then they threw me one quest, and when I came back, it was like, 'Okay, ride's over. Have a nice life.'"

He crumpled his Coke can and threw into the creek, which really shocked me. One of the first things you learn at Camp Half-Blood is: Don't litter. You'll hear from the nymphs and the naiads.

They'll get even. You'll crawl into bed one night and find your sheets filled with centipedes and mud.

"The heck with laurel wreaths," Luke said. "I'm not going to end up like those dusty trophies in the Big House attic."

"You make it sound like you're leaving."

Luke gave me a twisted smile. "Oh, I'm leaving, all right, Percy. I brought you down here to say good-bye."

He snapped his fingers. A small fire burned a hole in the ground at my feet. Out crawled something glistening black, about the size of my hand. A scorpion.

I started to go for my pen. "I wouldn't," Luke cautioned. "Pit scorpions can jump up to fifteen feet. Its stinger can pierce right through your clothes. You'll be dead in sixty seconds."

"Luke, what—"

Then it hit me.

You will be betrayed by one who calls you a friend.

"You," I said.

He stood calmly and brushed off his jeans.

The scorpion paid him no attention. It kept its beady black eyes on me, clamping its pincers as it crawled onto my shoe.

"I saw a lot out there in the world, Percy," Luke said. "Didn't you feel it—the darkness gathering, the monsters growing stronger? Didn't you realize how useless it all is? All the heroics—being pawns of the gods. They should've been overthrown thousands of years ago, but they've hung on, thanks to us half-bloods."

I couldn't believe this was happening.

"Luke ... you're talking about our parents," I said.

He laughed. "That's supposed to make me love them? Their precious 'Western civilization is a disease, Percy. It's killing the world. The only way to stop it is to burn it to the ground, start

over with something more honest.”

“You're as crazy as Ares.”

His eyes flared. “Ares is a fool. He never realized the true master he was serving. If I had time, Percy, I could explain. But I'm afraid you won't live that long.”

The scorpion crawled onto my pants leg.

There had to be a way out of this. I needed time to think.

“Kronos,” I said. “That's who you serve.”

The air got colder. “You should be careful with names,” Luke warned.

“Kronos got you to steal the master bolt and the helm. He spoke to you in your dreams.”

Luke's eye twitched. “He spoke to you, too, Percy. You should've listened.”

“He's brainwashing you, Luke.”

“You're wrong. He showed me that my talents are being wasted. You know what my quest was two years ago, Percy? My father, Hermes, wanted me to steal a golden apple from the Garden of the Hesperides and return it to Olympus. After all the training I'd done, that was the best he could think up.”

“That's not an easy quest,” I said. “Hercules did it.”

“Exactly,” Luke said. “Where's the glory in repeating what others have done? All the gods know how to do is replay their past. My heart wasn't in it. The dragon in the garden gave me this”—he pointed angrily at his scar—“and when I came back, all I got was pity. I wanted to pull Olympus down stone by stone right then, but I bided my time. I began to dream of Kronos. He convinced me to steal something worthwhile, something no hero had ever had the courage to take. When we went on that winter-solstice field trip, while the other campers were asleep, I snuck into the throne room and took Zeus's master bolt right from his chair. Hades's helm of darkness, too. You wouldn't believe how easy it was. The Olympians are so arrogant; they never dreamed someone would dare steal from them. Their security is horrible. I was halfway across New Jersey before I heard the storms rumbling, and I knew they'd discovered my theft.”

The scorpion was sitting on my knee now, staring at me with its glittering eyes. I tried to keep my voice level. “So why didn't you bring the items to Kronos?”

Luke's smile wavered. "I ... I got overconfident. Zeus sent out his sons and daughters to find the stolen bolt— Artemis, Apollo, my father, Hermes. But it was Ares who caught me. I could have beaten him, but I wasn't careful enough. He disarmed me, took the items of power, threat-ened to return them to Olympus and burn me alive. Then Kronos's voice came to me and told me what to say. I put the idea in Ares's head about a great war between the gods. I said all he had to do was hide the items away for a while and watch the others fight. Ares got a wicked gleam in his eyes. I knew he was hooked. He let me go, and I returned to Olympus before anyone noticed my absence." Luke drew his new sword. He ran his thumb down the flat of the blade, as if he were hypnotized by its beauty. "Afterward, the Lord of the Titans ... h-he punished me with nightmares. I swore not to fail again. Back at Camp Half-Blood, in my dreams, I was told that a second hero would arrive, one who could be tricked into taking the bolt and the helm the rest of the way—from Ares down to Tartarus."

"You summoned the hellhound, that night in the forest."

"We had to make Chiron think the camp wasn't safe for you, so he would start you on your quest. We had to confirm his fears that Hades was after you. And it worked."

"The flying shoes were cursed," I said. "They were supposed to drag me and the backpack into Tartarus."

"And they would have, if you'd been wearing them. But you gave them to the satyr, which wasn't part of the plan. Grover messes up everything he touches. He even confused the curse."

Luke looked down at the scorpion, which was now sitting on my thigh. "You should have died in Tartarus, Percy. But don't worry, I'll leave you with my little friend to set things right."

"Thalia gave her life to save you," I said, gritting my teeth. "And this is how you repay her?"

"Don't speak of Thalia!" he shouted. "The gods let her die! That's one of the many things they will pay for."

"You're being used, Luke. You and Ares both. Don't listen to Kronos."

"I've been used?" Luke's voice turned shrill. "Look at yourself. What has your dad ever done for you? Kronos will rise. You've only delayed his plans. He will cast the Olympians into Tartarus and drive humanity back to their caves. All except the strongest—the ones who serve him."

"Call off the bug," I said. "If you're so strong, fight me yourself"

Luke smiled. "Nice try, Percy. But I'm not Ares. You can't bait me. My lord is waiting, and he's got plenty of quests for me to undertake."

"Luke—"

"Good-bye, Percy. There is a new Golden Age coming. You won't be part of it."

He slashed his sword in an arc and disappeared in a ripple of darkness.

The scorpion lunged. I swatted it away with my hand and uncapped my sword. The thing jumped at me and I cut it in half in midair.

I was about to congratulate myself until I looked down at my hand. My palm had a huge red welt, oozing and smoking with yellow guck. The thing had gotten me after all.

My ears pounded. My vision went foggy. The water, I thought. It healed me before.

I stumbled to the creek and submerged my hand, but nothing seemed to happen. The poison was too strong. My vision was getting dark. I could barely stand up.

Sixty seconds, Luke had told me.

I had to get back to camp. If I collapsed out here, my body would be dinner for a monster.

Nobody would ever know what had happened.

My legs felt like lead. My forehead was burning. I stumbled toward the camp, and the nymphs stirred from their trees.

"Help," I croaked. "Please ..."

Two of them took my arms, pulling me along. I remember making it to the clearing, a counselor shouting for help, a centaur blowing a conch horn.

Then everything went black.

* * * I woke with a drinking straw in my mouth. I was sipping something that tasted like liquid chocolate-chip cookies. Nectar.

I opened my eyes.

I was propped up in bed in the sickroom of the Big House, my right hand bandaged like a club. Argus stood guard in the corner. Annabeth sat next to me, holding my nectar glass and dabbing a washcloth on my forehead.

"Here we are again," I said. "You idiot," Annabeth said, which is how I knew she was overjoyed to see me conscious.

"You were green and turning gray when we found you. If it weren't for Chiron's healing ..."

"Now, now," Chiron's voice said. "Percy's constitution deserves some of the credit."

He was sitting near the foot of my bed in human form, which was why I hadn't noticed him yet. His lower half was magically compacted into the wheelchair, his upper half dressed in a coat and tie. He smiled, but his face looked weary and pale, the way it did when he'd been up all night grading Latin papers.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Like my insides have been frozen, then microwaved."

"Apt, considering that was pit scorpion venom. Now you must tell me, if you can, exactly what happened."

Between sips of nectar, I told them the story.

The room was quiet for a long time.

"I can't believe that Luke ..." Annabeth's voice faltered. Her expression turned angry and sad.

"Yes. Yes, I can believe it. May the gods curse him.... He was never the same after his quest."

"This must be reported to Olympus," Chiron murmured. "I will go at once."

"Luke is out there right now," I said. "I have to go after him."

Chiron shook his head. "No, Percy. The gods—"

"Won't even talk about Kronos," I snapped. "Zeus declared the matter closed!"

"Percy, I know this is hard. But you must not rush out for vengeance. You aren't ready."

I didn't like it, but part of me suspected Chiron was right. One look at my hand, and I knew I wasn't going to be sword fighting any time soon. "Chiron ... your prophecy from the Oracle ... it was about Kronos, wasn't it? Was I in it? And Annabeth?"

Chiron glanced nervously at the ceiling. "Percy, it isn't my place—"

"You've been ordered not to talk to me about it, haven't you?" His eyes were sympathetic, but sad. "You will be a great hero, child. I will do my best to prepare you. But if I'm right about the path ahead of you ..."

Thunder boomed overhead, rattling the windows.

"All right!" Chiron shouted. "Fine!"

He sighed in frustration. "The gods have their reasons, Percy. Knowing too much of your future is never a good thing."

"We can't just sit back and do nothing," I said.

"We will not sit back," Chiron promised. "But you must be careful. Kronos wants you to come unraveled. He wants your life disrupted, your thoughts clouded with fear and anger. Do not give him what he wants. Train patiently. Your time will come."

"Assuming I live that long."

Chiron put his hand on my ankle. "You'll have to trust me, Percy. You will live. But first you must decide your path for the coming year. I cannot tell you the right choice...." I got the feeling that he had a very definite opinion, and it was taking all his willpower not to advise me. "But you must decide whether to stay at Camp Half-Blood year-round, or return to the mortal world for seventh grade and be a summer camper. Think on that. When I get back from Olympus, you must tell me your decision."

I wanted to protest. I wanted to ask him more questions. But his expression told me there could be no more discussion; he had said as much as he could.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," Chiron promised. "Argus will watch over you."

He glanced at Annabeth. "Oh, and, my dear ... whenever you're ready, they're here."

"Who's here?" I asked.

Nobody answered.

Chiron rolled himself out of the room. I heard the wheels of his chair clunk carefully down the front steps, two at a time.

Annabeth studied the ice in my drink. "What's wrong?" I asked her.

"Nothing." She set the glass on the table. "I ... just took your advice about something. You ... um ... need anything?"

"Yeah. Help me up. I want to go outside."

"Percy, that isn't a good idea."

I slid my legs out of bed. Annabeth caught me before I could crumple to the floor. A wave of nausea rolled over me.

Annabeth said, "I told you ..."

"I'm fine," I insisted. I didn't want to lie in bed like an invalid while Luke was out there planning to destroy the Western world.

I managed a step forward. Then another, still leaning heavily on Annabeth. Argus followed us outside, but he kept his distance.

By the time we reached the porch, my face was beaded with sweat. My stomach had twisted into knots. But I had managed to make it all the way to the railing.

It was dusk. The camp looked completely deserted. The cabins were dark and the volleyball pit silent. No canoes cut the surface of the lake. Beyond the woods and the strawberry fields, the Long Island Sound glittered in the last light of the sun.

"What are you going to do?" Annabeth asked me.

"I don't know."

I told her I got the feeling Chiron wanted me to stay year-round, to put in more individual training time, but I wasn't sure that's what I wanted. I admitted I'd feel bad about leaving her alone, though, with only Clarisse for company....

Annabeth pursed her lips, then said quietly, "I'm going home for the year, Percy."

I stared at her. "You mean, to your dad's?"

She pointed toward the crest of Half-Blood Hill. Next to Thalia's pine tree, at the very edge of the camp's magical boundaries, a family stood silhouetted—two little children, a woman, and a tall man with blond hair. They seemed to be waiting. The man was holding a backpack that looked like the one Annabeth had gotten from Waterland in Denver.

"I wrote him a letter when we got back," Annabeth said. "Just like you suggested. I told him ... I was sorry. I'd come home for the school year if he still wanted me. He wrote back immediately. We decided ... we'd give it another try."

"That took guts."

She pursed her lips. "You won't try anything stupid during the school year, will you? At least ... not without sending me an Iris-message?"

I managed a smile. "I won't go looking for trouble. I usually don't have to."

"When I get back next summer," she said, "we'll hunt down Luke. We'll ask for a quest, but if we don't get approval, we'll sneak off and do it anyway. Agreed?"

"Sounds like a plan worthy of Athena."

She held out her hand. I shook it.

"Take care, Seaweed Brain," Annabeth told me. "Keep your eyes open."

"You too, Wise Girl."

I watched her walk up the hill and join her family. She gave her father an awkward hug and looked back at the valley one last time. She touched Thalia's pine tree, then allowed herself to be lead over the crest and into the mortal world.

For the first time at camp, I felt truly alone. I looked out at Long Island Sound and I remembered my father saying, The sea does not like to be restrained.

I made my decision.

I wondered, if Poseidon were watching, would he approve of my choice? "I'll be back next summer," I promised him. "I'll survive until then. After all, I am your son." I asked Argus to take me down to cabin three, so I could pack my bags for home.