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*Once was Apollo
Now a rat in the Lab'rinth
Send help. And cronuts*

NO.

I refuse to share this part of my story. It was the lowest, most humiliating, most awful week in my four-thousand-plus years of life. Tragedy. Disaster. Heartbreak. I will not tell you about it.

Why are you still here? Go away!

But, alas, I suppose I have no choice. Doubtless, Zeus *expects* me to tell you the story as part of my punishment.

It's not enough that he turned me, the once-divine Apollo, into a mortal teenager with acne, flab and the alias Lester Papadopoulos. It's not enough that he sent me on a dangerous quest to liberate five great ancient Oracles from a trio of evil Roman emperors. It's not even enough that he enslaved me – his *formerly favourite son* – to a pushy twelve-year-old demigod named Meg!

On top of all that, Zeus wants me to record my shame for posterity.

Very well. But I have warned you. In these pages, only suffering awaits.

Where to begin?

With Grover and Meg, of course.

For two days, we had travelled the Labyrinth – across pits of darkness and around lakes of poison, through dilapidated shopping malls with only discount Halloween stores and questionable Chinese food buffets.

The Labyrinth could be a bewildering place. Like a web of capillaries beneath the skin of the mortal world, it connected basements, sewers and forgotten tunnels around the globe with no regard to the rules of time and space. One might enter the Labyrinth through a manhole in Rome, walk ten feet, open a door and find oneself at a training camp for clowns in Buffalo, Minnesota. (Please don't ask. It was traumatic.)

I would have preferred to avoid the Labyrinth altogether. Sadly, the prophecy we'd received in Indiana had been quite specific: *Through mazes dark to lands of scorching death. Fun! The cloven guide alone the way does know.*

Except that our cloven guide, the satyr Grover Underwood, did not seem to know the way.

'You're lost,' I said, for the fortieth time.

'Am not!' he protested.

He trotted along in his baggy jeans and green tie-dyed T-shirt, his goat hooves wobbling in his specially modified New Balance 520s. A red Rasta cap covered his curly hair. Why he thought this disguise helped him better pass for human, I couldn't say. The bumps of his horns were clearly visible beneath the hat. His shoes popped off his hooves

several times a day, and I was getting tired of being his sneaker retriever.

He stopped at a T in the corridor. In either direction, rough-hewn stone walls marched into darkness. Grover tugged his wispy goatee.

‘Well?’ Meg asked.

Grover flinched. Like me, he had quickly come to fear Meg’s displeasure.

Not that Meg McCaffrey *looked* terrifying. She was small for her age, with traffic-light-coloured clothes – green dress, yellow leggings, red high-tops – all torn and dirty thanks to our many crawls through narrow tunnels. Cobwebs streaked her dark pageboy haircut. The lenses of her cat-eye glasses were so grimy I couldn’t imagine how she could see. In all, she looked like a kindergartner who had just survived a vicious playground brawl for possession of a tyre swing.

Grover pointed to the tunnel on the right. ‘I – I’m pretty sure Palm Springs is that way.’

‘Pretty sure?’ Meg asked. ‘Like last time, when we walked into a bathroom and surprised a Cyclops on the toilet?’

‘That wasn’t my fault!’ Grover protested. ‘Besides, this direction *smells* right. Like . . . cacti.’

Meg sniffed the air. ‘I don’t smell cacti.’

‘Meg,’ I said, ‘the satyr is supposed to be our guide. We don’t have much choice but to trust him.’

Grover huffed. ‘Thanks for the vote of confidence. Your daily reminder: I didn’t *ask* to be magically summoned halfway across the country and wake up in a rooftop tomato patch in Indianapolis!’

Brave words, but he kept his eyes on the twin rings around Meg's middle fingers, perhaps worried she might summon her golden scimitars and slice him into rotisserie-style cabrito.

Ever since learning that Meg was a daughter of Demeter, the goddess of growing things, Grover Underwood had acted more intimidated by her than by me, a former Olympian deity. Life was not fair.

Meg wiped her nose. 'Fine. I just didn't think we'd be wandering around down here for two days. The new moon is in —'

'Three more days,' I said, cutting her off. 'We know.'

Perhaps I was too brusque, but I didn't need a reminder about the other part of the prophecy. While we travelled south to find the next Oracle, our friend Leo Valdez was desperately flying his bronze dragon towards Camp Jupiter, the Roman demigod training ground in Northern California, hoping to warn them about the fire, death and disaster that supposedly faced them at the new moon.

I tried to soften my tone. 'We have to assume Leo and the Romans can handle whatever's coming in the north. We have our own task.'

'And plenty of our own fires.' Grover sighed.

'Meaning what?' Meg asked.

As he had for the last two days, Grover remained evasive. 'Best not to talk about it . . . here.'

He glanced around nervously as if the walls might have ears, which was a distinct possibility. The Labyrinth was a living structure. Judging from the smells that emanated

from some of the corridors, I was fairly sure it had a lower intestine at least.

Grover scratched his ribs. ‘I’ll try to get us there fast, guys,’ he promised. ‘But the Labyrinth has a mind of its own. Last time I was here, with Percy . . .’

His expression turned wistful, as it often did when he referred to his old adventures with his best friend, Percy Jackson. I couldn’t blame him. Percy was a handy demigod to have around. Unfortunately, he was not as easy to summon from a tomato patch as our satyr guide had been.

I placed my hand on Grover’s shoulder. ‘We know you’re doing your best. Let’s keep going. And, while you’re sniffing for cacti, if you could keep your nostrils open for breakfast – perhaps coffee and lemon-maple cronuts – that would be great.’

We followed our guide down the right-hand tunnel.

Soon the passage narrowed and tapered, forcing us to crouch and waddle in single file. I stayed in the middle, the safest place to be. You may not find that brave, but Grover was a lord of the Wild, a member of the satyrs’ ruling Council of Cloven Elders. Allegedly, he had great powers, though I hadn’t seen him use any yet. As for Meg, she could not only dual-wield golden scimitars but also do amazing things with packets of gardening seeds, which she’d stocked up on in Indianapolis.

I, on the other hand, had grown weaker and more defenceless by the day. Since our battle with the emperor Commodus, whom I’d blinded with a burst of divine light, I had not been able to summon even the smallest bit of my

former godly power. My fingers had grown sluggish on the fret board of my combat ukulele. My archery skills had deteriorated. I'd even missed a shot when I fired at that Cyclops on the toilet. (I'm not sure which of us had been more embarrassed.) At the same time, the waking visions that sometimes paralysed me had become more frequent and more intense.

I hadn't shared my concerns with my friends. Not yet. I wanted to believe my powers were simply recharging. Our trials in Indianapolis had nearly destroyed me, after all.

But there was another possibility. I had fallen from Olympus and crash-landed in a Manhattan dumpster in January. It was now March. That meant I had been human for about two months. It was possible that the longer I stayed mortal, the weaker I would become, and the harder it would be to get back to my divine state.

Had it been that way the last two times Zeus exiled me to earth? I couldn't remember. On some days, I couldn't even remember the taste of ambrosia, or the names of my sun-chariot horses, or the face of my twin sister, Artemis. (Normally I would've said that was a blessing, not remembering my sister's face, but I missed her terribly. Don't you *dare* tell her I said that.)

We crept along the corridor, the magical Arrow of Dodona buzzing in my quiver like a silenced phone, as if asking to be taken out and consulted.

I tried to ignore it.

The last few times I'd asked the arrow for advice, it had been unhelpful. Worse, it had been unhelpful in Shakespearean English, with more *thees*, *thous* and *yea*,

*verily*s than I could stomach. I'd never liked the 90s. (By which I mean the 1590s.) Perhaps I would confer with the arrow when we made it to Palm Springs. *If* we made it to Palm Springs . . .

Grover stopped at another T.

He sniffed to the right, then the left. His nose quivered like a rabbit that had just smelled a dog.

Suddenly he yelled, 'Back!' and threw himself into reverse. The corridor was so narrow he toppled into my lap, which forced me to topple into Meg's lap, who sat down hard with a startled grunt. Before I could complain that I don't *do* group massage, my ears popped. All the moisture was sucked out of the air. An acrid smell rolled over me – like fresh tar on an Arizona highway – and across the corridor in front of us roared a sheet of yellow fire, a pulse of pure heat that stopped as quickly as it had begun.

My ears crackled . . . possibly from the blood boiling in my head. My mouth was so dry it was impossible to swallow. I couldn't tell if I was trembling uncontrollably, or if all three of us were.

'Wh-what was that?' I wondered why my first instinct had been to say *who*. Something about that blast had felt horribly familiar. In the lingering bitter smoke, I thought I detected the stench of hatred, frustration and hunger.

Grover's red Rasta cap steamed. He smelled of burnt goat hair. 'That,' he said weakly, 'means we're getting close. We need to hurry.'

'Like I've been *saying*,' Meg grumbled. 'Now get off.' She kneed me in the butt.

I struggled to rise, at least as far as I could in the cramped

tunnel. With the fire gone, my skin felt clammy. The corridor in front of us had gone dark and silent, as if it couldn't possibly have been a vent for hellfire, but I'd spent enough time in the sun chariot to gauge the heat of flames. If we'd been caught in that blast, we would've been ionized into plasma.

'We'll have to go left,' Grover decided.

'Um,' I said, 'left is the direction from which the fire came.'

'It's also the quickest way.'

'How about backwards?' Meg suggested.

'Guys, we're close,' Grover insisted. 'I can *feel* it. But we've wandered into *his* part of the maze. If we don't hurry —'
Screee!

The noise echoed from the corridor behind us. I wanted to believe it was some random mechanical sound the Labyrinth often generated: a metal door swinging on rusty hinges, or a battery-operated toy from the Halloween clearance store rolling into a bottomless pit. But the look on Grover's face told me what I already suspected: the noise was the cry of a living creature.

SCREEE! The second cry was angrier, and much closer.

I didn't like what Grover had said about us being in *his part of the maze*. Who was *his* referring to? I certainly didn't want to run into a corridor that had an insta-grill setting, but, on the other hand, the cry behind us filled me with terror.

'Run,' Meg said.

'Run,' Grover agreed.

We bolted down the left-hand tunnel. The only good

news: it was slightly larger, allowing us to flee for our lives with more elbow room. At the next crossroads, we turned left again, then took an immediate right. We jumped a pit, climbed a staircase and raced down another corridor, but the creature behind us seemed to have no trouble following our scent.

SCREEE! it cried from the darkness.

I knew that sound, but my faulty human memory couldn't place it. Some sort of avian creature. Nothing cute like a parakeet or a cockatoo. Something from the infernal regions – dangerous, bloodthirsty, very cranky.

We emerged in a circular chamber that looked like the bottom of a giant well. A narrow ramp spiralled up the side of the rough brick wall. What might be at the top, I couldn't tell. I saw no other exits.

SCREEE!

The cry grated against the bones of my middle ear. The flutter of wings echoed from the corridor behind us – or was I hearing *multiple* birds? Did these things travel in flocks? I had encountered them before. Confound it, I should *know* this!

'What now?' Meg asked. 'Up?'

Grover stared into the gloom above, his mouth hanging open. 'This doesn't make any sense. This shouldn't be here.'

'Grover!' Meg said. 'Up or no?'

'Yes, up!' he yelled. 'Up is good!'

'No,' I said, the back of my neck tingling with dread. 'We won't make it. We need to block this corridor.'

Meg frowned. 'But –'

'Magic plant stuff!' I shouted. 'Hurry!'

One thing I will say for Meg: when you need plant stuff done magically, she's your girl. She dug into the pouches on her belt, ripped open a packet of seeds and flung them into the tunnel.

Grover whipped out his panpipes. He played a lively jig to encourage growth as Meg knelt before the seeds, her face scrunched in concentration.

Together, the lord of the Wild and the daughter of Demeter made a super gardening duo. The seeds erupted into tomato plants. Their stems grew, interweaving across the mouth of the tunnel. Leaves unfurled with ultra-speed. Tomatoes swelled into fist-size red fruits. The tunnel was almost closed off when a dark feathery shape burst through a gap in the net.

Talons raked my left cheek as the bird flew past, narrowly missing my eye. The creature circled the room, screeching in triumph, then settled on the spiral ramp ten feet above us, peering down with round gold eyes like searchlights.

An owl? No, it was twice as big as Athena's largest specimens. Its plumage glistened obsidian black. It lifted one leathery red claw, opened its golden beak and, using its thick black tongue, licked the blood from its talons – *my* blood.

My sight grew fuzzy. My knees turned to rubber. I was dimly aware of other noises coming from the tunnel – frustrated shrieks, the flapping of wings as more demon birds battered against the tomato plants, trying to get through.

Meg appeared at my side, her scimitars flashing in her hands, her eyes fixed on the huge dark bird above us. 'Apollo, you okay?'

‘Strix,’ I said, the name floating up from the recesses of my feeble mortal mind. ‘That thing is a strix.’

‘How do we kill it?’ Meg asked. Always the practical one.

I touched the cuts on my face. I could feel neither my cheek nor my fingers. ‘Well, killing it could be a problem.’

Grover yelped as the strixes outside screamed and threw themselves at the plants. ‘Guys, we’ve got six or seven more trying to get in. These tomatoes aren’t going to hold them.’ ‘Apollo, answer me right now,’ Meg ordered. ‘What do I need to do?’

I wanted to comply. Really, I did. But I was having trouble forming words. I felt as if Hephaestus had just performed one of his famous tooth extractions on me and I was still under the influence of his giggle nectar.

‘K-killing the bird will curse you,’ I said finally. ‘And if I *don’t* kill it?’ Meg asked.

‘Oh, then it will d-disembowel you, drink your blood and eat your flesh.’ I grinned, though I had a feeling I hadn’t said anything funny. ‘Also, don’t let a strix scratch you. It’ll paralyse you!’

By way of demonstration, I fell over sideways.

Above us, the strix spread its wings and swooped down.