

Houdini's Escape From Hades

by
Mark Jenks

Chapter 1 An Unexpected Visit

Sometimes life in cabin three can be a lonely and boring thing: but every once in a while it can be really awesome. For example, a couple of weeks after Annabeth, Grover and I traveled to the underworld and returned a few stolen items, I had an unexpected visitor.

We had just completed another exhausting game of capture the flag and naturally we won. I was really beat and went back to what was now my home, to take a nap. Just as I was drifting off to sleep, I heard a light knocking at my door. A young satyr, named Gabby, stood shyly at the doorway. Smiling nervously she said, “Am... am I bothering you? ... Mr. Ja... Percy?”

I shook my head, and she continued, “There is someone here who wants to see you. I think that it's a god, but he's not one that I know of...” Stepping aside she ushered someone into my cabin and backed quietly away.

The god was a short stocky looking guy, wearing a tuxedo, of all things. He had a winning smile and unlike the other gods that I had met, this one seemed to be genuinely friendly. He held out his hand and shook mine. I might have doubted that he really was a god, but as soon as our hands touched, I could feel the power within him.

“Hello Percy,” he said, “My name is Golem.”

“Like the dude in the Lord of the Rings?”

He laughed a pleasant laugh and said, “No, not Gollum... it's Golem.” 'Ok', I thought, 'long o, sound, not short o.'

“I just wanted to meet one of the few godlings to have ever visited the underworld and returned.” He said. “You're in a very select group you know. The only other hero that I've had the

pleasure of being associated with who had made the journey was Harry Houdini. When I heard that someone else had made the trip, I just knew that had I to meet you.”

“I don't really know anything about Houdini's trip to the underworld, sir,” I said.

Golem smiled widely and said, “Really? Would you like to hear the tale? It's a fascinating story, although you might find some parts of it disturbing: if so, don't get me started.”

Harry really didn't think that he could be phased by anything any more so he just said, “Go ahead.”

Houdini was a half-blood, like you Percy. He was born in Budapest, and came to America when he was four and was raised and lived his life, in Appleton, Wisconsin. His mother was Thetis, the sea-goddess: related to Poseidon, and adopted daughter of Hera. His father was a mortal Rabbi, whose sense of honor and tenderness of heart had attracted the attentions of the goddess.

With a thoughtful look on his face Golem said, “I suppose that the relationship makes the two of you distant relatives... interesting.”

Continuing... never knowing of his true origins, Houdini went on to become the most celebrated escape artist in mortal history. I suppose that this makes sense though. Thetis has always had a strong aversion to captivity. It was she who freed Zeus when he was chained: and when her son, Achilles was born, she did all in her power to free him from death, by making him indestructible. Unfortunately, she missed his heel, and a snake bite to that heel wound up sending him into the captivity of an after-life in Hades realm.

His mother was a lesser known goddess, and so young Houdini was not under constant attack, like most of the inhabitants of Camp Half-Blood are today. To be honest, even though he had eventually become famous, he simply wasn't powerful enough to really attract anyone's notice.

Still, the blood of Thetis ran through his veins, and he shared her aversion to captivity. That's what made him such a great escape artist: that and the extraordinary agility that was his birthright as a

demigod. His was a good life until the day of his father's death.

The eighteen year old Houdini stood by the side of his father's death bed, along with the rest of his family. Before he died, his father, the Rabbi, whispered to him a great secret. He told his son that Houdini had a different mother than did his brothers and sister. Although the Rabbi was indeed his father, his mother was someone other than the woman whom he had always thought was his mother: the loving woman who had raised him.

The dying man pushed a slip of paper in young Harry Houdini's hand and weakly said, "In case you ever want to know the truth about your mother." Two hours later the Rabbi passed from this world.

After the funeral, Harry finally opened the paper and read, "*My son, your real mother is still alive. If you ever wish to find her, return to Budapest. In the cornerstone of the old Synagogue you will find the truth. With all my love, Papa.*" He decided then and there to book passage on the next steamship to Europe and find his biological mother.

In 1892, a sea voyage was the fastest form of transportation that could be found over the ocean, but it was still very slow by today's standards. Harry stood at the ship's railing looking out to sea. He had always had an affinity to the sea, and to bodies of water in general, but up until now, he had no idea that that affinity might be an indication of something special within him. Several times, he could swear that at the edge of the limits of his vision, he could see mermen and mermaids cavorting among the waves and playing tag with the dolphins. He shook the visions out of his head and went below deck to spend time with real people.

He wasn't very rich so he had booked passage among the poorer classes. He paid for his passage by entertaining the crew and passengers with magic tricks and handcuff escapes. He quickly became popular on such a boring cruise by entertaining those around him: unfortunately he also attracted the attention of several passengers that he never would have suspected existed.

A scruffy looking boy, named Bertram, in a beat up beret under a hooded coat and long baggy pants, took a special liking to Harry and the two quickly became close friends. Unfortunately, there was also a large menacing figure sticking to the shadows that kept looking at him: which made Harry very uncomfortable.

On his third evening aboard ship, after his first show of the evening, Harry was given a break so that he could go down to the crew's mess and get a bite to eat. First class passengers ate in a luxurious dining room that would have rivaled the opulence of the best restaurants in Paris; but the crew ate in a dingy room at the bottom of the ship. As an entertainer, he ate with the crew: but that was still infinitely better than what the people in steerage got. They ate what they were able to bring with them, and after a week at sea, they weren't eating very well.

Bertram had booked passage in steerage, so Harry had to eat alone. He climbed down the stairs and walked down the long hallway toward the mess hall. The whale-oil lamps flickered and smoked as he walked the damp corridor. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the shadowy figure following him at a distance. Where the man walked the lights went out completely and he was in constant darkness.

The feeling of unease stayed with Harry as long as the man continued to follow him. Upon entering the lighted lunchroom, the man stopped following him, and the sense of dread left him immediately.

The bland gruel-like stew was rather unappetizing, and young Houdini's mind wandered. His thoughts drifted into pleasant daydreams, until he was suddenly jolted back into what felt like the clearest reality that he had ever experienced: but what he saw about him didn't look like any reality that he had ever conceived.

The Grey Man dug through the rubble of the gray world, looking for anything that might hinder the workmen when they began construction of the gray building in the gray day to come. His gray coveralls soiled with the sands of the days that were, before the world became gray: his lean frame and

sandy hair, covered with the dirt of long ago.

The gray world was pretty much the same every day, and there was a kind of reassurance in knowing that there would be no surprises in the coming days. Still the Grey Man felt an empty spot in his soul and searched for his missing piece.

After many days of fruitless searching, the day finally came, while he ranged farther a field than he ever had before: as he crested a steep hill he looked down into a small valley, and he saw something that drew him up short. Before him sat a house, that was frighteningly large, behind a large fence. It must have been at least a four or five room house and that opulence alone would have stunned him, but surrounding the house there was the green and brown of growing plants. Honest to goodness plants. They really still existed. He stared at them for a long time and for the first time in his life the grey man felt wonder.

He looked up at the ashen sky and questioned the world. If the plants that the legends spoke of were true, could other of the myths be true too? Was there once an Age of Heroes? There were extent, stories about a golden age that existed long ago, but no one really believed them.

They say that once upon a time the Earth was green with blue skies, and that people lived incredibly long and fulfilling lives, where some of them even lived to be forty or fifty years of age. In that golden age, everyone could read while all of mankind was treated with respect and they only had to work five days a week. Every laborer on his crew had heard the stories from the day of their births, but then again they've heard the myths about Santa Claws, the Easter Bunny (although they never really believed that such an animal as a bunny ever actually existed), the Kings of Arthur and Martin Luther and the myth of the Lincoln Emancipator. But people nowadays were realists, and couldn't be bothered with such ancient fairy tales.

For a brief moment, the Grey Man dared to hope of a better world: but then he remembered the bitter realities of life, and gave up on his silly dreams. His was a world of gray... he couldn't believe that there ever was such a thing as a golden age. Turning away from the tantalizing vision of the house

with plants, he returned sadly to his unending labors.

Harry heard a deep growling voice laughing at the Grey Man's despair. Somehow he was sure that there was nothing human about that voice, but he also knew that there had been nothing in his experience to indicate that monsters really existed.

“It doesn't take one long to get up to speed on that subject: does it Percy!” Interjected Golem

Anyway, soon Harry felt someone shaking him awake and the vision of the Gray World disappeared: but as is often the case with visions, the memory of the vision stayed crystal clear. With the shaking renewed, young Houdini opened his eyes to see the concerned face of his friend Bertram.

“Harry! Are you all right?” Bertram said.

“I'll be fine,” Harry said, “just let me clear my head a little. Sitting up he looked around and realized that he was no longer in the Mess Hall. “How did I get here?”

“You passed out in the Mess Harry. Several of the crew carried you back to your bunk. They told me to call the ship's doctor, but I recognized the symptoms and figured that that might not be the best thing to do.”

“Why not Bert?”

“Because, my friend, the world is a lot more complicated than you ever thought, and I suppose that it falls to me to fill you in on a few truths about your life.”

Chapter 2 The Hidden Ship

Bertam had recognized Harry's problem, but he wasn't yet ready to fill the young Houdini in on everything that he probably should have: therefore he decided that, since the godling was beginning to manifest visions, he had to try to give him some partial warnings. "Harry, what can you tell me about what happened to you that made you pass out?"

"I guess that I had... a daydream? I'm not really sure what else it could have been. If it was a dream, it was the most brilliant dream that I've ever experienced."

"Can you tell me what you saw?"

Harry proceeded to tell his friend about the things that he had seen: and more importantly, the feeling that he had felt. It was as if the emotions of the Grey Man were as tangible a thing to him as a taste or smell might be: but if it were possible, they were even more real.

Bertram whistled and said, "Harry that was no dream... that was a vision... and a very powerful one at that! What do you know about visions?"

"Only what Papa talked about and the things that are written in the Torah. Papa said that it was the way that God talks to man."

"The vision that you had isn't a vision from that Creator of all things, who your Papa talked about. Your vision came from another source."

"The devil?"

"Oh no, no. Don't worry about that Harry: it was something else entirely. There are forces in the world like wind, electricity and waves, but long after the creation of the world many of these forces became embodied, taking on names and personalities. In ancient Greek and Roman times, these were called gods. That's gods with a small g: not God with a Capital G. It was one of them that gave you

your vision.”

As had all of the children of his era, Harry had read up on the ancient Greek mythology, and had a good working knowledge of it. His mind raced quickly and he asked, “Which one?”

“I don't know yet, but we'll figure it out, I promise you.”

“I'm not really convinced about this Bert. It really seems more likely that it was just a really odd dream.”

Bertram's face screwed up in thought until he made a decision. “Let me show you something Harry. It might shock you a little so don't be surprised.”

Bertram pulled back his hood, and pulled up his baggy pants legs. Behind his ears, he had gills, like a fish. Looking down, Harry could see that his legs were scaled, again like a fish, and when he pulled his feet out of his boots, his toes were webbed.

Harry looked with amazement, but not fear. “Are you a mermaid Bert?”

“Well, a merman actually: only the girls are mermaids.”

“I thought that mermaids had fish tails...”

“We do when we're in the water,” said Bertram. “But when we're out of the water, we are like this. Do you believe me about the Greek gods now?”

“Well, I'm willing to accept the possibility anyhow.”

Percy interrupted Golem's narrative at this point and said, “Wait a minute! I've seen mermen before, and they were blue and green and had really sharp teeth. No one could have mistaken them for humans.”

Golem laughed like a parent with a child who had just said something silly. “My friend, there are many kinds of mermen. Some of them look more human than others. Percy, if you're going to be a son of Poseidon, you should really learn a few things about the inhabitants of the seas. Why don't we get back to the story.”

Bertram and Harry talked late into the night, and Harry became aware of a whole world that had existed about him which he had never suspected. Somewhere during the night they had drifted off to sleep, but they were awakened suddenly by a frenzied activity on deck. The shouting and obvious alarm of the crew jolted them from their slumber.

Rubbing the sleep out of their eyes, they stumbled sleepily up onto the deck. Bertam asked one of the deck hands what was going on. The hand pushed back his stocking cap and said that an iceberg was approaching the ship from the south.

Harry thought that that was a strange direction for an iceberg to be coming from: usually they would be coming from the north, but he knew that the crewmen were the professionals, so he trusted them. Looking out into the fog, he searched for the berg, but all that he could see was an old style sailing ship: granted, it was a big one but still it was a ship, not a mass of ice.

The ship almost seemed to be floating on a dense fog bank. Its sails blazed brightly with an orange kind of St. Elmo's Fire. As he strained to get a better look at it, Harry was sure that he could see lightning dancing around the wooden deck of the old vessel.

The crew kept talking about avoiding a collision with an iceberg, but no matter where he looked, he couldn't find anything but the ship. Next to him, Bertram followed his gaze.

“Oh no...” the merman gasped..

“Oh no?”. Harry said, “Why oh no?”

“The ship Harry... don't you see the ship?”

“Yeah. It's kind of strange looking, but so what?”

“Harry, that's the Flying Dutchman. If this crew isn't very good, that ship will sink us much easier than any iceberg ever could.”

A chill ran through the young Houdini. “I've heard the stories about the Flying Dutchman. What do you suppose it wants with this ship?”

“If I had to guess, I would say that it wants either you or me.”

The ship modified its course to try to avoid the iceberg, and the Dutchman changed direction to continue on its ramming course. The ship changed direction again and again and the Dutchman also changed course each time in response. It was obvious to Harry and Bertram that the crew saw only an iceberg and no Flying Dutchman. And that there was no way that a collision could be avoided under that delusion.

Finally Bertram said, “Harry, if we want to save this ship, and the people on it, we'll have to abandon ship.”

The two friends climbed into a lifeboat and dropped with it into the sea. As soon as they hit the water they began rowing away from the doomed ship as quickly as they could. Sure enough, the Flying Dutchman changed course, and the hapless ship was saved. Unfortunately, it was now bearing down on the two young heroes.

As the Dutchman closed in on them, they could see that the Dutchman indeed was floating on a fog bank that looked like a nasty summer storm cloud. Leaping overboard Bertram tried to swim away, but the constant lightning strikes to the ocean electrified the waters around them and he was forced to flee back to the row boat.

The waves became choppier and choppier and they were having a difficult time keeping the small boat from capsizing. As the Dutchman neared them, the skies became darker and more menacing. The light around them continually faded, Harry was surprised at how gray the world around him had become. If he didn't know better, he would have sworn that Bertram was becoming a black and white character, like the ones that he had seen in old photographs, or in the new fangled silent pictures that were becoming so popular in the theaters lately.

As the Dutchman neared them he also was able to better make out the details of the ship. What had before seemed to be an ancient sailing ship continually changed shape before his eyes. One minute

it was an old style Man of War, and the next a Viking marauder: a Greek ship became a modern steelclad, then a futuristic luxury ship which then returned to an old pirate ship before it became something else.

On deck there were skeletal faces looking down on them, talking excitedly to each other. No matter what happened to the ship, the faces remained unchanged.

“I’ve got a really bad feeling about this Bert.” Harry said.

“Yeah, me too,” The merman said, “what should we do now?”

They tried fleeing one way then the other, but no matter where they turned, the Dutchman followed their course change and continually got closer and closer. Finally they decided that if they couldn't avoid it they would do something totally unexpected.

So they decided to attack the Flying Dutchman with a rowboat. They steered a collision course on a path that led directly toward the spectral ship: coming at the Dutchman from the north. The grayness increased, and as they entered the lightning fog the grayness darkened to blackness, and Harry quickly became unconscious.

Chapter 3

An Unghostly Ghost

Rope ladders dropped down onto the duo. Through a barely conscious haze, Bertram was aware of the hands attached to the ends of the ladders as they grabbed him and his friend and lifted them from the small water craft. He passed out as they were drawn through the mist and awoke on the wooden deck of an old style man-o-war.

Around the two friends was an odd assortment of mariners. There were skeletal Greek sailors and Barbary Pirates: there were American Naval Officers and German cooks: in total, there were at least sixty assorted shades standing over them. Their tattered and patched clothing showed a gray mist supporting the uniforms over their bony structures.

A Viking Marauder who seemed to be in charge threw a pail of water on the two castaways. “Get up you two! We're not planning to hurt you.” Said the Viking.

“Not unless we 'ave to,” chuckled the Pirate.

Several assorted shipmates lifted the half-blood and the merman to their feet. The Viking turned and walked toward the constantly changing doorway that led below deck. He beckoned them to follow him with a flick of his bony fingers. Numbly they followed the bizarre apparition down a ladder to what must have been the Captain's Quarters.

He motioned for them to sit at a table and then seated himself at the head of the table. “Well, “ he said, “you're probably wondering what you're doing here.”

“Y- yes sir.” Stammered Harry.

“You boy are here because you're a half-blood. The merman is only here because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, but since he is here, His fate is now tied in with yours. Do you know

what it means to be a half-blood?”

“A little: on the way here, Bertam tried to fill me in on the situation.”

“You'll need more than a little information if you're going to survive the quest that is going to be leveled on you.”

A Spanish Conquistador stepped out of the shadows behind Harry and touched both sides of his face. I'm told that lightning crackled through his brain, unleashing vision after vision, and in a matter of moments, he learned that half-bloods were the earthy children of the Greek Gods, and that all sorts of monsters and other creatures also existed. He suddenly knew that he was indeed a half-blood, although it would be a while until he discovered his true parentage.

When he began to recover, Harry said, “What do you want with me?”

“To the point, I like that. Well young half-blood, would it surprise you to know that all of the sailors on this ship are half-bloods?”

“What?” Bertram interrupted.

“Hush young merman, “the Viking said, “It is true. We are all half-bloods that have been cursed to sail this unholy vessel for all time, or until we are able to redeem ourselves in the eyes of the god who cursed us.”

“What did you do?” Harry whispered.

The Viking sighed,... a horrible sound I'm told, “We've each done different things. The one thing that we all have in common is that we all angered Hades, the god of the underworld. He has cursed us to be unable to die, but also to be unable to enter any part of his kingdom, so there's no way for us to find eternal peace or rebirth. He has also cursed us to be unable to leave this ship of the damned, so that we can never find a way to win his redemption and forgiveness.”

Harry and Bertram were horrified by the suffering that these poor creatures must be enduring. Then Harry began to wonder if he had done something to become one of these pitiful creatures. The fear he felt was like a whirlpool sucking him into a darkness that he couldn't understand or withstand.

Sensing Harry's panic, the Viking said, "Peace, little half-blood, you are not one of us. And if you perform the task that we are going to lay upon you, you probably never will be."

"Then what do you want with me?" Whispered the young Houdini.

The skeletal Viking smiled a toothy grin and said, "We think that we have a way to win our redemption, and we need a half-blood to act as our agent. We can't leave the ship, you know. You are the first living half-blood that we have come upon. It's really very hard to find one out here in the middle of the ocean."

"And why should we help you?", said Bertram indignantly, "after you hunted us down, threatened our ship and abducted us?"

Looking angrily at the merman the Viking said, "You'll help us, or you'll become one of us. If you make us mad, we can hold you here as long as we want... and we have nothing better to do for the rest of eternity. When you should be dying of starvation, you will continue to live because of the curse put on this ship."

Turning to Harry, his voice got softer, "Look young half-blood..."

"Call me Harry..." Houdini said.

"Right. I've almost forgotten that living people had names, it's been so long since anyone on board ship needed names." Hesitantly, like he was struggling to remember something long forgotten he said, "I think that I was once known as Eric... I think that I was also called *the Red* by some. "

"I've heard of you." Harry said.

The Viking looked surprised, "Well that's nice: at least I'm remembered: that's more than most of my shipmates have."

"What do you want us to do?" Said Harry.

"You will co-operate then?"

"We'll think about it. Now talk."

The Viking once named Eric began to fill them in on the situation. "Although we are never able

to leave this ship, we do get new crewmates every so often, so we pick up a bit of news here and there. Four months ago a half-blood Canadian Ensign was sent to us. He had learned of a plot against the lord of the underworld and made the mistake of trying to capitalize on the situation, so that when he found Hades, all that Hades saw was that the Ensign was a half-blood who would try to blackmail him. Immediately he was sent here and Hades hasn't yet found out that he is in danger.”

“And you want us to warn him? Bert said.

“Basically, yes. If we are able give him enough warning to let him save his kingdom: we're hoping that he'll show mercy and remove the curse from us: we're hoping that he will finally let us move on. And yes, we can't leave the ship so we're counting on you delivering our message for us.”

“That's a lot to ask,” said Harry, “why should we do it?”

“For two reasons, young Harry. First, it will give you freedom from this ship, and secondly it will bring you all of the answers that you have been seeking about your unknown past.” Turning to Bertram he continued, “And you merman... you will give young Harry all of the help he needs, or we will find you and drag you back here. By your nature you cannot stay away from the sea for long, and if you do not try your hardest to help him succeed: we will eventually find you and drag you back here. On that day you shall never be allowed to leave.”

The Viking straightened his rags of a uniform, like a modern officer would his most resplendent uniform. “Now, what will it be boys? Freedom and maybe glory, or eternal imprisonment?”

Slowly Harry said, “I guess that we'll choose freedom. What are we supposed to do?”

“First things first. You will have to pass a test to see if you have what it takes to accomplish the task that is set before you. After all, if you are not, like our young Ensign, you could wind up making things worse than they already are.”

“Then you will continue on the journey that you have already begun. When you find the answers that you seek, you shall also find a way to complete our task, so go. Find out the things that you need to know for yourself.”

Harry considered for a moment and asked, “How will we find Hades?”

“You will find him when the time is right: don't worry about that. When you find him, tell that he has an enemy that threatens the destruction of his entire kingdom.”

“Who shall we say is this enemy?’ Harry asked.

“All that we know about that; is that some people have called him Omega: the Gray Destroyer at the end of the world. Now,” he blew a dust in Harry and Bertram's faces and said, “Rest and prepare for your trial. This ship has to leave soon, so you need to off it before we leave.”

“Where are you going?” The drowsy Harry said as he drifted off to sleep.

“This ship is taking a cruise down to Cuba. There's a new warship down there that our young Ensign assures us that we will be unable to sink. We made a bet and we're going to see if the Flying Dutchman can sink the American ship, the Maine. If so: I guess that he was wrong and we'll have made sure that no one will long *remember the Maine.*”

Chapter 4

The Journey Home

Bright lights and dark stars swirled all around him as Harry drifted back into what he assumed to be consciousness. His hands were manacled behind him with a long chain attaching him to a vile looking man with a wicked grin. The man was leaning against a boulder, with body language that told him that he was at the stranger's mercy, and that the stranger was not a man of tolerance. The evil looking man was at least a foot taller than Harry wearing a dark business suit with a black shirt and even blacker tie. His black hair was slicked back and his short beard pulled down, coming to a point just below his chin. The man spoke in a soft and menacing tone, "You are finally here, I see? I think that it is time for you to arise, for we have a long and treacherous journey ahead of us."

The ocean was gone, and they appeared to be in a dark void. "Where are we? Am I dead?"

"Dead? No not yet, but you soon could be. You are here for the test." Said the evil looking man.

"Test? What test? Are you God?"

The man laughed a throaty chuckle, "No. I am definitely not the Creator of all things. I am your examiner and your test has already begun. We will travel a course that is fraught with danger and if you make the wrong step anywhere along the way, you will be eternally lost."

He yanked Harry to his feet and pulled him into the dark, forcing him to stumble along behind the tall man. After a seemingly endless trek they came to a poster, at which time the man pointed at the sign and said, "What do you see?"

Upon the cardboard sheet were a set of instructions:

Travel the course and find the clues that will lead you to home and safety.

Find your way to the hidden clue, and interpret the riddle properly.

If you do you shall live, but if you fail in this quest your soul shall be forever sacrificed.

Harry looked at his surroundings and the darkness had given way to illumination. He was standing at a similar, yet familiar crossroads which, on Earth, had led him into the trap that led to the Dutchman. One road led to the north and to the familiar looking steam ship at the side of the sea, while the other road led west into an unknown wood.

The dark man said, "It is time to choose. Will you again do your duty and take the north route or will you flee cowardly into the unknown?"

Harry looked back and forth and then looked at the man who wore body language that shouted caution. Harry had been trained by his Papa to follow orders blindly and was ready to once more take the north route until he looked again to the sign. At that point he turned quickly west and entered the overgrown wood.

The man in black asked him, "Why did you take this unknown path? I would have thought that you would have taken the known route and tried to change the outcome."

"The sign told me to take the safe course and I knew that the north route was a trap: therefore it would never be a safe route. Besides which, the gray seas reminded me of the Grey Man and his Gray World. His only hope was finding the home and the plants: neither of which I could find in the cold gray seas. Likewise, the clues said to find home and safety, which cannot be in a death at sea."

They walked the west road and the wild wood tumbled all about them in an enormous chaotic mass.

The shadowed road became harder to see with every step, and quickly began to have many branching paths leading in many directions.

He soon began to hear a quiet, yet strong, martial music, similar to Sousa's *Under the Double Eagle*, yet somehow gentler and more serene, rising from the woods about him: he marched ahead in confidence to the step of the music. The willows seemed to sway in unison with the hypnotic tune and the leaves of the oaks blowing in harmony with the rest of the woods.

The man in black tried to lead Harry down the first side path on the left while a harshly evil and

seductive swirling tune rose above the beautiful march as he neared the path. The clashing chords made his heart begin to pound with excitement and the thorny brambles grew thick on the edges of the side path. He could easily lose himself in this music. Harry yanked the chain, and with it the man, back onto the road with the marshal music.

Another side path quickly came up on his right bordered by beautiful flowers attached to the thorniest of bushes. As they closed the distance the march music began to fade into a seductive song of swaying rhythms that called to the baser parts of his instincts. Once again his dark companion attempted to entice him to follow the siren song, but Harry turned away at the last minute.

The marshal road continued. Again to the left was another path. This one carried a lullaby tune with a landscape that grew successively grayer as you traveled further along its length until the grasses could be seen as dry and sere. Harry paused in front of the path: its alluring chords spoke to his soul and as exhausted as the past days activities had made him, he longed to walk its sleepy byways and find rest. His guide stood quietly offering him no encouragement or resistance.

Harry took one step onto the path and felt his weariness intensified tenfold. Standing there for an interminable time he staggered back onto the marshal road and fell back into the step of the eternal march. Holding tightly to the chain his dark companion scowled as if he had suffered a great setback.

The marshal road veered to the right and another path branched off it which continued forward. The sweet strains of the Surprise Symphony, which had so comforted him at many difficult times in his life, interspersed with an unknown choral work, floated from the brilliantly colored flowers lining the small path and Harry made his choice, striding decisively onto the floral path. Each step brought him greater strength and joy. The chain joining him to the dark man dissolved, weakening, but not severing completely the hold that he held on Harry.

Followed ploddingly by the quiet man: Harry traversed the path through a woods that was so densely overgrown with flowering shrubs that you couldn't see more than three feet into it: the beautiful strains of music and intoxicating scents of the floral symphony around him moved him to skip lightly along

the chosen path despite the unknown destination ahead.

The journeyer and his shadow lost all track of time in this exuberant state until the path ended abruptly as it spilled out into a large circular glen. The walls consisted of giant trees standing tall and impenetrable, with a dozen breaks, opening onto a dozen new paths leading off into as many new directions. The floor was made of a single trunk of an enormous redwood tree, a hundred feet across, which had been cut perfectly flat and polished to a mirror-like finish.

Brightly dressed dancing girls pranced out from the openings, each one beckoning him to dance with her. The nearest one was an Argentine girl who was seductively dressed, who walked boldly up to Harry and whispered suggestively into his ear. She placed her body into full contact with Harry in the manner of the tango and the dance began. The music sang through the air and the couple danced through spinning and hypnotic movements, the dark man standing quietly next to the pathway that spawned the music of the tango.

With a herculean effort, Harry pulled himself away from the siren woman and immediately ran into an American girl dressed in the most popular of modern dresses along with a group of her friends. They were all dancing to the rhythms of a gay nineties piano rag, swaying with a wild abandon and chaotic swirl that would be easy to lose oneself in. The little blond dancer tried to dance him further and further into the mindless mass of people which led to another doorway.

Just before he entered the door, he yanked himself into an even worse crowd of people situated near another doorway. With each change of dance, he noticed that the man in the black suit had moved himself to stand next to the door where the dancers had spewed out. The wild crowd who were now all around him began hurting him and blood was beginning to flow from many of the wounds that all of the dancers had obtained.

Getting away from one group of dancers after another Harry placed himself directly in the middle of the dance floor where he was able to obtain a minutes respite, so that he could study the situation.

Each group of dancers tried to entice him to come to them except one.

Directly ahead of where he had entered the dance hall were a group of children playfully dancing to the unheard music in their own heads. Each child was dancing in a different way. Harry remembered when he was a child and had danced like these children. They danced as an expression of their joy, whereas the adult dancers danced seeking joy through their festivities. Harry walked to the doorway by the children: the adult dancers pawed and clawed at him attempting to hold him back, but once more in his life, he was moved by the joy within him as he danced as freely as a child, letting his heart move him, and he skated through the inviting doorway.

The strange pair of men passed through a series of rooms. Each room had several pathways leading out of it, and in front of each path there was displayed a clue: but only one of the clues would lead him to the correct path: the others led to destruction.

The painting room displayed five paintings: one showed a lion chasing a gazelle, one showed a stop sign on a lonely country road, one displayed a mother holding her baby, another displayed a scene of the Battle of Gettysburg and the last a scene depicting an old man at a table eating a loaf of bread.

Harry chose the mother and her child. The man in the black suit asked him why he had chosen that particular painting and Harry said that all of the paintings depicted scenes that would lead to an ending, except the mother's, which depicts a family, which is a thing that can go on forever. He had chosen correctly and the journey continued.

The room of mathematics posed several different kinds of questions. The first one posed $x+x=0$. The next stated, $y=3$. Another $3x=2y$, and lastly, $(4y/0)+3=2z$. Harry was never one who was particularly math oriented so he took longer to study this puzzle than maybe he should have. Finally he chose the third equation as the one that he needed now.

His companion again asked him why he made that particular choice and he answered cautiously, half expecting the man to be setting a trap for him, "The first two equations have single answers, while the

fourth one is an impossibility and has no answer. If the puzzle wanted a single answer there would have been only one option that had a single answer. The third one is the only one with an infinite number of possibilities, so it must be that one.

He had become so used to the continuing series of rooms that he was startled when the next hallway suddenly dumped the two men into a well lit glen with no exits. Directly in front of them was a large board with a cryptic poem.

“Now comes the final exam,” Said the man in black as he made a sweeping gesture in front of the poem.

*Many things it can be,
Though one's above them all.
To forever leave this place,
Don't be distracted by the small,
For things can be bright and things can be dull,
With our senses deadened by the latest fads pull.
For we live in a world that screams all around,
But a gentle word can rarely be found.
Though if you've found the right clue,
The help will abound.
So make you your choice,
The answer's in front of you.*

This was more confusing than any of the choices that had stood previously before him. He never was much for poetry, because it always seemed to have hidden meanings: and this, it seemed to him wasn't even particularly good poetry. Sitting down on a nearby log, he stared at the poster board for what seemed like an eternity.

Finally, he looked up at his traveling companion and said, “Can't you give me any clues?”

The man smiled in a way that made Harry uncomfortable, “Of course I can. You just never asked.”

Then he stopped and Harry realized that he had been ignoring the man in the black suit. “Maybe,” he thought, “that had been his mistake.”

Irritated by the abrupt answer of his shadow follower, he continued, “Well, why don’t you help me?” “Because you haven’t asked the right questions yet.”

Harry thought about it for a moment, “Maybe I’m supposed to play a game of twenty questions with him,” he thought. He reasoned out what the right question might be: then he asked, “What do I have to do to leave this place and return home?”

“Ah!” said the man, “Now you begin to see. You but need to find the magic word and to ask, and you will be granted passage home.”

“It couldn’t be that easy, could it,” thought Harry. Then he looked at the poem before him. Was the poem only a distraction to keep him from the simple answer? Was the man setting some sort of trap for him? He decided to go for the obvious, “Is the magic word please?”

“Although that is never a bad word, it isn’t that easy. This is your test. This has been a long journey with many difficult lessons along the way. What have you learned?”

Harry began to review his entire journey looking for a pattern. He recalled each and every trial that he had overcome and even recognized a few that he had passed that, at the time, he didn’t even realize were trials. He reread the poem and recalled his journey and he made his choice.

He awoke back in the rowboat: he had made the right choice. They had washed up on the shores of

France. Bertram lay next to him unconscious, dressed in his usual ragged clothing. The merman roused and looked up at Harry. “Wha’ happened?” he slurred, blinking wakefulness into his eyes.

Harry recited the story of his long journey and his final exam. After listening several times to the tale, the merman asked, “Harry, you said that you made a choice that brought you back to us. Can you please tell me: what was the choice that you made?”

“Ah, that is the sweetest thing of all. I realized that everything that I had experienced was a form of communication: music communicates emotions better than any words ever written and dance frees the soul to express its joy. Likewise artwork, mathematics, poetry and even my companion’s body language communicated things, in their own ways, that could never be expressed in any other. I realized then that communications was the magic word that would lead me home.”

Bertram said, “I don’t see your point.”

“It was then that I remembered what the poem at the end of my journey, and the instructions at the beginning said. They said that there was one that was not shown me, but was above them all: one that I had to discover for myself.”

“Go ahead Harry... what was it? What did you discover?”

“For a guy who has spent so much time talking about gods and goddesses, I would have thought that it was obvious. The answer was communication between a man and his Creator. The form of communication that stands above all other forms of communication is prayer. As soon as I realized this I sank to my knees and offered up the desires of my heart: after which I immediately awoke here. Nothing else would have returned us to the path that leads to my old home: the place of my birth.”

It was obvious that Bertram didn't remember the journey at all, and Harry wasn't going to tell him that Bertram was possibly at his side throughout the entire journey. He would have to discern the meaning of the way he acted on the journey for himself. Harry had learned the lesson that he was meant to learn: Bert would have to learn his own lessons in his own way.

Chapter 5

Bertram's Insights

Harry and Bertram abandoned their boat and struck out walking due east. After about forty-five minutes they found a cobbled street and worked their way to the nearest railroad train station and booked passage to Paris. As was usual in those days, before the production of automobiles, the railroad was the main form of transportation; so the train had quite a few people aboard. Unfortunately for those two, everyone was speaking French, not English. (Well, it was France after all.)

They rode alone talking quietly to themselves, when a young man, who was about the same age as Houdini, broke his silence and spoke to them, "It's nice to hear someone else speaking English," he said, "My name is Mike. Where are you from?"

Harry was thrilled to hear someone else speaking in a language that he could understand. He reached out to shake the stranger's hand and said, "I'm Harry and this here's my friend Bert. Where are you from?"

"New York born and bred," said Mike proudly, "How 'bout you?"

"Wisconsin," Harry replied, "although I was born in Budapest, I was raised in Wisconsin."

"Nice country," Mike said, "now I gotta ask; what are you doing traveling cross country with a merman?"

Startled, Houdini said, "Wh... what..."

"Oh come now, I've been watching you. He's a merman, and you're a half-blood. So am I for that matter. I know the signs. You did know that you were a half blood didn't you?"

"Well, yes. I just found out recently, but I really don't know what that all entails yet. Aren't we supposed to go on quests or something?"

"Well, we're always on some sort of quest or another, even when we aren't officially on a quest.

You? You're on your way somewhere, aren't you? Well that's your current quest. Me? I'm looking for a dragon.”

“Really? Dragons are real too?”

“They better be, or I've wasted a lot of time looking for them.”

Harry looked at the guy called Mike, trying to size him up. 'Is this guy feeding me a line?' He thought to himself. Instead he said, “How's that going for you?”

“Not so good,” Mike said, “I have to get a dragon's scale. That's my quest. If I can, the Oracle will tell me who my father is. Unfortunately, I have no idea how to find a dragon.”

“I know how to find dragons,” said Bertram.

Mike looked startled. I guess that he probably thought that Bertram had dozed off, but he was listening to everything. Composing himself, Mike asked, “What do you know, merman?”

“Bert. The name's Bert: at least to my friends. What I know is that dragons live under water. You're looking in the wrong place. That's why they're only seen on rare occasions. The most famous dragon lives in Loch Ness. Occasionally, some mortal who can see through the mist catches a glimpse of it, and tells the story of seeing a lake monster.”

Now Harry had to wonder about the veracity of his friend too.

“Ok friend Bert,” said Mike, “do you happen to know where the nearest dragon might be?”

“Not really. The nearest one that I know of lives in Lake Geneva. It's not one of the biggest ones, but it is a dragon.”

Excitedly, Mike said, “I've got to get there then. You guys want to come along?”

“Sure,” said Harry, “It's pretty much along the way to Budapest; which I guess that getting there is our quest for now. I'm supposed to go there to find out who my mother is.”

“I guess that we're on the same quest then.” Said Mike. “Why don't we travel together and help each other out.”

“Wait a minute,” Bertram said, “I can see what you'll get out of this partnership, but what do we

get? And how do we know that you aren't just going there to hurt an innocent dragon. Dragons are really gentle and peaceful creatures if you don't get them riled up: and believe me, you really wouldn't ever want to get one mad at you. Why should we take a chance at angering one?"

That was something that young Harry hadn't thought of.

"I can be of great help to you guys," said Mike. "I've been trained at the newest Camp Half-Blood, which is in America by the way and I've been trained how to defend myself and my friends: plus I have several mystical gifts to help us on this way. Don't fool yourselves; as easy as your quest may seem at this time, no quest is ever completed without a few obstacles: and then there's the monsters to consider."

"What monsters?" said Harry.

"There are always monsters about Harry," said Bert. "Now Mike: how can we be sure that you aren't out to hurt an innocent dragon?"

"I'll tell you what. Since only you know exactly where the dragon is, why don't you go to it before I do and ask it for permission. Then if the dragon says it's all right... then I go see it?"

"Sounds good. This is how we'll do it..." Bert kept talking, but Harry felt that same uneasy feeling of being watched come over him that he had felt on the ship. Looking around he saw the same shadowy man from the ship ducking out through the back door of the coach car.

Jumping up Harry vaulted over Mike and bolted for the door. Bert and Mike looked startled and followed him. Once through the door, Harry looked around, but the man of shadows had disappeared. How he was able to leave a moving train was a further mystery that they would have to wait to find the answer.

"That was the man from the ship..." said Harry quietly.

Looking helplessly into the darkness, he watched as the train continued down the tracks.

They switched trains in Paris and continued on with their journey. On their overnight stay in

the Capital of France, Harry again glimpsed the shadowy watcher and was relieved when he got back to the relative safety of the train.

They arrived in Lausanne the following day. Harry and Mike rented a room while Bertram went off to find the dragon. I'm told that he had to travel by foot well out of the city where he jumped into the lake and assumed his merman form: a form which granted him the ability to travel under water at incredible speeds.

He sped from one end of the lake to another under the assumption that it shouldn't be terribly hard to find as big an animal as a dragon: but he was surprised when it couldn't be found. Eventually he had to start questioning the fish of the lake. Bertram always hated to lower himself to the level of talking to the lower castes of the undersea worlds, but he had no other choice. It was like having to get useful information out of a two year old.

Finally one of them was able to tell him that the dragon had been captured by a strange looking land dweller four days before. All of the while that they were conversing the fish kept rubbing up against him like a furry kitten. Humans might find that activity endearing, but a merman does not like to be touched if he can avoid it.

The lake fish pointed out a warehouse on the land where he said that the dragon was being held. "There are other strange things about swimmer friend," the orange fish said, "Have you noticed the lake floor in the vicinity of the dragon's captivity? There is a kelp field of swaying human bones where there should be only water plants. It is all very strange."

Bertram glanced downward and indeed he did see that the lake bed had what looked like a prairie of skeletal human arms waving in the currents just as tall grasses would be waving in a gentle breeze. He thanked his fish friend and cautiously approached the bizarre garden beneath him.

The arms and hands continued to sway hypnotically in the currents, lulling him into a false sense of peace, but as he got too close they came to instant activity and reached out to grab him. If he

had been a sluggish human type, instead of a sleek and swift merman, he would have been trapped by the hands and dragged down into the muck.

Putting on a burst of speed he headed swiftly for the shore. There was obviously more going on here than simply a human hunting a dragon or lake monster: there was a real power behind the dragon's abduction, and he had to warn his friends about it. He rocketed toward land and had gathered such velocities that he left the water and became airborne, sailing nearly an eighth of a mile into the air. Extending his little used sail fins he glided through the air like a flying fish, covering nearly all of the ground to the hotel in less than ten minutes.

He walked into his friend's hotel, not really sure of what it was that he was going to tell them. He wasn't even sure whether he and Harry should even be getting involved. Harry may think that his quest is to find out who his mother is, but Bertram knew that it was far more important to find their way into the underworld and deliver their message to Lord Hades. He had no intention of being trapped aboard the Flying Dutchman for an eternity.

Chapter 6

A Dragon Unchained

The three adventurers waited until dark the following evening. There was a cold chill blowing in off of the lake and they had to dress warmly. Their seaman's coats were dark and blended into the shadows well while the overcast sky and icy fog made it hard to find their way around in the strange countryside.

The warehouse was easy enough to find as it was the only structure that was fenced in and well lit, but unfortunately there was a guard stationed at each of the three large barn-like doors. Harry looked numbly at each of the massive guards and said, "What are those things? How can they stand there without anyone noticing them?"

"Those are Cabeiri." Bertram answered, "They used to be servants of Hephaestus, but they were too opinionated and Hephaestus eventually replaced them with cyplopes. They're a lot like ogres except for that tuft of feathers forming a mohawk on their heads.

"The Cabeiri aren't particularly bright, but they think that they are, and Hephaestus got tired of them always trying to tell him how he ought to be doing his work. Most of the time they really had no idea what they were talking about: they just thought that they did."

"Think about that Percy: there are always people like that everywhere: in fact almost every teen-ager is like that at one time or another: you'll see. Either way our heroes were teens and wouldn't have been able to figure that out yet." Said Golem in an aside to the son of Poseidon.

Bertram continued, "We should be able to slip by them, they spend too much time daydreaming to be good guards. Let's go around to the back door."

The boys tried to step out of the brush but something inside the bushes grabbed their ankles and held them fast. In a sudden panic, they started swatting the ground with sticks. Between the leaves

they saw the same skeletal hands that Bertram had seen on the bottom of the lake. Feeling the cold grip of fear in their hearts each of them tried harder to force the hands to release them.

The noise of their struggles caught the attention of the Cabeiri, who came upon them stealthily and knocked them unconscious. They didn't see their attackers until the split second before they were swallowed up in the mists of oblivion.

Harry awoke with a splitting headache. Mike was still out with blood staining his blond hair; but Bert had a harder head and was already assessing their situation. A dense fog brought visibility down to about ten feet. Their arms were manacled to a large pole which must have been off to one side of the building since there was a wall within a few feet of them. They could hear a deep growling whimper far into the mists, but could see nothing there

“Psst,” Harry said, “Where are we Bert? What's going on?”

“Your guess is as good as mine friend. A little while ago several men came in and looked at us. I faked a coma and stayed quiet. I couldn't hear much of what they said, but I know that they're planning on coming back later.”

“What did they look like? Were they more of those Kaberry things?”

“That's Cabeiri: and no, they looked like mortal men; although they were in long coats and mufflers, so I couldn't get a good look. One of them... the leader I think... might have been that Shadowy Man that you were talking about the other day.”

“We have to get free before they get back here. Fortunately, escapes are one of my specialties. Turn away, so I can get us free.”

“Why should I turn away?”

“Because no good magician ever reveals his secrets unless he has to: now turn around.”

Bertram turned away and immediately he heard the jingle of manacles falling to the floor. Stealing a glance he saw that Harry was indeed free. Harry used one hand to turn Bert's head away

while with the other he did something that couldn't be seen, and instantly the merman felt his manacles fall away.

In a few minutes they had freed and woken Mike and the three friends were searching the foggy building for a door. They nearly jumped when they heard the creak of a rusty hinge in the darkness and the murmur of whispered voices through the mists. There is nothing more disconcerting than hearing a noise in the dark and they all jumped backwards when they heard it.

“Sssshh,” Mike warned, “We have to go the other way.”

Creeping blindly along, they changed directions and wandered deeper onto murky center of the warehouse. The growling whimper got stronger with every step that they took. Tripping over a chain that looked like it could hold the anchor of a large steelclad ship, they looked up through the fog and saw the dragon.

She was small as a dragon goes: only about fifty feet in length; and she was chained down to the floor. There was a hose running continually over her to prevent her from building up enough heat to ignite her flame. She looked at the adventurers with pleading violet eyes which conveyed a hopeful plea for help.

They heard the shouting of their captors through the fog and they knew that their escape had been discovered. Harry hoped that the dragon's moaning would be loud enough to mask the noise that he was making as he picked the massive lock that held the dragon chained to the floor.

Bertram and Mike shut off the hoses that had been spraying the dragon and began to drag them away. It was obvious that their best means of escape would be to set the dragon free so that their enemies would have more to worry about than three escaped teens. All in all, it was a well improvised scheme, except that none of them had consulted with the dragon.

As soon as Harry had her free, she reared up on her hind legs, spreading her leathern wings and let out a roar. Igniting her fire she burned off the fog and laid down a blast of fire in the attacker's path. Looking at the boys she grabbed each one of them between her blazing teeth, the flames held back and

glowing deep in her throat. She threw each of them onto her back and leaped into the air, her wings lifting her higher and faster with each beat.

The boys struggled to hold onto her as they smashed through the skylight and soared into the night sky. It was both terrifying and exhilarating to fly in such a fashion. 'Maybe some day,' they all thought, 'men will build a machine that would allow men to be able to fly in the skies like this.' They all knew that daring and resourceful men were working on it, but these three had already done it. A few years later the Wright Brothers would do it, and change the world, but for now, they alone could enjoy the power of flight.

Bertram shinnied forward to the dragon's head and was talking to the dragon in a tongue that neither Harry nor Mike understood as the two of them worked out a plan.

After a quick stop to pick up their things, the boys and their dragon friend, which Bertram told them was named Silverscale, were winging their way eastward.

The eleven hour flight was at first exciting, but eventually very tiring. Silverscale set them down just outside of Budapest and gave each of them a beautiful silver scale in thanks. She told Bertram that they had won her eternal gratitude, and if they ever needed her help, all that they had to do was place their scale under their tongue and let it dissolve. If they did that she would know that they were in distress and she would come running.

Mike was thrilled, because this meant that he was now able to complete his own quest. He put the scale in a locked and sealed box in his bag and sighed a sigh of relief. His friends had helped him with his quest, now it was time for him to help them with theirs.

Silverscale had told Bertram that she was going to travel further east and stay in the Caspian Sea for a few years. Maybe by then the dragon hunters in Lake Geneva would have given up and she could go home.

They each gave her a hug and thanked her for the ride. (She did save them from train fares and

having to change trains several times after all.) Standing back they watched as she spread her wings and once again majestically took flight.

When they could see her no longer they turned towards Budapest and started walking. The young adventurers decided to get a room and take a long night's rest. In the morning they would begin their search for the old synagogue which was the subject of Harry's father's last message: but for now they all needed a very long rest.

Chapter 7

Hades Door

Budapest was a smaller place in those days, but still it was big enough to have an adequate selection of facilities for any travelers. Selecting an inn near their destination they stashed their bags, washed up and met in the inn's taproom.

“I can't believe that we actually did it,” said Mike, “when I left on this quest, I never really expected to succeed. I couldn't imagine that I would ever find a dragon, much less one that would be so friendly.”

“Dragons have a much worse reputation than they deserve,” Bertram said, “they're actually quite cuddly and loving: but only if people give them a chance. Usually mortals shoot first and never give them a chance.”

“I'll keep that in mind in case I ever meet one again. At least I have my scale now and when I give it to the oracle, she'll tell me who my father really is. She said that she would also tell me my destiny, but I'm not really sure that I want to know anything about the future.” said Mike.

“You'll be heading out in the morning then?” asked Harry.

“No. I promised to help you guys through your quest and I never break a promise. What exactly is your quest?”

“I have to retrieve information that my father left behind that will tell me about my mother. He left it in an old synagogue near here. There shouldn't be any monsters involved.”

“Sounds simple enough,” said Mike.

“Wait a minute,” said Bertram, “That is how the quest started, but we can't finish it without delivering our message to Lord Hades.”

“Hades!?” Exclaimed Mike, “The Hades? That's not something that you should forget to tell me about. I think maybe you better tell me the whole story.”

Harry and Bertram looked at each other and then told Mike the tale of their time on the Flying Dutchman. Mike said that he would have to think about it before agreeing to go with them to see Hades. They finished their meals and went to bed for a long and deep nights sleep.

Bertram rose earlier than the others to take a swim in the Duna River. After all, he was a merman and needed to occasionally rehydrate himself fully. The river was unfortunately the endpoint for all of the city's sewer pipes, and it stank something awful. It may have rehydrated Bertram, but it was no pleasant experience.

All of the while he was careful not to be seen, continually watching the bank checking for unwanted observers. It was near the end of his swim that he saw him. The Shadow Man was standing in the predawn shadows at the edge of the river. Realizing that he had been spotted, the mysterious man ducked away from the streetlight and hustled around a corner and out of sight.

It was Bertram's first clear view of the stranger: the emotionless massive face sent a shiver down his spine that had nothing to do with the chill water of the river. Leaping out of the water he tried to track down the intruder, but he could be found nowhere.

He searched for a little while longer before he gave up and returned to the inn, where he woke up his friends and apprised them of the situation. After a brief breakfast, they settled up their bill at the front desk and headed out.

“Who do you think this Shadow guy is Harry?” said Mike.

“I don't have the faintest idea, but I think that he's been following me ever since I left America: perhaps longer, I have no way of knowing. He might have been behind some unsettling events on board ship and at Lake Geneva, but I really have no proof of that.”

“Wonderful! We're being followed by a really weird guy who may or may not mean us harm.”

The rest of the conversation involved breakfast and the weather: pretty boring stuff actually, although they did enjoy seeing the scenery in the beautiful old section of the city. In the days before the damage of the world wars and communist neglect, Budapest was an inspiring city and the boys greatly enjoyed the sights until they came upon a burned out hulk of a building.

“Is that the synagogue on the corner Harry?” asked Bertram.

The synagogue had burned down in the time since Harry's family had moved from Budapest; but many of the charred walls were still standing, including the cornerstone, which was the object of Harry's quest.

Digging through the rubble that was heaped around the cornerstone, Harry found a keyhole on the inner facing of the stone. It was obvious that others had tried to pick the blackened lock, but were unsuccessful. Harry chuckled, pulled out his small tool kit and had the small time capsule opened in a matter of moments. (He was on his way to being the greatest escape artist of all time after all. Picking a lock was child's play to him.)

Inside the time capsule he found a key and a letter in his father's handwriting. The note said:

If you are reading this my son, you have accepted your quest. I am sure that you have had some interesting experiences in just getting here, but if you want to find out about your mother, you will have to endure much greater. Your mother is a captive of the Greek god of the underworld. She attempted to rescue a half brother of yours named Achilles. In the basement of this synagogue you will find a door to a secret entrance into the underworld land of Hades. This Rabbi blessed key will open any door and will admit you into the cursed land. Additionally, I have called upon an ancient Jewish power to protect you in your greatest hour of need, if you are valiant and faithful. Go now my son and rescue your mother. Papa

Rummaging through the time capsule Harry found the items mentioned in his father's letter. Additionally there was a prayer shawl and a sealed book of Harry's family history. He stowed them all into his bag, which he slung over his shoulder before turning back to his friends.

After reading his note to his friends, he asked, "What do you guys think about all of this?"

"I never expected that your quest would take me into the underworld. That's a lot more than I ever would have imagined." said Mike.

"You don't have to come along with me; that would be too much to ask. I would never try to hold you to your promise under these circumstances."

After a moment's thought Mike slowly continued, "I gave my word Harry. I would rather die a horrible death than to sacrifice my honor. Besides, when else will I ever have the chance to have an adventure like this. I mean really... to get the chance to possibly meet *the* Achilles and Lord Hades himself is an opportunity that I never would have expected. Count me in. How about you Bert?"

Mumbling Bertram said, "I always knew that we were going to have to meet Hades at some time, so why not now. I'll do it because I have to, but I don't have to like it."

The boys wandered through the blackened rubble of the basement until they found a portal that had been untouched by the fire. The clean white marble doric pillars were so out of place from the charred remains of the synagogue that at first the boys suspected that they might be unreal: they couldn't see how it could be that no one had noticed them before, until Bertram reminded them that to mortals the mist probably made them look like the rest of the debris.

On either side of the pillars stood powerful looking statues, with blank faces and the inexplicable feeling of great power. Over the lintel was a replica of the battle between David and Goliath. The golden lock was placed in the center of the door, obviously meant for a shorter person than Harry although the door was large enough to admit Goliath himself.

Touching the key to the lock, the door swung silently open. The adventurers peeked inside and

saw a long hallway and staircase, lined with silver and gold frescoes and black marble steps. Harry led the way, followed by Bertram and Mike.

Upon crossing the threshold the cool morning air above was instantly replaced with a dry heat, which Bertram found particularly distressing. The stairway curved to the left into a giant spiral leading ever downward.

Mike kept poking at the torches, which were ensconced in the walls every six or seven feet.

“Who do you think keeps these torches lit?” He said.

“Do you really want to find out Buddy?” said Harry, “or are you just a little more nervous than you thought?”

“Probably the second,” grinned Mike, “besides, maybe we won't find anything threatening down here.”

Shortly after the boys had gone out of sight down into the stairway to Hades; the Shadowy Man entered the portal through the doorway which the boys had left open and stealthily began to follow them: while unknown even to him, a large dark figure moved to follow the Shadow Man.

Chapter 6

Into the Pit

Hades watched the young heroes' progress with amusement. It wasn't nearly often enough for him that demigods willingly entered his domain, and these ones were so utterly in the dark that it was actually comical.

On top of that, one of them who was so utterly ignorant, thought that he was chasing after his dream although all of the time he was racing in as wrong a direction as it was possible for him to go. The Lord of the Underworld chuckled with the anticipation of seeing the look on the young fool's face as he would tell the boy the truth about himself and crush his spirit.

After watching them for a few minutes, he sat bolt upright as he noticed something vaguely amiss. The intruders were being followed, by two hazy shapes. What Hades found so disturbing was that, although he could tell that something was there, he wasn't able to perceive what it was.

Summoning his guard captain he dispatched him to investigate the mystery. Eternity can often be a boring experience so anything different was a welcome change. This may be a more interesting day than he first thought.

The young men made their way all of the way to the Fields of Asphodal. Hades actually laughed out loud when he saw them hand Chiron an American half dollar coin. The ferryman would have fried them on the spot for that insult if Hades hadn't previously told him to let them pass. Again he noticed the shadowy form sneak aboard the ferry, totally unseen by everyone else.

The intruder's stealth greatly bothered the lord of the underworld, but he was shocked beyond words to

perceive another nearly invisible figure voluntarily walk into the River Styx and vanish under the waves. Then it did something even more shocking... it walked out of the other side of the river; apparently undisturbed by the passage. 'That', he thought, 'should be impossible.'

Although he had seen them coming, he wasn't completely sure of their motives for undertaking this hopeless quest; and he was curious. Two of them were blindly seeking their origins; that much was obvious; but the merman was a mystery.

Snapping his fingers a servant brought him a drink and he leaned back in his Louis XIV chair and decided to observe and enjoy himself.

Things were going too smoothly. From what Harry had heard of the place, they should never have made it this far without being stopped cold, and he couldn't help but wonder if it might be harder getting out of Hades than it was getting in. He never really imagined that they would find such an easy crossing of the River Styx, (they had a backup plan where Bert was going to try to swim the River, but they were glad that he didn't have to. (It wasn't called the river of death for no reason) Cerberus actually wagged his tail as they passed, and they fell into a trance as they passed through the Fields of Asphodol so they barely remembered doing so.

And now they saw a man approaching them in a tux and tails with a top hat and cane. If he wouldn't have had fur and floppy dog ears they would have thought that he was a high society gentleman.

"Greetings young travelers," he said to them, "my name is Fidomus... and yes I get the humor of my name, but Lord Hades sometimes has a strange sense of humor when he hands out names. Either way, he has watched your progress with interest and I have been sent to escort you into his presence."

After passing by wonders that were never really meant to be seen by mortals, the travelers were finally ushered into the presence of the Lord of the underworld who bowed mockingly to them and said, "How may I serve you, who have invaded my lands without leave?"

Harry, sensing the menacing tone in Hades voice, stopped to consider carefully the choice of his next words. Unfortunately, Bertram was more impulsive than Harry and started talking immediately.

“Lord Hades, we have come on a mission of great importance.”

“Speak, little merman.” Commanded the god with a smirk.

“We come to speak on behalf of the demigods of the Flying Dutchman...”

“You might,” interrupted Michael, “but that’s not what I was told that we were coming here for.”

Looking interested, Hades looked sideways with a mischievous grin at the young man and asked,

“Then why are you here young fellow?”

“I am here to help my friend Harry to discover the truth of his parentage.”

“Harry must be the demigod over there then?” Questioned Hades slyly.

Sensing that there was something that he was missing, Mike slowly said, “Yes...”

“And you are...?”

“I am his friend.”

“Are you not also searching for your parentage?”

“I was, but I now have the means of obtaining that information.”

Grinning widely Hades said, “I’ll give you a hint. You think that you’re a demigod, but you’re most definitely not a demigod.”

The look in his eyes showed that Michael was crushed by this revelation and he wondered whether he was just being a foolish mortal seeking to be more than his allotted station after all.

With a laugh Hades continued, “You my young fool aren’t a mortal either. You are something much worse than either mortal or demigod; and I have yet to decide what I should do with you.” Turning suddenly to Harry he became deadly serious. “You on the other hand I don’t think that it would be wise for me to ever let you leave my realm.”

Stunned, Harry asked, “Why... what have I done?”

“Other than being stupid enough to come here and bring yourself to my attention? You exist: that is

enough.”

“But why? I can’t be much of a threat to you?”

The dread god roared with laughter. “You!? A threat? That is funny. No, but you may be a good bargaining chip. You see your mother is a most amazing goddess. Both of my brothers Zeus and Poseidon have always been in love with her but can never have her. I might be able to use you to force her to use her influence over my brothers to better my position.”

“Then you know who my mother is,” said Harry, “please tell me.”

“I don’t think so... after all you did invade my domain without permission. I’ll tell you what though; she is currently a captive in my dungeon. I’ll chain you up next to her so that you can meet her; and if she wants to tell you, that will be up to her.”

“No!” Shouted Bertram, but was cut off by a deadly glare from the dread lord.

“There are many fates much worse than an eternity on the Flying Dutchman, my dear merman,” Hades quietly but forcefully hissed. “Don’t tempt me to give you one.”

Turning back to Harry he summoned his Captain of the Guard. “Please escort this tiny demigod to meet his mother Captain.” With which, Fidomus bowed and led Harry away.

After Harry had been escorted from their presence, Hades turned his withering gaze back upon Bertram and Michael. “OK boys, let’s talk.”

Bert cleared his throat and said “We have brought a message from the captain of the Flying Dutchman.” He held out a rolled up parchment to the threatening god; who took it and opened it.

Twisting his faced into an expression of deep concentration, Hades finally looked up and said, “Have you read this message?”

“No, my lord. I have not.”

“Then you will be unable to answer my questions about this message, which warns me of an approaching enemy. Maybe you can answer this question: do you realize that you were followed onto

my realm?”

Looking at each other, and then scanning the room around them, the two boys looked back at the god and said simultaneously, “No.”

A deep laughter echoed throughout the room and a deep voice, which seemed to come from everywhere at once mockingly said, “Oh my dear Hades, I’m amazed that you even sensed my presence. Bravo.”

“Come forward and show yourself intruder!” Hades commanded.

Chuckling from everywhere, the voice said, “Now why would I do that? If you can’t see me, and don’t know where I am, you will be unable to stop me when I wrest control of this land from you. Maybe I’ll chain you up next to that young godling that you just sent to the dungeons.”

“You can try!” shouted Hades.

Insane laughter reverberated throughout the cavernous building and the shadow man said simply, “Why not.”

Chapter 7

A Prison By Any Other Name

Harry was escorted through a maze of corridors lined with doors and barred windows. The sobbing and wailing all about him was almost tangible and he feared for the safety of the mother that he had yet to meet. Finally his escort stopped in front of an enormous iron door with a large black crossbar. The entire thing reeked of decay and a constant drip of musty condensation.

It took four of the soldiers to pry the ancient door ajar and it groaned from long disuse as it slowly opened. The guard behind him pushed him with the point of his spear and said, "In there!"

Once he passed through the portal, he could feel that he had passed through something more than a simple door. (Which was closed and latched behind him as quickly as it was possible.) There was another world on the other side of that gateway. The air was cool and pleasant and a rosy sun was shining warmly in an auburn sky. The amber gold garden was accentuated with such a variety of brilliantly colored flowers that he almost didn't notice the fact that some of them sported colors that he had never even imagined existed.

The air exuded emotions of hope and optimism, and Harry had a hard time understanding how something like this could exist in Hades domain. 'This must be something like what Heaven will be like,' he thought. 'The place was the direct opposite of the gray world of his vision, how could it possibly be a prison cell?'

Then he saw her.

On the far side of the sapphire colored pond, sat the most serene woman that he had ever seen. Her flowing platinum robe blew gently in the breeze and the ruby crown on her head proclaimed her status. She was beautiful, but somehow the energies she exuded shouted that she was the mother of all living

things on Earth. Harry couldn't tell if it was true or if it was just the effect of being in this place that made him feel that way, but at the time he couldn't care less.

Sitting next to her was a man in ancient Greek armor, with a bandages heel on his foot. 'That must be the Achilles that Father wrote about', he thought.

The woman called out to him, calling him by name and he rushed to her side.

The Gray Man stepped from the rocks, where his shadings made him blend in so well that it was all but impossible to differentiate him from the strata. "Let me make myself more comfortable for your eyes," he said. With that said, he was suddenly visible to Mike, Bertram and Hades. He looked like a distinguished businessman in a charcoal gray suit. His hair was pulled back into a ponytail and his goatee was streaked with silver. He might have looked distinguished but for the evil sneer and cruel look behind his eyes.

Hades threw a fireball at the Gray Man who laughed and caught it like a baseball. The fireball withered and fizzled out in his hand. The god of the underworld repeated his performance again and again, hurling dozens of forms of destructive energies at the shadowy invader, only to see each attack age and die.

Fear began to be hinted at in the god's face as he asked quietly, "Who are you?"

"I am the end of all things; the son of your captive. You may call me Omega."

"Are you my mother?" Harry quietly whispered.

"You know your mother. She was a wonderful woman: but if you mean 'Am I she who bore you?', the answer is yes."

"Who are you?"

"I am many things to many peoples. To some, I am the Alpha, she who created the universe. To others I am the sea goddess. Achilles here knows me as mother while Zeus and Prometheus knew me as

savior. Hades fears me because it is prophesied that I shall produce a son that is destined to be more powerful than Zeus, Poseidon or Hades. It is up to you to discover what I am to you.”

“Do you have a mane?”

“I have many, but I am most known as Thetis., so why don’t you think of me as such?”

After a few minutes of taking it all in Harry formulated his next question. “Hades seems to think that you are locked away in his dungeon, but it doesn’t look that way to me. Are you really a prisoner?”

“I could also be called the goddess of freedom, because I abhor captivity... indeed, on much of your American money, I am called Miss Liberty; therefore even though Hades placed me in his prison, I made it a place of beauty and freedom within my jail. After all, I am reputed to be a creator of worlds, so I made a whole world within what he thinks is my cell.”

“And why has he locked you up?”

“He doesn’t fear me; he fears the son that prophecy says that I will have, and he hopes to prevent the birth of that child.”

After a long pause Harry asked the question that was now nagging in the back of his mind, “Am I that son?”

The sea goddess laughed with a merriment that hinted of the joys of Christmas bells and Easter bonnets. “Oh no dear one. You are my child, but you are only a demigod. It would take a god to wield the power that they fear; and that god is confronting him now, even as we speak. My boy, the son of prophecy, entered the underworld with you and now threatens the power of the gods of Olympus.”

Hades lost his battle and was chained in the cell next to Thetis’ cell. The Gray Man turned then to Bertram and Mike with a stare that bored holes in their souls, and he said. “Now what shall I do with the two of you? Hades stood in my way, but I have no quarrel with you, unless you place yourselves in my way. Still, I found my way here by following you, so I owe you something.”

Looking at Bertram he said, “You said that your reason for coming here was to free the crew of the

Flying Dutchman, so that they cannot force you to become one of them.” The Gray Man snapped his fingers and said, “There. Their curse has been broken. Still; they did send you here to warn Hades, so I have removed them from the curse of their ship, but I have now locked them in the dungeons of Hades until I decide to forgive them for making themselves my enemies.”

With an evil laugh, he turned to Mike and became deadly serious, “You wanted know your parents? Fine. I will send the two of you to your answers now.” And with another snap of his fingers, the two young men vanished from sight, leaving the Gray Man alone to contemplate his next step in bringing about the Gray World that Harry Houdini saw in his vision of the future. After all, he had inherited the power to create worlds from his mother so he would destroy this world by creating one that was more suitable to his needs.

Chapter 8

The Escape Artist

Hades hung from the wall blindfolded and defeated. If he ever escaped, he decided that he and his brothers needed to start paying more attention to the prophecies. He vaguely remembered one about a demigod heralding the downfall of Olympus. If this experience wasn't the fulfillment of that prophecy, maybe he and his brothers needed to take steps to try to prevent that prophecy from coming true. If it is, it's probably already too late.

Mike and Bertram suddenly appeared in front of Harry, Achilles and Thetis. Looking shocked, Mike looked at the sea goddess and said, "Mom...? What are you doing here?"

Smiling sweetly, she said, "Hi Michael. I'm sorry to see you here, but I knew that it was coming."

With a surprised expression Harry said, "Mike, how do you know Thetis?"

"Who's Thetis?"

Pointing at the goddess Harry said, "The goddess here. She's Thetis... and she's my mother."

"That's no goddess, that's my mom... right Mom?"

"I am your mother," Thetis said, "and I am Harry's mother, and I am a goddess. Michael, I haven't been entirely honest with you. I know that you think that you are a demigod, but you're not..."

"That's what Hades said too." Whispered Mike.

"And it's true; you are not a demigod. You are much more. You are a demi-titan. I, your mother, am more than a goddess, and your father was a titan; as was the father of Zeus and his brothers. You are more than a demigod you are a god, and more than a god. You are the young child of prophecy, and if

events proceed in their normal course, you will cause the fall of Olympus.”

After a few moments of stunned silence Mike stuttered, “I don’t want to be the cause of Olympus’ fall. I have nothing against them. Now that I know, I’ll just stay away from them.”

“You don’t have the power to prevent that. Without outside intervention, you will become the god of destruction. You will become the Gray Man who has already defeated Hades: he is the shade of your future. You have seen what the simple shade can do, imagine what the actuality will be able to do.”

“Then we are lost?”

The goddess laughed her tinkling laugh and said, “I never said that. I simply said that there is nothing that you can do to prevent it. Fortunately there are others who even now are working to solve that situation.”

“Then what shall we do?” Asked a forlorn Mike.

“I’ll tell you what we need to do,” said Bertram, “we need to not worry about those other people and we need to find a way to get out of here.”

“I agree,” said Harry, “Fortunately, you guys have a magician and escape artist with you, so let’s get going.”

Harry had no trouble opening the door to Thetis’ cell, and although the goddess could now leave her cell, she and Achilles stayed in the garden world that she had created: therefore the boys traveled on alone. The guards had abandoned their posts with the fall of Hades and fled so they met with no resistance.

Creeping quietly down the dank corridor they looked through each of the barred cell doors hoping to find a way out of the labyrinth of dungeons. In the first cell they saw Hades chained and broken: hanging from the wall. Across the hall from him they found the crew of the Flying Dutchman laying around on their cell floor.

“We’re going to have to free Hades if we hope to have a chance of defeating the Gray Man.” Harry

said, "But he looks wasted. We're going to need help to carry him to a place of safety."

"How do we know that he won't just kill me," said Mike. "Maybe that's what he'll try to do to prevent the Gray Man from coming into existence."

"Let us out." came the voice of the Captain of the Flying Dutchman, "This is our chance to prove ourselves to Lord Hades. We'll take care of him while you three make your escape. We'll nurse him back to health as a part of our penance and if you fail in your quest he will have to contact his brothers and it will take the three of them to deal with the enemy."

"What makes you think we have a quest my friend?"

"Of course you do. Heroes are always on a quest, and now it is up to the two sons of Thetis... the two brothers... and their friend... to find and fulfill that quest.

"You're a brave man and a true friend Captain. It will be as you say," Promised Harry, who told his friends to turn their heads: then he went to work and opened the two jail cells.

Working their way backwards, using Harry's memories of his trip through the tunnels they slowly found their way out of the dungeons, only to walk directly into the presence of the Gary Man, who was still standing in Hades parlor, apparently waiting for them. Looking up, the Gray Man said, "It took you long enough to get here. Now why don't we get down to business?"

Chapter 9

The End of the Riddle

With a wave of his gray hand, the Shadowy Man lifted the three young men into the air and studied them while he held them suspended in the air.

Harry could see that he was indeed an older version of Mike by the way he talked and the way he moved. A stray thought entered his head that instinctively he must have known, from his vision, that the Gray Man was a trusted friend. At the time he suspected that he was Bert: but that was before he had met Mike. It was now obvious to him that someone had tried to warn him of this confrontation through that vision.

Playing for time he questioned the shade, “What do you want from us?”

“From you? I want nothing. But from him,” pointing at Mike, “I want everything.” Nodding his head at a swirling cloud of dust, building in the corner, he said, “Once that spell over there grows to the right size, I will take him into that vortex and my mind will take control of his body. His mind will be erased and we two shall merge. Right now I am only a possibility of the future: those energies will make me a fact. My mother was reputed to be the goddess of the world's creation so I will become the god of its destruction.”

“But why now?” said Mike. “Why not let me live out my life before doing this? Why can't I have a happy life, before you take it away from me?”

“For many reasons boy. First of all, this spell will only work in this place and at this time. If I don't use it now, I will never become you, and you will never gain the power that I am destined to possess. Secondly, right now you are young and inexperienced. If you live longer and become

stronger, you may have the strength to resist me, and I can't have that.”

After a few minutes of watching the dark vortex growing Mike finally said with a crestfallen face, “Why don't you at least let my friends go free? They aren't important to your plans.”

“They are inconsequential,” bellowed the Shadow Man, who with a wave of his hand threw them into a wall and materialized chains that attached them to the wall, so that he could forget about them.

The shadowy storm continued to grow and Harry thought to himself, 'How can we escape from this situation?' Then he began to remember his visions. Someone had sent him a warning about this confrontation, maybe it was more than a simple warning.

Wracking his mind he tried to remember every detail of his visions, but his mind kept wandering, and as memories of discussions with his father intruded into his concentrations: and as the two lines of thought merged into one line of consciousness he knew the answer.

He fell to his knees and began to practice, what he learned from his vision was the highest form of communication. Reaching into his bag, he pulled out the prayer shawl that his father had left for him, put it on and he called upon the God of his fathers, the God Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for deliverance. The surest way to defeat a god was with the real God. As soon as he had done so, from the shadows stepped the second shadowy figure that Hades perceived but couldn't see clearly.

Standing in front of Harry was a hulking clay figure from Jewish mythology, with the word *Emet* inscribed on its forehead. Harry knew immediately what it was. It was said last to have been seen in 16th century Prague, but Harry remembered seeing it as a statue, standing to the left of the doorway in the razed synagogue where they had entered the underworld. It must have followed him.

The Gray Man was finally convinced that the spell was ready and he grabbed the struggling Mike whose movements hindered his progress and strode purposefully toward the swirling vortex. In desperation Mike took out the dragon's scale and put it into his mouth, mentally calling out for help, knowing that he was throwing away that which he had quested for. Instantly the dragon called

Silverscale appeared and swooped down upon the man who called himself Omega who stopped to face this new menace.

The dragon blasted him with a fiery breath and the Gray Man laughed and clapped his hands together. A bolt of lightning leapt from his hands and crashed into the dragon, who crumpled and fell immediately unconscious.

Just as swiftly, in another corner of the room, the man of clay snapped Harry's manacles and carried him tenderly into the dusty vortex before the Gray Man could reach it. Strange energies crackled sharply around the two forms as Harry and the man of clay became one creature that was more than either of them had ever been alone.

The Gray Man screamed in frustration and threw himself at the dusty spell, but as it was already in use he simply bounced off. Energies were sucked out of Mike's body and swirled into the whirlpool and he looked more at peace than at any time in his life despite the situation that he found himself. The shade screamed again, knowing that his chance had been lost, but he was unable to comprehend how it had happened.

He tried again and again unsuccessfully. Finally the dust cleared and Harry stood there alone, but subtly changed. The Gray Man put down Mike and threw himself at the magician, who stepped swiftly to one side evading the raging shade.

Suddenly the cavernous room was filled in light as Hades and Thetis entered the room. The injured Hades was supported by the Dutchman's sailors. Taking in the situation, Lord Hades quickly realized that fortunes had changed and he snarled and said, "You shade shall suffer as none before you have ever suffered, before I allow you to fade from existence."

With a scream the Gray Man felt himself being pulled apart atom by atom as the Lord of the underworld began his vengeance; but he was quickly stopped by the Lady Thetis.

"That will be enough!" She said. "No matter what he was. He might have been my child and I

will not allow him to suffer.” With a snap of her fingers, the shadowy man vanished in a puff of dissipating dust.

Turning to Mike she said, “You will never now have to worry about becoming that sad creature. You now have a different destiny.”

Then looking at Harry, she said, “And you, my other son, have a new destiny too. Being a demigod rather than a demi-titan, you will never be able to gain the power that Michael could have; so Olympus has nothing to worry about from you. Still, this spell has made you more than a demigod, and since it has happened without the approval of the gods of Olympus, I fear that you will have a hard time finding acceptance among them.”

“I suggest that you live your life as a mortal. And if Olympus ever decides to accept you; fake your death through a drowning and go to them. After all, you are the son of a sea-goddess, and you can never really drown. It ought to be mighty convincing.”

Hades turned to the crew of the Flying Dutchmen and said, “You have rendered a great service today. Not only did you send these brave heroes to warn me of an impending danger: you stood by me in my time of need when you might have run away. You have earned my forgiveness and my appreciation. You will all receive a place in Elysium and be honored as favored of Hades.”

After a great banquet and feast the three young men departed for the surface world, there each to face their separate destinies, although the three of them remained close friends and secretly got together whenever they could.

With the prophecy of Thetis finished, she was able to leave her confinement and return to Olympus, where she turned the heads of many of the gods who had at that point never met her before.

Hades and his brothers met and decided that they had to pay more attention to the prophecies. It was from those discussions that they decided to avoid the three of them creating any more demigod children. I understand that you are familiar with that particular decision.

Harry Houdini went on to become the world's most famous escape artist, and eventually was accepted by the gods of Olympus. He faked his death, took upon him the name of the clay creature of Jewish myth, and lives now among the gods.

And that Percy is the story of Houdini's escape from Hades.

Epilogue

“Yes Percy,” said Golem, “as I'm sure that you've figured out by now: I am... or rather I was Harry Houdini, born as Erik Weisz, before I changed my name: and now I am called the Golem; a minor earth god who has taken on the form and name of the creature of Jewish legend. You're the first person that I have admitted that to in over eighty years; but it was important that you hear this story.”

“I thought you said that you wanted to meet me because I had escaped from Hades.” Said Percy.

“And that was true, but I could have met you without relating this story. Although you didn't realize it at the time, I have given you a quest in the telling of this tale. If you survive the next few years and reach the age of thirty, you will be visited by my great friend Bertram (and yes he is still alive and hasn't aged much in the past hundred years) who will join you.”

“What are we supposed to do?”

“Why save the world of course. My dear companion adventurer Mike (whose name really wasn't Mike, but that's another story) did finally reach the oracle and received that for which he had been promised. Additionally, he was he was given a prophecy, which a half-blood relative of mine is supposed to play a part. I suspect that that might be you, my distant cousin.”

“But it might not be me?” said Percy hopefully.

“It might not, but since I was here to hear your story anyway, I thought that I would give you a heads up.”

“OK: assuming it's me, what am I supposed to do?”

“I'm not completely sure. According to the prophecy, this will be the quest of another, and you will be there in the capacity of a helper and a mentor. You will help Bertram to find this person who

has no inclination of their great destiny, and train and support her as she prepares to save the world. She will be a descendant of Mike's, although that has been hidden from her. Additionally the three of you will be joined by another who will also be important.”.

“How will I find this girl that will do all of these great things?” asked Percy.

“I'll give you her name, and don't forget it.” Said Golem, “She is called Sara Hendrickson. I have kept track of Mike's family and have seen the hidden signs within her. Many times I talked to Mike about my growing up in Wisconsin, and he decided to settle there. (Although he faked his identification so that he could better hide his identity as a half-blood.) That is where you will find her. If it turns out to be you who will be called on to help Bertram, do I have your word that you will do all that you can to help Sara succeed in her quest?”

Crossing his heart with his right hand Percy said, “I swear.”

Grinning widely Golem said, “I suspected that you would; and I want to thank you for that.” Standing up and smoothing out the wrinkles in his tuxedo Golem rose and said, “Well it's time that I be going. Farewell cousin.” And with a smile and flourish of his hand he vanished in a puff of smoke.

Falling back into his chair Percy simply whispered, “Wow.”