

The Sea of Monsters

When we got to the gym, Coach Nunley was sitting at his little desk reading Sports Illustrated. Nunley was about a million years old, with bifocals and no teeth and a greasy wave of grey hair. He reminded me of the Oracle at Camp Half-Blood – which was a shrivelled-up mummy – except Coach Nunley moved a lot less and he never billowed green smoke. Well, at least no that I'd observed.

Matt Sloan said, 'Coach, can I be captain?'

'Eh?' Coach Nunley looked up from his magazine. 'Yeah,' he mumbled. 'Mm-hmm.'

Sloan grinned and took charge of picking. He made me the other team's captain, but it didn't matter who I picked, because all the jocks and the popular kids moved over to Sloan's side. So did the big group of visitors.

On my side I had Tyson, Corey Bailer the computer geek, Raj Mandali the calculus whiz, and a half-dozen other kids who always got harassed by Sloan and his gang. Normally I would've been okay with just Tyson – he was worth half a team all by himself – but the visitors on Sloan's team were almost as tall and strong-looking as Tyson, and there were six of them.

Matt Sloan spilled a cage full of balls in the middle of the gym.

'Scared,' Tyson mumbled. 'Smell funny.'

I looked at him. 'What smells funny?' Because I didn't figure he was talking about himself.

'Them.' Tyson pointed at Sloan's new friends. 'Smell funny.'

The visitors were cracking their knuckles, eyeing us like it was slaughter time. I couldn't help wondering where they were from. Someplace where they fed kids raw meat and beat them with sticks.

Sloan blew the coach's whistle and the game began.

Sloan's team ran for the centre line. ON my side, Raj Mandali yelled something in Urdu, probably 'I have to go potty!' and ran for the exit. Corey Bailer tried to crawl behind the wall mat and hide. The rest of my team did their best to cower in fear and not look like targets.

'Tyson,' I said. 'Let's g-'

A ball slammed into my gut. I sat down hard in the middle of the gym floor. The other team exploded in laughter.

My eyesight was fuzzy. I felt like I'd just got the Heimlich manoeuvre from a gorilla. I couldn't believe anybody could throw that hard.

Tyson yelled, 'Percy, duck!'

I rolled as another dodgeball whistled past my ear at the speed of sound.

Whoom!

It hit the wall mat, Corey Bailer yelled.

'Hey!' I yelled at Sloan's team. 'You could kill somebody!'

The visitor named Joe Bob grinned at me evilly. Somehow, he looked a lot bigger now ... even taller than Tyson. His biceps bulged beneath his T-shirt. 'I hope so, Perseus Jackson! I hope so!

The way he said my name sent a chill down my back. Nobody called me Perseus except those who knew my true identity. Friends ... and enemies.

What had Tyson said? They smell funny.

Monsters.

All around Matt Sloan, the visitors were growing in size. They were no longer kids. They were two-and-a-half-metre-tall giants with wild eyes, pointy teeth and hairy arms tattooed with snakes and hula women and Valentine hearts.

Matt Sloan dropped his ball. 'Whoa! You're not from Detroit! Who ...'

The other kids on his team started screaming and backing towards the exit, but the giant named Marrow Sucker threw a ball with deadly accuracy. It streaked past Raj Mandali just as he was about to leave and hit the door, slamming it shut like magic. Raj and some of the other kids banged on it desperately but it wouldn't budge

'Let them go!' I yelled at the giants.

The one called Joe Bob growled at me. He had a tattoo on his biceps that said: JB luvs Babycakes. 'And lose our tasty morsels? No, Son of the Sea God. We Laistrygonians aren't just playing for your death. We want lunch!'

He waved his hand and a new batch of dodgeballs appeared on the centre line – but these balls weren't made of red rubber. They were bronze, the size of cannon balls, perforated like Wiffle balls with fire bubbling out the holes. They must've been searing hot, but the giants picked them up with their bare hands.

'Coach!' I yelled.

Nunley looked up sleepily, but if he saw anything abnormal about the dodgeball game, he didn't let on. That's the problem with mortals. A magical force called the Mist obscures the true appearance of monsters and gods from their vision, so mortals tend to see only what

they can understand. Maybe the coach saw a few eighth graders pounding the younger kids like usual. Maybe the other kids saw Matt Sloan's thugs getting ready to toss Molotov cocktails around. (It wouldn't have been the first time.) At any rate, I was pretty sure nobody else realized we were dealing with genuine man-eating bloodthirsty monsters.

'Yeah. Mm-hmm,' Coach muttered. 'Play nice.'

And he went back to his magazine.

The giant named Skull Eater threw his ball. I dived aside as the fiery bronze comet sailed past my shoulder.

'Corey!' I screamed.

Tyson pulled him out from behind the exercise mat just as the ball exploded against it, blasting the mat to smoking shreds.

'Run!' I told my teammates. 'The other exit!'

They ran for the locker room, but with another wave of Joe Bob's hand, that door also slammed shut.

'No one leaves unless you're out!' Joe Bob roared. 'And you're not out until we eat you!'

He launched his own fireball. My teammates scattered as it blasted a crater in the gym floor.

I reached for riptide, which I always kept in my pocket, but then I realized I was wearing gym shorts. I had no pockets. Riptide was tucked in my jeans inside my gym locker. And the locker room door was sealed. I was completely defenceless.

Another fireball came streaking towards me. Tyson pushed me out of the way, but the explosion still blew me head over heels. I found myself sprawled on the gym floor, dazed from smoke, my tie-dyed T-shirt peppered with sizzling holes. Just across the centre line, two hungry giants were glaring down at me.

'Flesh!' they bellowed. 'Hero flesh for lunch!' They both took aim.

'Percy needs help!' Tyson yelled, and he jumped in front of me just as they threw their balls.

'Tyson!' I screamed, but it was too late.

Both balls slammed into him ... but no ... he'd caught them. Somehow Tyson, who was so clumsy he knocked over lab equipment and broke playground structures on a regular basis, had caught two fiery metal balls speeding towards him at a zillion miles an hour. He sent them hurtling back towards their surprised owners, who screamed, 'BAAAAAD!' as the bronze spheres exploded against their chests.

The giants disintegrated in twin columns of flame – a sure sign they were monsters, all right. Monsters don't die. They just dissipate into smoke and dust, which saves heroes a lot of trouble cleaning up after a fight.

'My brothers!' Joe Bob the Cannibal wailed. He flexed his muscles and his Babycakes tattoo rippled. 'You will pay for their destruction!'

'Tyson!' I said. 'Look out!'

Another comet hurtled towards us. Tyson just had time to swat it aside. It flew straight over Coach Nunley's head and landed in the stands with a huge KA-BOOM!

Kids were running around and screaming, trying to avoid the sizzling craters in the floor. Others were banging on the door, calling for help. Sloan himself stood petrified in the middle of the court, watching in disbelief as balls of death flew around him.

Coach Nunley still wasn't seeing anything. He tapped his hearing aid like the explosions were giving him interference, but he kept his eyes on his magazine.

Surely the whole school could hear the noise. The headmaster, the police, somebody would come to help us.

'Victory will be ours!' roared Joe Bob the Cannibal. 'We will feast on your bones!'

I wanted to tell him he was taking the dodgeball game way too seriously, but before I could, he hefted another ball. The other three giants followed his lead.

I knew we were dead. Tyson couldn't deflect all those balls at once. His hands had to be seriously burned from blocking the first volley. Without my sword ...

I had a crazy idea.

I ran towards the locker room.