

JASON

JASON HATED BEING OLD.

His joints hurt. His legs shook. As he tried to climb the hill, his lungs rattled like a box of rocks.

He couldn't see his face, thank goodness, but his fingers were gnarled and bony. Bulging blue veins webbed the backs of his hands.

He even had that old-man smell – mothballs and chicken soup. How was that possible? He'd gone from sixteen to seventy-five in a matter of seconds, but the old-man smell happened instantly, like *Boom. Congratulations! You stink!*

'Almost there.' Piper smiled at him. 'You're doing great.'

Easy for her to say. Piper and Annabeth were disguised as lovely Greek serving maidens. Even in their white sleeveless gowns and laced sandals, they had no trouble navigating the rocky path.

Piper's mahogany hair was pinned up in a braided spiral. Silver bracelets adorned her arms. She resembled an ancient

statue of her mom, Aphrodite, which Jason found a little intimidating.

Dating a beautiful girl was nerve-racking enough. Dating a girl whose mom was the goddess of love . . . well, Jason was always afraid he'd do something unromantic and Piper's mom would frown down from Mount Olympus and change him into a feral hog.

Jason glanced uphill. The summit was still a hundred yards above.

'Worst idea ever.' He leaned against a cedar tree and wiped his forehead. 'Hazel's magic is too good. If I have to fight, I'll be useless.'

'It won't come to that,' Annabeth promised. She looked uncomfortable in her serving-maiden outfit. She kept hunching her shoulders to keep the dress from slipping. Her pinned-up blonde bun had come undone in the back and her hair dangled like long spider legs. Knowing her hatred of spiders, Jason decided not to mention that.

'We infiltrate the palace,' she said. 'We get the information we need, and we get out.'

Piper set down her amphora, the tall ceramic wine jar in which her sword was hidden. 'We can rest for a second. Catch your breath, Jason.'

From her waist cord hung her cornucopia – the magic horn of plenty. Tucked somewhere in the folds of her dress was her knife, Katoptris. Piper didn't look dangerous, but if the need arose she could dual-wield Celestial bronze blades or shoot her enemies in the face with ripe mangoes.