

GO THE
DISTANCE
A TWISTED TALE

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What if Meg had to become a Greek god?

JEN CALONITA

Disney • HYPERION
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For Tyler and Dylan—
Always go the distance.

—*J.C.*

PROLOGUE

Some time ago . . .

“Excuses! Excuses! You give the same ones every week!”

“They’re not excuses, Thea! It’s the truth!”

“Truth? You expect me to believe you leave this house every day and go to *work*?”

Their voices echoed through the small home, inevitably reaching five-year-old Megara as she sat in the adjacent room at the window. She didn’t flinch as their argument grew louder and more heated. As cutting as their words might be, Megara didn’t understand them. Her parents’ arguments had become as common as the sun rising in the morning and the moon shining at night. Even her mother seemed to anticipate them coming now, like she could feel an impending storm. As the sun began to fade each day, she’d move

Megara to the home's only other room minutes before her father would walk in the door.

"You wait here and play, Megara," her mother would say, sounding tired before the yelling even began. "Be a good girl now and keep quiet."

Her mother usually placed the *stromvos* in front of Megara to keep her busy. The top her father had once whittled her was the quietest of all of Megara's toys, though it had never been her favorite. That would be the *platagi*, but the rattle was deemed "too loud" by her father, and the *spheria* rolled all over the floor. One time her father had tripped over the marbles when he walked through the room and yelled so loud, Megara swore the walls rumbled. What she really wanted to play with was a doll with moving arms and legs like the ones she saw the girls at the market carrying, but somehow she knew not to ask for such an expensive gift. Most days her mother struggled to make enough from her mending to buy Megara milk.

"Where did you spend the money you made, Leonnatos? We need it for the rent! Maya will be here any minute to collect."

Megara rocked the *stromvos* back and forth between her thumb and index finger.

"I don't expect you to understand what it is like for me while you do nothing all day but sit here with her."

“*Her?* You mean your daughter? The child who is your spitting image? The one you all but ignore while I mend and clean for others to feed her, since you can’t?”

Megara gave her fingers a small twist and watched the top take off, spinning wildly across the windowsill, the colors in the wood melting into one.

“It is hard enough to feed one mouth! You expect me to provide for three when there is no work in all of Athens?”

“You mean none that *you’re* willing to do, Leonnatos. I see you when I bring Megara into the market. You stand around with those other louts all day laughing and doing nothing! While I fight to buy her milk!”

“Enough!”

Her father’s roar reminded her of that day with the spheria, when he’d landed on his back after catching his foot on a marble. She momentarily looked at the door and held her breath, wondering if he would burst into the room and start yelling at her for doing absolutely nothing wrong, as he sometimes did.

“I can’t do this anymore, Thea. I never wanted this life.”

“Yet this is the life you have,” her mother said sadly. “Rent is due today, the food is all gone, and there is a child in that other room who needs us.”

“I have nothing to give her.” His deep voice broke. “This is on you now. Goodbye, Thea.”

Megara watched the top wobble as it neared the edge of the windowsill. If Megara didn't put her hand out to catch it, the stromvos would fall off.

"Don't you walk out that door!" Megara's mother shouted. "Leonnatos?"

The door in the other room opened and slammed shut. Her mother gave a strangled sob, then was quiet.

The stromvos wobbled for a moment more before it fell onto the floor and skidded across the room, landing in front of the door. Megara turned to retrieve it, but the door opened first, sending the top back across the room and under a chair.

"Megara, get your things." Her mother swept into the room, gathering blankets and clothes and shoving them into a giant sack. Her pale face was tired and her brown hair was pulled high above her head in a messy bun held up by one of her sewing needles. "We're leaving, so move quickly."

"Are we going to the market?" Megara asked hopefully. Her stomach growled as if to remind her how hungry she was. They'd had nothing but a roll to split the day before. The money her mother made mending clothes never made it to the end of the week. By the last day, Megara would be lucky if she had one meal to sustain her. Megara recalled

the jug with coins being empty that morning when her mother had peeked inside to see what was left. “Maybe today your father will bring home some pay,” she’d said hopefully, but Megara had said nothing. Father never came home with money.

“We’re moving,” her mother said, not looking at her. “We need to get out of here before Maya comes to collect the rent. Rent we don’t have because . . .” She exhaled hard. “Your father causes nothing but pain.”

Pain. “Is he sick?” Megara asked, not understanding.

“Yes. Sick of us,” Thea mumbled under her breath and then looked at her daughter. Her face softened, and she dropped the bag and knelt at Megara’s side. “Look at me, child.” She held the bottom of Megara’s chin with a single finger. “Your father left us.”

Meg blinked, unsure what to make of this statement. “Father went to work?”

This made her mother laugh, but the sound was bitter, like the taste of Kalamata olives. “No.” She looked her straight in the eye. While Megara’s deep red hair and pale skin resembled her father’s, she shared her mother’s unusual violet eyes. Their eyes were so magnetic a day didn’t go by when someone in the street or at the market didn’t comment on them. Today, her mother’s eyes looked as if they were on

fire. “No. Your father is gone and isn’t coming back. It’s just you and me now. I need you to be strong.”

Gone. Megara blinked rapidly. He wasn’t coming back. The way her mother was staring at her, Megara sensed this meant something that would change all she ever knew. Her eyes filled with tears.

“We will not cry, Megara.” Her mother pushed a strand of Megara’s hair behind her right ear. “We are better off without him. You’ll see.” She held her chin high. “Let this be a lesson, child. Don’t ever let a man dim your light. In this world, you can’t count on anyone but yourself.”

Megara sniffled, but said nothing.

There was banging at their door. “Thea? Leonnatos? It’s Maya. Are you in there?”

Megara and her mother looked at one another. Her mother put her hand to her lips. “Grab what you can and go to the window. We’re going.”

“Window?” Megara whispered. Their home was only one floor, so there was no need to worry about falling, but she’d never come and gone by window before. “No door?”

“No door.” Her mother pushed her toward the window and opened it. “There’s no pleading with that woman,” she said as she dropped their sack outside. “You think she’ll feel bad for us that Leonnatos left? That we can’t pay to stay

here and she's placing a child on the street? No. All she'll see is lost rent money."

"Thea? I know you're in there!"

"We will find somewhere else to stay," her mother told her as the banging grew louder. "I promise."

Megara looked around at the small home they had rented. The sparse furnishings, the tattered blanket on the bed they all shared, the small table where her mother sat to do her mending, the fresh orchids in the vase (the one luxury Thea allowed herself). None of the possessions being left behind were their own, but there was something about the space she'd lived in for five years that Megara somehow sensed she'd have a hard time finding again: a true home. Their world wasn't much, but her father had robbed her of it. Her eyes caught sight of the forgotten stromvos under a chair. That top was the one and only thing she recalled her father ever giving her. Instinctively, she went running back for it. Her hands closed around the top just as she felt her mother's hands on her back.

"Megara! What are you doing?" Thea hissed, pulling the child into her arms and lifting her up and out the window.

The stromvos slipped from her fingers as her mother dropped her over the side of the window. Megara could hear

it hit the floor as she landed on the other side, but she knew not to ask her mother to retrieve it. Her father and the top were gone, and there was no use crying over them. Megara looked up to see her mother climbing out of the window behind her.

Maya appeared in the window looking angry. “You owe me your rent!”

Thea ignored Maya and reached for her daughter’s hand. The two started to run.

“Thea!”

Megara could still hear Maya yelling from the window as they disappeared into the crowd at the end of the street.

If there was one thing Megara had learned in her short life already, it was this: love wasn’t worth the trouble.

ONE: In Thin Air

Present day . . .

The view was spectacular.

That was Meg's first thought as Wonder Boy lifted her into his arms and a cloud carried the two of them into the air, high above the city of Thebes.

The second? Don't look down.

She wouldn't let her fear of heights ruin the moment. Hercules was beside her, his body awash in a golden glow that burned like the sun. Meg knew just from looking at him that he had finished his quest. Wonder Boy was now a god, and she was . . .

What was she, exactly?

Was she even alive?

In the last few years, Meg had been to hell and back—literally. She'd sold her soul to the god of the Underworld and spent her days and nights fulfilling Hades's every demand. While she still walked in the land of the living, her life was no longer her own.

Meeting Hercules had awoken something in her. Honestly, she wasn't sure what that something was, but she knew it felt *important*. Why else would she have leaped in front of a falling pillar to save him, causing her own demise in the process? That moment, and Wonder Boy's rescue of her afterward, was a blur now, like so many nightmares she tried hard to forget. The next thing she remembered was air filling her lungs as if she'd held her breath underwater for too long. Then there had been a crack of lightning, a flurry of clouds, and she and Wonder Boy were being whisked into the heavens toward Mount Olympus.

The city sat on a bed of clouds that shone like the sun burning brightly behind it. The majestic home of the gods rose high in the sky with peaks of clouds holding various buildings and waterfalls. As their cloud came to a stop in front of a massive staircase that led to Mount Olympus's pearly gates, Meg could hear cheering. Lined up on either side of the staircase, every god of Olympus was on hand to congratulate Wonder Boy.

"Three cheers for the mighty Hercules!" they shouted

as they threw flowers and blew kisses of gratitude into the air.

At that moment, Pegasus landed on a nearby cloud with Phil. The satyr caught a yellow flower in midair and began to chew happily as he surveyed the celebration.

“You did it, kid!” Phil shouted.

“Can you believe this, Meg?” Hercules said in wonder. “They’re cheering for . . . me.”

“You deserve it,” she said warmly, because he did . . . but something was suddenly gnawing at her.

The fact that Phil was there made sense—he’d trained Wonder Boy on Earth, helping him achieve true hero status. But how had she gotten a front row seat to this party? Her association with Hades, and doing his bidding, had almost cost Hercules this moment. Did these gods realize the woman standing beside their newly anointed god had almost derailed his dream?

“Meg?”

She looked up. Hercules was offering her his hand. At some point, she must have stopped walking, because she was standing still as the cloud swayed slightly.

“Are you coming?”

Meg hesitated, looking from him to the crowd of admirers and those huge steps to the Mount Olympus gates. Her thoughts were coming fast, and not all of them were pretty.

Wonder Boy might have wanted her there, but it was clear a mortal didn't belong among the deities of Mount Olympus. Hercules was a god now. Where did that leave the two of them?

Mortals weren't allowed to date gods, were they?

Was this the last time she'd ever see him? If it was, she was just standing there, totally blowing it. She wasn't saying any of the things she wanted to say . . . which were what, exactly?

Well, there was the way he made her appreciate things in life she had never seen before—fragrant lilies in bloom, the way a kid in the market smiled. He had a contagious optimism that filled with her newfound energy. There were also those stolen moments between Hercules's hero training and triumphs, and Meg's awful meetings with Hades. The two of them would stroll through the garden, talking for as long as they could. They could not get enough of one another, drinking in each other's thoughts and observations like parched farmers reaching for brimming wells; Hercules brushing hair out of her eyes, Meg teasing him, making his ears redden so adorably. They had each challenged one another to see such vastly different points of view, to expand their worlds far beyond the reach of Mount Olympus and the Underworld. Those moments had been just for them . . .

or were they? Did the gods know about all the time they'd spent together? Did they care?

Okay, so it was clear there was a lot to unpack there, and Meg had no clue what the newly minted god in front of her was thinking. *That's* what she really wanted to know. But how did she ask Wonder Boy what he wanted when this was the moment he had worked so hard for . . . and when every god of Olympus was watching?

There was a sudden hush over the crowd and Meg followed the stares of the others to two figures who had appeared at the top of the stairs. Zeus and his wife Hera were a commanding sight: Zeus, a ball of blinding light with a long white beard and flowing hair, with muscles so large they looked as if they belonged to several men; Hera, a vision in pink, her curly hair and gown sparkling like gems.

Meg felt Hercules's sharp intake of breath at the sight of his parents. This was what he'd wanted, what he had been working toward his entire life. He glanced at Meg for a split second before rushing up the stairs to see them. She said nothing as she watched him go, staring instead at his bulging calves as he raced up the steps. Only one thought came to mind: *I should have taken the man's hand.*

Way to go, Meg! Hercules asks if you're coming and you

just stand there like a Greek statue. Why didn't you talk to him? Why didn't you say, "Wonder Boy, I want you to stay. Don't become a god"? Because that sounds selfish, doesn't it? And what right do I have to ask him that after I almost cost him everything? She could tell him the truth. *And what's that, Meg?* she countered herself. *How do you really feel about the boy?*

Meg looked at him as he reached the gates and her heart felt a sudden pull. There was only one thing she knew to say for certain.

"Don't go," she whispered.

He was too far away to hear her.

"Hercules," Meg heard Hera say as Hercules sank into his mother's open arms. "We're so proud of you."

"Fine work, boy!" Zeus punched him in the arm affectionately. His blue eyes that mirrored Hercules's own shone with pride. "You've done it! You're a true hero."

Meg suddenly felt Hera's eyes on her. Every other god in the joint turned to look at the single mortal among the clouds too. Meg shifted uneasily at the sudden attention of the immortals.

"You were willing to give your life to rescue this young woman." Awe coated Hera's voice.

Even Meg couldn't believe that Wonder Boy had almost

sacrificed himself to save her, of all people. And yet here they both were. *Don't go. Don't go.*

“For a true hero isn’t measured by the size of his strength, but by the strength of his heart,” Zeus told his son as he clasped a large arm around him. “Now at last, my son, you can come home!”

The gates of Mount Olympus opened, revealing a world beyond that Meg couldn’t put into words. It was heaven, pure and simple. Paradise. It was a world not meant for a mortal like her.

She felt the shift as her heart—the one she’d only just gotten used to hearing beat again—stopped suddenly at the sight of it all. Any second now Wonder Boy would walk through those gates and never look back. She couldn’t blame him. Zeus was offering him his dream come true—immortality, family, and home.

Home. That was everyone’s dream, wasn’t it? She’d never had a home of her own—not really. For years, she’d bounced from place to place, never staying long enough to even hang something on the walls. She’d never lived somewhere she longed to return to, where she felt loved, where she felt safe; a place she didn’t want to leave.

Well, of course, she had felt that way once for a short while . . . and look how *that* had turned out.

The other gods crowded around Hercules, cheering

once more for the boy who was lost and found again. When Meg heard a cry, she couldn't help turning around. The god of love, Aphrodite, a vison in purple, was being consoled by a green god wearing a hat of leaves whom Meg didn't recognize.

"I can't believe we finally have our Hercules back." Aphrodite wiped away tears. "I'm just so happy for this family! Hera has waited so long to see her son again."

"Yes, well, she could have seen him sooner, but you know Zeus. He's so big picture," said the green god, and Aphrodite looked at her strangely. "Oh, don't mind me being dour on such a happy occasion. Just a bit of gossip I heard."

Aphrodite moved in closer. "Gossip away, Demeter."

Demeter was the god of harvest—someone Meg's first love had always prayed to when planting crops for the coming year. She strained to hear the zaftig god with the pink lips.

"Well, I heard that Hera was so inconsolable about Hercules being stolen that Zeus set out to find the boy, and he did. But once he found out the kid was mortal, he left him there. The Fates predicted Zeus's son was the only one who could stop the Titans eighteen years after his birth, so Zeus just waited the time out. Now he has the boy trained up, and strong enough to fight future battles."

Meg inhaled sharply as Aphrodite gasped. “No! He just *left* the child on Earth? Hera would be heartbroken to know that.”

Holy Zeus. Was it true? Meg wondered.

Demeter shrugged and half-heartedly waved a palm leaf in the air in celebration. “Well, it’s just a rumor, but I’ll tell you something: if it were my daughter, I would never have left her sleeping in a cradle to be stolen in the first place. And I’d certainly never let her roam the Earth alone. If I knew where she was, I’d stop at nothing to get her back. Nothing.”

Aphrodite patted her back. “We’ll find Persephone. Don’t you worry. I’m sure the girl is just off wandering meadows and farmland again as she likes to do.”

“Maybe. But she has her harvest duties on Earth soon,” Demeter said, her eyes on Zeus accepting praise for his son. “Anyway, all I know is I won’t rest until I find her.”

Phil rushed past the gods, separating Meg from them, with not even a greeting. He ran up the steps as fast as his small hooves would take him. Meg watched him, distracted. She couldn’t get what Demeter said out of her head. Did Hercules know his father had located him, had known exactly where he was his entire life and never come for him?

Meg felt cold at the thought. She tried to shake the rumor aside, not let it get to her. She had enough to worry about—including saying goodbye to Wonder Boy in this,

his big moment. He'd opened up a whole new way of life to her—one where sacrifice was rewarded, and people could be good, and heroes could save the world. And now she was going back to Earth alone. There was nothing waiting for her in Thebes. Not anymore.

She had no one else to blame for her misfortune. What did her mother always say—never rely on anyone but yourself? It was true. After her father had abandoned them, she had lost her mother, and finally, her first flame. When would she learn that love was a dangerous game that she never won? Was it any surprise she was about to lose Wonder Boy, too?

Meg felt tears begging to come to the surface, but she refused to give in. She had no clue what she'd do next, but for now, she could stand on this cloud and watch Hercules till he disappeared beyond Olympus's gates. Hercules was home and she was happy for him—truly—even if she felt an urge to scream *don't go* once more.

"Congratulations, Wonder Boy," Meg said softly, giving him one last look. "You'll make one heck of a god."

She'd only made it a few steps before she felt someone grab her hand.

She turned around in surprise. Hercules was somehow standing beside her.

"Father, this is the moment I've always dreamed of," she

heard Hercules say, “but a life without Meg, even an immortal life, would be empty.” He pulled her closer and stared into her eyes, making her heart quicken once more. “I . . . I wish to stay on Earth with her.”

Her grip on his arm tightened. Had she just heard him correctly?

“What? How? Are you sure?” she whispered, still not believing her ears.

“I finally know where I belong . . .” he whispered back. “And it’s with you.”

Then suddenly he was kissing her and she was throwing her arms around him as he lifted her high into the air. She could hear the gods cheering, and this time it wasn’t just for Hercules. It was for the two of them and their love that somehow defied logic.

Meg started to laugh and then thought she might cry. She stared into his blue eyes and didn’t know what to say. But that was okay. She didn’t have to rush her thoughts. Now they had time. Lots of time! Wonder Boy was coming back to Earth with her and they had a whole life ahead of them. Had something in her life finally gone right? It didn’t seem possible, and yet Wonder Boy’s lips on hers were proof. The gods approved. They were happy for them! They were—

“No.”

No? At first, Meg thought she’d imagined someone

uttering the word and disagreeing with Hercules's wishes. But one look at Zeus's stern face and Meg knew—the gods' All-father was putting an end to their relationship before it could ever really get started.

TWO: A Change of Heart

The air was completely still. No one spoke a word. Their eyes were either on Zeus or his newly god-anointed son. And he just looked downright confused.

“Father?” Hercules questioned, still holding tight to Meg.

“I said no to your request, my boy,” Zeus repeated.

Meg noticed some of the other gods sense the friction in the air and start to move away. It was clear no one wanted to be in Zeus’s crosshairs. Only Hera remained by his side, listening patiently to Zeus’s reasoning. Phil quietly motioned to Pegasus and climbed aboard the horse’s back, flying off without even a goodbye. There went her ride.

“We waited a lifetime to get you back and have you sit beside your mother and me,” Zeus explained. “And now that you’re here, you want to give that up and remain human?”

“No . . . but I . . . I want to be with Meg,” Hercules said, running a hand through his wavy locks, as he did whenever he got nervous. “If I can’t go back, can she remain here?”

“No,” Zeus said again, laughter escaping his lips. “Mount Olympus is no place for *mortals*.”

He said the word “mortals” as if they were the scum of the Earth. *We’re the ones who praise the gods, make sacrifices and do their bidding, and we’re not worthy of their company?* Meg thought, feeling suddenly defensive even though she had had a similar thought just moments earlier.

“Zeus,” Hera started, but he blazed forward.

“Son, when you visited my temple, I was so thankful to know you were alive and well.” He grabbed Hera’s hand and smiled. “Your mother and I had always hoped and prayed you were out there somewhere and we’d find you someday. Instead, you found us.”

Meg’s eyes flickered to Demeter’s. Her face was blank, but Meg felt her skin prickle. *He’s lying*, she thought.

“That is why I sent you on a quest to become a hero,” Zeus continued. “We wanted you to become a god again, and you did all we asked and more to make that happen. You fought every beast sent your way and won! You have

proven yourself to be selfless and a fighter. You deserve to be a god again, child, and gods, as you know, belong here. You spent your time on Earth with the mortals, and I'm glad you enjoyed spending time with this one." Zeus's eyes flickered to Meg before he looked away dismissively. "But now your place is here with us."

Hercules let go of Meg. "But Father . . ."

Her body went cold. *I'm glad you enjoyed spending time with this one?* Was Zeus serious? Who was he to judge their relationship when he barely knew her? He didn't even know his son! If what Demeter said was true, Hercules had not needed to wait so long to prove his worth as a hero; Zeus had left him on Earth till he needed his help. He had abandoned Hercules, just like she'd been abandoned countless times over. And now he was dismissing Hercules's love for her as if it were nothing? Then again, why was she surprised? When her first love had lain dying, it wasn't Zeus who saved him. It was Hades.

Meg felt a flash of anger. If Hercules was going to stay on Mount Olympus, he deserved to know what his father had done, just as she had learned the painful truth about her own—they'd both been left to fend for themselves.

"Wait! Hercules, you deserve to know the truth!" Meg's voice was breathless. She felt a little dizzy now, the altitude finally catching up to her. "Zeus knew you were alive! Even

before you reached the temple. He left you on Earth till you grew up and he needed you to fight the Titans!”

Meg heard gasps and saw Zeus look at her with disdain. She looked for Demeter, but she had suddenly disappeared from the crowd, as had Aphrodite. Smart move. Maybe she should have thought about revealing this news in front of an audience.

“What?” Hercules whispered, his pained expression making Meg’s stomach twist.

“Zeus, is this true?” Hera asked, the anguish on her face mirroring her son’s. Zeus looked away, his face turning redder.

“How do you know this?” Hercules asked.

“I overheard someone telling the story,” Meg admitted, choosing not to reveal Demeter’s name. Why have multiple gods mad at you? “You were mortal, so he left you on Earth, waiting till Hades resurrected the Titans so *you* could fight them for him,” she continued, feeling the heat rise in her face as she thought of Hercules being a pawn in the god’s game. “He only wants to keep you here now so that you can fight his battles.” Hercules’s broad shoulders sank. “I’m sorry. I just felt you should know what you’re signing up for.”

“Father?” Hercules looked up at Zeus, whose expression had grown even stonier.

Zeus glared at Meg. “Who are you going to believe, son? Me or this mortal?”

Meg’s eyes flashed. “I’m not the one who let his own child be stolen while he slept.”

The minute the comment left her lips, she knew she’d gone too far.

The other gods quickly began to dissipate. Hera stayed put, but Meg wondered if she was in shock.

Zeus’s face turned almost purple as he seemingly grew three times his size. Behind him, the sky darkened like an approaching thunderstorm and lightning bolts crisscrossed the sky. Hercules instinctively stepped in front of Meg, putting one hand on her arm, but she nudged it away. She’d lived with Hades. She wasn’t afraid to stand up to Zeus.

“You dare question my judgment, Megara?” Zeus thundered as the storm clouds rolled in around him. Lightning crashed dangerously close to where she and Hercules were standing. “You, the woman who worked to keep my son from completing his quest?”

On second thought, maybe she *should* be a little afraid of Zeus. Especially now that she realized he was well aware of what she had done.

“Oh yes, I know all about your life, too, Megara,” Zeus said. “I suspect much more than my son knows.”

Meg felt her cheeks flame. It was true she hadn't told Wonder Boy *everything*.

"You did my brother's bidding for him, trying to cheat Hercules from his rightful place at my side, and you think I should let him return to Earth with you?" As Zeus continued, Hera looked at her.

"I . . ." Meg wanted to explain herself, but Zeus was on a roll.

"You think turning my son against me will allow you to keep him?" Zeus bellowed. "You are not worthy of a god's love!"

"Father, she saved my life!" Hercules shouted. Zeus flinched and the lightning stopped.

"That may be true," he said, his size shrinking back down to normal again. "And it is also true that I could have come to you before, son." Regret laced his voice as he glanced briefly at his wife. "But I saw no point in disrupting your childhood when good people like Amphitryon and Alcmene could protect you and keep your identity hidden until you were old enough to learn how to fight for your right to be a god again. As that is indeed what needed to be done. Only a god can call Mount Olympus home, and you needed time to grow into that role. It would have been foolish and selfish to have rushed you." He narrowed his eyes at Meg. "*That* is why I sacrificed our time

together—not because I didn’t want you. *Never* because I didn’t want you.”

Meg felt her cheeks burn and she looked away. *Okay, that kind of makes sense. Nice one, Meg.*

“I was trying to protect you,” Zeus added. “Can you, Megara, say the same for Hercules during his time on Earth?”

Meg looked at the ground. They both knew the answer to that question.

“I am sorry, son, but this mortal is not worthy of your love,” Zeus added. “My decision is final. You will remain here and she will leave at once.”

“No!” Hercules cried. Hera narrowed her eyes.

“Hermes!” Zeus thundered, and his faithful messenger flew to his side in seconds.

“You called, my lord?” Hermes hovered in front of him thanks to the wings on his hat. He rubbed at his fogged-up glasses to see them all better.

“Yes,” Zeus said. “Take Megara back to Earth.” He looked at his son and his expression relaxed slightly. “You may have a moment to say your goodbyes,” he added hastily before gliding up the steps to the gates. The storm clouds slowly began to dissipate.

Hercules looked from Zeus to Meg. “I . . . you . . . Don’t go anywhere. I’ll talk to him.” He ran after Zeus. “Father!”

Hermes flew to Meg's side. "Wow, you really know how to wind up the big guy! Ready to go?"

"Will you give us a moment, Hermes?" Hera appeared in front of her.

Hermes flew off and the two women stared at one another. Close up, Hera was almost blindingly stunning, the epitome of regal with her sparkling gown and rose-colored hair piled on top of the crown on her head. Small gold rings held up the draped sleeves of her dress, which ruffled in the light wind. Unlike Zeus, she bore an open, almost curious expression as she peered at the mortal before her. She held out an arm.

"I think we should talk," the god said simply.

Meg took a deep breath. "Look, about what I said before . . ."

"I will deal with Zeus later; that's not what I want to talk to you about. I want to know why you felt the need to tell my son about his father. Were you hoping to gain favor with him?"

"No, I just thought he deserved to know."

"Because?" Hera prodded.

"Because no one should live with a lie," Meg said.

"And?"

Hera was clearly fishing for something. Meg thought for a moment. "And . . . I owe him. He changed my life."

Hera drew closer. Now that she was getting used to the light emanating from the god, she realized Hercules had her wide eyes. Yes, Zeus also had the same magnetic blue shade, but there was a kindness in Hera's and Hercules's that instantly put her at ease. "And how did he do that?"

Meg closed her eyes and thought about Wonder Boy again. She pictured their rendezvous in a secluded meadow, a surprise picnic at the water's edge—these moments were some of the happiest she'd had in a long time. He had literally saved her body from the river Styx, her soul from Hades, but it was more than that. When they were together, she felt as weightless as the clouds beneath her. What she knew for sure was that she was content when she was by his side, like a piece of a puzzle had slid into place.

But could she say all this to his newly found mother? No way. Best to keep it simple. "He gave me my life back. A girl doesn't forget that."

Hera tapped her chin and looked thoughtful. "I see. Is that the *only* reason you wish for my son to return to Earth with you?" Meg opened her mouth and closed it again. "I assume you do want him to return to Earth, don't you? You didn't protest when he suggested it." A small smile played on her pink lips.

"I . . ." Meg looked back at Hercules, who appeared to be talking with his hands, winding them up as if he were

about to throw a discus. “Of course, I’d like to spend more time with him, but if he’s happy here . . .” She felt the lump form in her throat and couldn’t believe this was happening. She would *not* cry while talking to Hera. “I want him to be happy. He deserves that.”

Hera nodded. “And do *you* deserve to be happy, Megara? I suspect *you* make him happy. And if he stays here and you go back there, I don’t think either of you will be.” She looked up at her son and husband still arguing. “No, this arrangement of my husband’s clearly won’t work. We need to come up with a different plan.”

Was the god of marriage and birth offering her an olive branch? Meg took a deep breath and tried to keep her words in check for a change while she deferred to Hera. “What do you suggest?”

Hera continued to look at her. “That depends. Are you in love with my son?”

“Love?” Meg took a step back. She immediately thought back to something she’d said to Hercules as she lay dying back in Thebes. *People do crazy things when they’re in love.*

Was that what this was? Love?

Was she in love with a god?

No.

Yes.

Possibly.

How did one know for sure? Her track record when it came to love was tarnished at best, and she and Wonder Boy hadn't known each other very long. Of course, they had grown close, but in the moment she had uttered those words she thought it was the end of the road. Her experience with love up until then had been messy and painful; she had sensed things could have been different with Hercules if given the chance. But *if* was the key word. She had no clue what she would do next when she stepped off this cloud, and even less of a clue if her world didn't include Wonder Boy. Was Hera giving her a chance to change her fate yet again? Meg looked at the god. If saying she was in love would give her and Hercules time to figure their story out, what was the harm in saying it?

"Of course," Meg said firmly.

Hera clasped her hands together and smiled. "Wonderful! Then there is only one choice: you, Megara, need to become a god."

Meg wasn't sure she had heard Hera correctly. "I'm sorry. What?"

"You need to become a god," Hera repeated, as if it were as simple as buying figs at the local market. "It's the only logical answer to this predicament."

Meg's eyes narrowed. Gods didn't just offer the gift of immortality without reason. People prayed for such an

honor all the time, but other than Hercules—who was born a god and lost his status when he was kidnapped—she could count on her fingers the number of gods she knew of who had started out as mortals: Psyche, Thyone, Ariadne . . . Dionysus counted since he supposedly had a mortal mother, but Zeus was his father. She had done nothing to help the gods like they had. All she'd done was anger Zeus. She looked up again at Wonder Boy still pleading with his father, who seemed as angry as ever. "And Zeus would be okay with this?"

Hera waved her hand dismissively. "Let me worry about my husband. Are you interested in what I have to say or not? We don't have much time."

Meg still couldn't believe what she was hearing. "What do I have to do? Let me guess. Save a pair of kids trapped in a chasm? Oh, wait. Hercules already did that when Hades set him up to fail."

Hera's smile faded. "Do you think I am trying to deceive you?"

Okay, maybe she'd overstepped. Again. A rumble of thunder in the distance made Meg choose her next words carefully. "Where I come from, offers like this aren't thrown around so easily. You'll have to excuse me for wondering what the catch is."

Hera's smile returned. "I like your spirit. And you

clearly care about one another. My son wouldn't ask to give all this up if that were not true." She stared at Meg. "I have a feeling you two would make a strong match, and that power is rare indeed—something that, in turn, could help the world. What good is one miserable god when there could be two extraordinary ones? That is why I want to help you. I assure you, this offer is no trickery. If you can prove yourself worthy, I can see to it that you are given the gift of immortality. There are special circumstances where mortals can become gods, and if that were to happen, then the two of you could be together." Her eyes flashed mischievously. "Whether Zeus likes it or not."

Meg was speechless. Hera wasn't joking. The god was offering her something that she'd never even dreamed of becoming. It took her a moment to catch her breath. "A god?" Meg repeated.

"A god," Hera said again. "*If* you can prove your worth."

Meg placed a hand on her hip and cocked her head to one side, her ponytail swishing. "And how do I go about doing that? Start helping kids cross the road and assist old men with their trips to the market?"

Hera actually laughed. "No. If you want to be with my son and become a god worthy of Mount Olympus, I need to see you understand love is a strength, not a weakness. That putting your trust in someone you love doesn't mean you

can't stand on your own two feet. It means you know how to share responsibility and accept help when it is needed." She placed her hands on Meg's shoulders. "I want to see you know how to be vulnerable, Megara. And understand that love means opening your heart even if the story doesn't always end the way you want it to."

Meg crossed her arms. "I know all these things already."

Hera put her arms down and smiled at her kindly. "Do you?"

"Yes," Meg insisted, somewhat defiantly.

Hera continued to study her. "Then you've told Hercules about the loves you have lost, I assume. You told him about Aegeus?"

Just hearing Aegeus's name made Meg's lungs burn. The memory of crying and the screams that she associated with the name of her first flame came flooding back. As always, she attempted to block the noise out. "Of course," Meg said, which wasn't exactly a lie. Wonder Boy knew she'd been scorned before. How she'd been scorned, not exactly . . .

Hera's eyes glittered. "And what about your mother?"