Titanic Trouble

by Jacob Rennaker

Chapter One

I always thought Saturday detention would be bad. I just never thought it would mean having to save the world, too.

You're probably wondering why I had Saturday detention. Okay—first of all, it wasn't my fault. Second, I don't get along with teachers. And Mr. Pagoni was the worst kind of teacher. Always telling me what to do. Expecting me to keep up with every single thing he said, even when he was talking a hundred miles an hour. And thinking I was trying to make him look bad whenever I asked a question (which happened a lot). Can you blame me for giving up on his class?

So, it was a usual Friday. I was feeling overwhelmed by everything Mr. Pagoni was saying and all the things he was telling us to do. So I took a little break to clear my mind and ended up staring at a branch just out the window—which I saw had a cocoon hanging from it. I could even see the butterfly starting push its way out, which was pretty awesome. But of course, Mr. Pagoni had to go and ruin it by yelling at me for not paying attention.

After chewing me out for about five minutes straight, he finally stopped and said, "Caleb, what do you have to say for yourself?" And I said something like, "Your ego is showing." That's how I got Saturday detention.

I might've been the first person to get Saturday detention in a very long time, because they didn't know what to do with me. They couldn't convince any of the teachers to come in on a weekend to be in charge of my detention, so instead, they decided to leave me with the janitor.

I know what you're thinking—having to spend an entire day with a janitor is possibly the worst thing they could've done for a punishment. But to tell you the truth, this janitor was the person I liked most at St. Georgios Middle School. His name was Homer. Like, from "The Simpsons." Except, he wasn't bald. He had thick gray hair and an even thicker black mustache.

He was just a little taller than me—maybe five feet tall—and his body was shaped like a bowling ball. But a pretty muscular bowling ball, if that's even possible. And no matter the time of year, he always wore long-sleeved coveralls (usually blue) and with a shiny silver cross around his neck.

Some of the kids at school made fun of him for his thick Greek accent, but I didn't. Those same kids made fun of me for not being able to say my "R"s, so maybe that's why Homer was so nice to me. And as sad as it sounds, there were days where I felt like he was the only one who actually cared about me since we'd moved to Massachusetts almost a year ago.

Sometimes when I got out of class to use the bathroom, I'd see Homer sweeping the hallway, and we'd talk. He told me that school was hard for him, too. He had trouble paying attention in class because everything around him was so much more interesting than whatever the teacher was talking about. And when he *did* manage to pay attention, the teachers would go on and on about the way they wanted him to do things—even if he could see a better way. Needless to say, he never really felt like he fit in there. But he loved fixing things and putting things in the right place, and so he ended up becoming a repairman instead of going to college.

Homer had been working at St. Georgios Middle School for almost 40 years. His family had started the school over two hundred years ago. Apparently, it was the oldest Greek school in America—a very special place where some of the earliest families from their homeland had brought their stories and traditions.

Speaking of Greek stories, whenever I was having a really bad day, Homer would cheer me up between classes by telling me stories about the Greek gods. I *loved* those stories. I'd checked out every book from our local library about Greek mythology at least twice. But Homer's stories felt different—like he really believed what he was telling me. Like those stories were real.

So, when my mom dropped me off at the school on Saturday morning and I saw Homer in his familiar faded blue coveralls at the front doors to let me in, I smiled. Maybe he'd let me off easy and I could just hang out until it was time for my mom to pick me up later that afternoon. It might actually be kind of fun.

Homer closed the doors, brought out a large key, and locked them shut behind me. I followed him with a bounce in my step as he hobbled down the hallway.

"This is great, Homer." I said. "Since it's just us two here, you can tell me more stories about the gods!"

Homer stopped and turned to me with a frown on his face. "They told me what you did in class," he said. "It is okay not to fit in at the school, as I have told you before. I did not fit in, either."

He shook his head. "But you must be respectful to the teachers."

I let out a loud sigh. "But what if they don't even *pretend* to care about me and how I learn? What if they're talking so much that I forget what they started talking about in the first place? Let alone why it even matters."

Homer nodded. "I know what you mean," he said. "School can be difficult for people like you and me. And so, you must learn how to listen."

"But I *do* listen," I said. "That's the problem. I listen to everything—what they say, what the other people in the room are saying, the sound of the vents rattling when the air comes through…I listen to ev-er-y-thing."

"No," he shook his head. "That is not listening. That is *hearing*. I am talking about *listening*. And for that, you need your imagination."

I scratched my head. "I don't get it."

Homer wrinkled his eyebrows as he searched the right words. “It is like...it is like you must find the golden thread between what the other person is asking of you and what you can give to them.”

I stared blankly at him, like he was speaking Greek. “I still don’t get it,” I said.

“Don’t worry,” Homer said. “You have time. But now, we have work to do. And if we finish a little early…” He shrugged. “Maybe I can tell you some more stories about the gods.”

I let a grin spread across my face. “Deal.”

He led me down the 7th grade hall and stopped where it crossed the long connecting hallway that joined the different wings of the school. If you were looking at the building from above, it was kind of shaped like a capital “E,” with separate halls for the sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. Actually, it looked more like a mutated “E,” because the cafeteria and the gym kind of grew out of that long connecting hallway.

Anyway, when we stopped where the two hallways crossed each other, Homer looked up above where we were standing.

“Yesterday, Mrs. Barbati said she heard rumbling noises.” He pointed up to the air vents that ran along the ceiling. “I think it might be a problem with the ventilation system. As I have told you—this is a very old building and there is much that needs fixing. And the showers in the little boy locker room is leaking again, so…”

He looked at his watch. “Ah. Now that the store is open, there are a few tools I will be needing.”

Homer looked me in the eyes and put hand on my shoulder. “Can I trust you to do some work by yourself until I am returning from the store?”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Was he really trusting me? Not even the teachers did that.

I nodded slowly.

"Okay," he said reaching into his back pocket. He handed me a thick gray cloth. "I want you to dust the storage room. Do you know where that is?"

I tipped my chin to the doorway across the hall from where we stood. "It's just on the other side to the drama room there, right?"

"Right," he said. "Clean anything that has dust on it. But do *not* clean the furnace room—I will take care of that myself. Understand?"

"Yep."

Homer patted me on the shoulder. "Good," he said. "I will return soon."

****

Lukewarm air blew out loudly from the vent in the ceiling above me as I passed the drama room and went straight to the storage room. I pushed open the heavy door, took a deep breath, and hit the light switch. I was expecting the room to look like something out of a zombie movie, but when I saw neatly-stacked boxes and organized shelves, I let out my breath out.

I ran a finger along one of the shelves, and it actually wasn't that dusty. Homer must have cleaned the storage room sometime in the past few weeks. But he was trusting me to do this one job, so I got to work right away with my gray cloth. After what felt like forever, the room was pretty much dust-free.

Homer wasn't back yet. Even though I was finished, I wanted him to see me cleaning when he got back, so I searched the room one more time to see if there was anything small I'd missed. Ah—there! I hadn't dusted the old sign on the large, mostly-rusty metal door that led into the next room.

With a loud scraping noise, I pushed a large plastic bin against the door, climbed on top, and looked closely at the sign. Now *that* was old. And I don't think anyone had bothered cleaning it for the last hundred years. So I started polishing. It took a while, but I could finally see the first row of letters. Only, I couldn't read them. They were mostly all round and swirly and *definitely* not English. I'd seen these same sorts of letters under a few of the signs around St. Georgios, and Homer had told me they were written in Greek. Under the thick dust, I could tell there was something else written just below these funny-looking letters, so I scrubbed with my cloth until I could see it clearly:

FURNACE ROOM. KEEP OUT.

Suddenly, I heard a rumbling noise from somewhere behind the door.

I froze.

What was that? I leaned against the cold metal door, but as soon as I put my ear against it, the rumbling stopped. Huh. Maybe it had just been my stomach. I hopped down from the plastic bin and shoved it back into place with another loud scraping noise. When I stopped, the scraping sound continued. No, not scraping. Rumbling. And it was *definitely* coming from behind the rusty metal door.

I looked at the doorknob and noticed that it wasn't nearly as rusty as the rest of the door. It was a dull brass color, and I guessed that the reason the knob looked so different from the rest of the old door was because someone had been using it.

That doorknob needed some polishing, too. And if the door happened to open a little when I was cleaning the knob…I guess that would be okay. Right?

I whipped out my gray cloth, and as I wrapped it around the doorknob and twisted it *just* a bit, the door swung open with a long, loud creaking noise. Still standing outside the doorway, I leaned forward to get a better look.

The furnace room was mostly dark. The light from the storage room behind me crept inside until it shone on a old iron furnace. It was about my height, maybe a little taller. A dull, orange light lit the furnace from the inside, revealing a thick iron grate that looked like monster teeth. Or were they *actual* monster teeth?

Without thinking, I stepped inside to get a better view. There was still a rumbling noise, and from where I stood, it kind of sounded like it was coming from the furnace. But no, the furnace was letting off a soft humming noise. The rumbling was different.

I took another couple of steps forward and tilted my head to see around the furnace. On the wall beside it, there was a long, thick crack. Only, this crack was glowing a deep red. Since the front of the furnace was glowing orange, I just figured the glowing red on the wall must've come from an opening on the side of the furnace or something. Homer would have to fix that.

Now that my eyes had adjusted to the room's dim light, I could make out a small cabinet door that stuck out from the wall on the far side of the furnace, not too far from the strange red crack on the wall. On the cabinet's small wooden door, there was a dull metal sheet fastened with tiny nails, and on the sheet, it looked like someone had carved the image of a tall, skinny mountain. I could tell there was something else on top of the mountain, but the light in the room was so low that I couldn't quite make it out.

I took a few more steps forward until I was standing about a foot away from the cabinet. Now I could see what was on top of the mountain—it was a bunch of…pillars? Each pillar had a tiny symbol carved into it—but these were so small and the light was so bad, that my eyes got tired and fell to the side of the door, where there was a thin latch along the right side. I wonder…

The rumbling noise grew suddenly louder, and as it did, a faint golden-yellow light shone along the edges of the cabinet door. Okay—I had to see what was behind the door. So I grabbed the latch and tugged the door open.

Inside the small cabinet was a hook handing at about my eye level. The hook wasn't glowing, and the gold chain that dangled from the hook wasn't glowing, either. But at the bottom of the gold chain hung a rusty, teardrop-shaped piece of jewelry about the size of my fist. *This* is what the golden-yellow light was coming from.

The chain ran through the smallest point of the teardrop-shaped jewelry at its top and in its center was a large wheel with raised bumps along its edge. But, like I said, even though it was glowing faintly, it was still pretty rusty, so I couldn't quite tell if those bumps were letters or designs or something else entirely.

Anyway, I could tell that it was old. Like, *really* old. I'd never seen anything that old before in real life, and imagined that it could have belonged to someone in ancient Greece—maybe even someone who had seen the gods themselves?

I wanted to get a better look at the necklace, so I lifted the gold chain from its hook. Immediately, the piece of jewelry stopped glowing and the rumbling noises returned. They grew louder and louder and somehow angrier. The rumbling grew sharper and the noise soon became words.

"Whooo…? Whooo…has laaaid claaaim…to the aaamulet?"

I leapt backward, jewelry still in hand. I tried swallowing before I answered, but my mouth had gone completely dry.

"Um…I haven't laid on anything. I mean, if you're talking about this necklace, it kind of jumped out at me from behind that door over there, and—"

"That is no mere necklace, mortal," the voice boomed. "It is an amulet—and an amulet of great power, at that."

With my free hand, I scratched my head. "Huh?"

"Do not feign stupidity before me, mortal," the voice continued. "The amulet is mine by right, and I *will* have it."

I knew a bully when I heard one. So I straightened up and said, "Oh yeah? Prove it."

A deeper rumbling sounded that actually shook the walls around me. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, after all.

"You want proof, do you? Then I will tell you of its creation. My son Prometheus was wronged by the wretched Olympians. So he tricked them into storing their power and abilities inside the amulet in the hope that they could contain us Titans forever more."

"Wait a minute—Titans? Like the monsters who Zeus and the other gods kicked into Tartarus?"

"It is they who are the monsters!" Again, the room shook, and dust fell from the ceiling. "And once I possess the amulet, it is *they* who will be thrust into Tartarus!"

The voice continued, "Surrender the amulet, and I will spare your life. But mark my words—if you use the amulet, I swear upon the River Styx that I will destroy you"

Yikes. This guy sounded terrible. And he definitely didn't seem like the type of person—or Titan—who should have an all-powerful amulet. But could could a boy like me possibly keep it away from him?

My mind raced. How could I possibly get away from a Titan? It was then I realized that I hadn't actually seen whatever was talking to me. Maybe this was all just a trick, too. Like the one Prometheus had played on the gods to get their power into the amulet in the first place. *If* that was really what happened.

I looked around the room, but aside from the cabinet, the furnace, and that weird streak of bright red light next to it—which looked a little larger now—there wasn't anything else in the room. So I started taking a few slow, backward steps toward the storage room.

Again, more rumbling. "Fool! I will claim what is mine!"

I turned and ran—through the storage room and out into the hallway. I stopped and looked around as I caught my breath. Where could I go? I'd promised Homer that I wouldn't leave. And even if I did leave, there's no way that that Homer would believe me if I told him I was running away from a Titan.

So, to honor my promise to Homer and to keep his trust, I decided to stay inside the school and try to survive until my favorite janitor returned from the store. And then if *he* heard the Titan, too, everyone else would have to believe me.

That's when I both felt and heard a rumbling behind me, from somewhere closer than the storage room.

"Gotta go!" I said.

I spun on my heel and sprinted down the 7th grade hallway in front of me. I ducked into the bathroom and darted into one of the stalls. I quickly locked the door behind me, climbed up onto

one of the toilets, and sat on its wide tank. The rumbling grew louder, and as it did, it started to sound more like a growl. I could feel sweat breaking out all over me, but I stayed quiet.

After an eternity—or maybe it was just a minute—the rumbling or growling or whatever grew quieter. I couldn't hide in the bathroom forever. I know because once when I was having a really bad day, I sat on top of one of the toilets like this for almost an entire class period, and when the bell finally rang, I found out that my legs were completely asleep. It took so long for my legs to wake up enough to finally stand on that I was late to class and got in trouble. Again.

I carefully lowered myself off the toilet. My hand hesitated over the lock—where would I go? Maybe if the front office was unlocked, I could use the phone there to call my mom. She probably wouldn't believe me, but it would sure make *me* feel better.

So I left the stall and opened the bathroom door a crack. The coast was clear. So I swung the door open, put my head down, and ran toward the front office. At least, I *tried* running to the office. Instead, I hit something like a brick wall, and heard several somethings clatter to the ground.

"No! Don't destroy me!" I yelled, as I squinted my eyes shut and put my hands in front of my face.

"Caleb?"

I opened my eyes. Homer was standing in front of me with a pile of supplies at his feet.

"What do you mean, 'don't destroy me?'"

I scrambled to my feet. "It...I was just...You've got to believe me—"

"Slow down, Caleb. Now, take a deep breath and tell me everything."

I opened my mouth to answer, but just then, I heard the rumbling noise return, louder and angrier than before. I grabbed Homer's sleeve and pulled him across the hallway and into the storage room.

The rumbling grew closer and the walls shook. Homer's eyes widened. This time, he grabbed *my* sleeve and pulled me farther inside—into the furnace room.

The first thing I notice was the red crack next to the furnace. It had grown both brighter and wider. Like, a *lot* wider. Wide enough for a me to catch a glimpse of whatever was inside: a pulsing red light and what looked like swirling black clouds.

The rumbling noise swept over us from behind and seemed to stop once it reached the strange glowing red crack. Then, with a loud tearing sound, several large, clawed fingers sprang out of the crack and tore it open even wider.

Out stepped a large, dark figure about the size of a professional football player—or maybe a small giant. I couldn't quite tell because its edges were pretty blurry. Actually, most of him looked so blurry that I couldn't tell if he was wearing clothes or not (which was pretty awkward). But his eyes were clear and red and burning. Black smoke rose from this body and curled around his head and giant horns.

My guess was that this was either an actual Titan, or the devil himself. Neither one was a good option.

Homer stepped forward unexpectedly. "Your time on this earth is long over!" He yelled. "Go back to Tartarus—to your place of rightful banishment!"

The rumbling voice—which was now definitely coming from the shadowy figure with burning eyes—paused for a moment. Then, he snorted.

"I am Iapetos, brother to Cronos, greatest of the Titans," the figure rumbled. "Millenia before your oldest ancestor was born, I broke continents asunder and tore the sky in half."

Then, rising even larger, the shadowy figure said, "And who are you…to challenge me, a Titan?"

Homer stood tall. And somehow, at a very round five feet tall and in his faded blue coveralls, he didn't look like a janitor anymore. He looked like someone strong and powerful. Like a superhero. Or, at the very least, a regular hero.

Homer rolled his shoulders back and opened his mouth. "I am Homer Georgopoulos, Guardian of the Sacred Amulet of Mount Belus. And now, you shall feel its wrath!"

With a surprising leap, he was at the cabinet on the other side of the furnace. And in one quick motion he pulled the door open and reached inside.

But the closet was empty—just a hook where an ancient amulet had hung earlier. For the first time in this whole crazy situation, Homer looked surprised.

No, he didn't look surprised. He looked terrified.

Sudden bursts of low noises came from the creature. It was a laugh—or what passed for a laugh from a Titan. "Fool!" He spat. "The boy has already claimed the amulet."

A double line of pointed teeth appeared on of the creature's dark face and curved upward in a horrific smile. "Without the amulet, you have no power, Guardian. You are now at my mercy."

Looking back, I probably should have taken out the amulet from my pocket and tossed it to Homer. But my eyes were glued to Iapetos and his strange movements. Raising his massive hands, he began waving them in complicated patterns through the air. He squinted his glowing eyes at the now-shimmering air before him, and after a moment, he grunted. He brought his clawed thumbs and forefingers together in front of him, like he was pinching something tiny in the air before him. Then he pulled his pinched fingers away from each other, like he was stretching out something that was so thin I couldn't see it.

Suddenly, Homer went completely stiff. His terrified eyes stared straight ahead, but he wasn't looking *at* anything. Then, almost in slow motion, his body tilted to the side and fell flat against the ground.

"Homer!" I dropped down beside him. He was laying completely still, and a wide-eyed look of terror was frozen on his face. The rest of his body was frozen stiff, so I brought my ear next to his mouth to listen for any signs of life.

There it was—he was still breathing. It was faint, but it was there. Homer was still alive.

"What have you done to him?" I yelled.

There was another, shorter burst of rumbling as Iapetos chuckled. "I have pulled tight the thread of his life. Here he will stay, until I say so. And if I wish, I can break his thread and end his life, for I have power over mortal threads."

While I wasn't exactly sure what a "mortal thread" was, I think I got the idea. But if it was true that this Titan could mess with a person's life, then why hadn't he done anything with my "thread?" There must be a reason. Otherwise, I'd be laying stiff on the floor next to Homer.

I stood up slowly and started to back out of the room. Again, the Titan's teeth shone in a wicked grin.

"Clever child," he said. "I have no right over the thread of any mortal in possession of an amulet of power."

The giant figure lowered his hands and held them out to me, palms up. "I must have the amulet. Only, you must give it to me freely."

But I was already halfway across the storage room, still walking backwards.

The creature clenched his clawed hands into fists as I slowly retreated. "My brother Cronos taught me the importance of time," he said. "So, seeing as I cannot seize your thread, I will give

you until precisely mid-day to surrender the amulet to me. And if you do not," he pointed a threatening finger to Homer's still body. "I will snap the thread of his life. And then," pointing his finger at me, "I will destroy you and take the amulet. Thus I swear and thus am I bound."

But by now I'd spun around and was already running away. I turned to the left and dashed into the cafeteria. I looked at the large clock on the cafeteria wall. It was eleven fifteen exactly. I had less than an hour to figure things out.

I heard a series of pounding noises that grew slowly louder. Now that the Titan's voice was back inside his body, he traveled a lot more slowly. So, after crossing the cafeteria quickly, I opened the door into the kitchen, slipped inside, and closed the door quietly behind me.

I crouched behind a large table and pulled out the old, mostly rusty amulet from my pocket. Then, scared I would drop the only thing that was keeping me alive right now—I slipped its golden chain around my neck.

The moment the amulet touched my chest, I felt something inside me go BOOM. I saw shockwaves moving out from my body across the kitchen and disappear into the walls. Almost immediately, I heard a loud cry of what sounded like frustration from somewhere outside. Whatever had just happened, I guess Iapetos had felt it.

As for me, I felt something, too. It was like my entire body had just drank a tall glass of ice water after mowing the lawn in the middle of summer. Or like I'd just devoured a juicy hamburger after sleeping through breakfast and missing lunch. I felt stronger. Faster. And a little braver.

There was a word that described people who felt like this in Greek mythology: demigod. Was this what a demigod felt like? If it was, maybe I wasn't so helpless, after all.

Maybe I could do something to challenge a Titan.