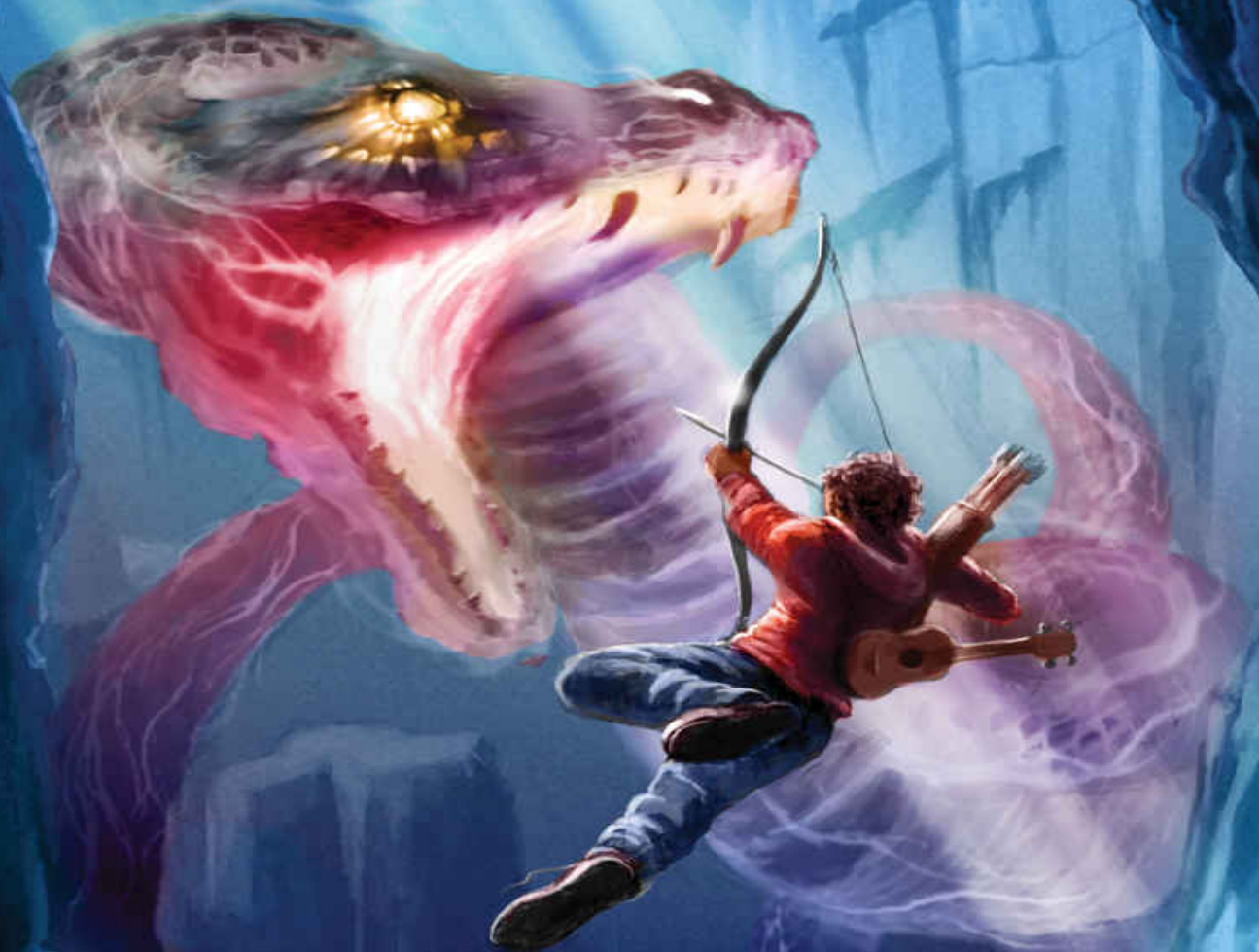


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THE TRIALS OF

APOLLO



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RICK RIORDAN

THE TRIALS OF

APOLLO

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THE TOWER OF NERO

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Guide to Apollo-Speak

About the Author

*To Becky,
Every journey leads me home to you*



1

*Two-headed snake dude
Jamming up my quiet ride.
Also, Meg's shoes stink.*

WHEN TRAVELING THROUGH WASHINGTON, DC, one expects to see a few snakes in human clothing. Still, I was concerned when a two-headed boa constrictor boarded our train at Union Station.

The creature had threaded himself through a blue silk business suit, looping his body into the sleeves and trouser legs to approximate human limbs. Two heads protruded from the collar of his dress shirt like twin periscopes. He moved with remarkable grace for what was basically an oversize balloon animal, taking a seat at the opposite end of the coach, facing our direction.

The other passengers ignored him. No doubt the Mist warped their perceptions, making them see just another commuter. The snake made no threatening moves. He didn't even glance at us. For all I knew, he was simply a working-stiff monster on his way home.

And yet I could not assume...

I whispered to Meg, "I don't want to alarm you—"

"Shh," she said.

Meg took the quiet-car rules seriously. Since we'd boarded, most of the noise in the coach had consisted of Meg shushing me every time I spoke,

sneezed, or cleared my throat.

“But there’s a monster,” I persisted.

She looked up from her complimentary Amtrak magazine, raising an eyebrow above her rhinestone-studded cat-eye glasses. *Where?*

I chin-pointed toward the creature. As our train pulled away from the station, his left head stared absently out the window. His right head flicked its forked tongue into a bottle of water held in the loop that passed for his hand.

“It’s an *amphisbaena*,” I whispered, then added helpfully, “a snake with a head at each end.”

Meg frowned, then shrugged, which I took to mean *Looks peaceful enough*. Then she went back to reading.

I suppressed the urge to argue. Mostly because I didn’t want to be shushed again.

I couldn’t blame Meg for wanting a quiet ride. In the past week, we had battled our way through a pack of wild centaurs in Kansas, faced an angry famine spirit at the World’s Largest Fork in Springfield, Missouri (I did not get a selfie), and outrun a pair of blue Kentucky drakons that chased us several times around Churchill Downs. After all that, a two-headed snake in a suit was perhaps not cause for alarm. Certainly, he wasn’t bothering us at the moment.

I tried to relax.

Meg buried her face in her magazine, enraptured by an article on urban gardening. My young companion had grown taller in the months that I’d known her, but she was still compact enough to prop her red high-tops comfortably on the seatback in front of her. Comfortable for *her*, I mean, not for me or the other passengers. Meg hadn’t changed her shoes since our run around the racetrack, and they looked and smelled like the back end of a horse.

At least she had traded her tattered green dress for Dollar General jeans and a green VNICORNES IMPERANT! T-shirt she’d bought at the Camp Jupiter gift shop. With her pageboy haircut beginning to grow out and an angry red zit erupting on her chin, she no longer looked like a kindergartener. She looked almost her age: a sixth grader entering the circle of hell known as puberty.

I had not shared this observation with Meg. For one thing, I had my own acne to worry about. For another thing, as my master, Meg could literally order me to jump out the window and I would be forced to obey.

The train rolled through the suburbs of Washington. The late-afternoon sun flickered between the buildings like the lamp of an old movie projector. It was a wonderful time of day, when a sun god should be wrapping up his work, heading to the old stables to park his chariot, then kicking back at his palace with a goblet of nectar, a few dozen adoring nymphs, and a new season of *The Real Goddesses of Olympus* to binge-watch.

Not for me, though. I got a creaking seat on an Amtrak train and hours to binge-watch Meg's stinky shoes.

At the opposite end of the car, the amphisbaena still made no threatening moves...unless one considered drinking water from a nonreusable bottle an act of aggression.

Why, then, were my neck hairs tingling?

I couldn't regulate my breathing. I felt trapped in my window seat.

Perhaps I was just nervous about what awaited us in New York. After six months in this miserable mortal body, I was approaching my endgame.

Meg and I had blundered our way across the United States and back again. We'd freed ancient Oracles, defeated legions of monsters, and suffered the untold horrors of the American public transportation system. Finally, after many tragedies, we had triumphed over two of the Triumvirate's evil emperors, Commodus and Caligula, at Camp Jupiter.

But the worst was yet to come.

We were heading back to where our troubles began—Manhattan, the base of Nero Claudius Caesar, Meg's abusive stepfather and my least favorite fiddle player. Even if we somehow managed to defeat him, a still more powerful threat lurked in the background: my archnemesis, Python, who had taken up residence at my sacred Oracle of Delphi as if it were some cut-rate Airbnb.

In the next few days, either I would defeat these enemies and become the god Apollo again (assuming my father Zeus allowed it) or I would die trying. One way or the other, my time as Lester Papadopoulos was coming to an end.

Perhaps it wasn't a mystery why I felt so agitated....

I tried to focus on the beautiful sunset. I tried not to obsess about my impossible to-do list or the two-headed snake in row sixteen.

I made it all the way to Philadelphia without having a nervous breakdown. But as we pulled out of Thirtieth Street Station, two things became clear to me: 1) the amphisbaena wasn't leaving the train, which meant he probably wasn't a daily commuter, and 2) my danger radar was pinging more strongly than ever.

I felt *stalked*. I had the same ants-in-the-pores feeling I used to get when playing hide-and-seek with Artemis and her Hunters in the woods, just before they jumped from the brush and riddled me with arrows. That was back when my sister and I were younger deities and could still enjoy such simple amusements.

I risked a look at the amphisbaena and nearly jumped out of my jeans. The creature was staring at me now, his four yellow eyes unblinking and... were they beginning to glow? Oh, no, no, no. Glowing eyes are never good.

"I need to get out," I told Meg.

"Shh."

"But that creature. I want to check on it. His eyes are glowing!"

Meg squinted at Mr. Snake. "No, they're not. They're *gleaming*. Besides, he's just sitting there."

"He's sitting there suspiciously!"

The passenger behind us whispered, "Shh!"

Meg raised her eyebrows at me. *Told you so.*

I pointed at the aisle and pouted at Meg.

She rolled her eyes, untangled herself from the hammock-like position she'd taken up, and let me out. "Don't start a fight," she ordered.

Great. Now I would have to wait for the monster to attack before I could defend myself.

I stood in the aisle, waiting for the blood to return to my numb legs. Whoever invented the human circulatory system had done a lousy job.

The amphisbaena hadn't moved. His eyes were still fixed on me. He appeared to be in some sort of trance. Maybe he was building up his energy for a massive attack. Did amphisbaenae do that?

I scoured my memory for facts about the creature but came up with very little. The Roman writer Pliny claimed that wearing a live baby amphisbaena around your neck could assure you a safe pregnancy. (Not helpful.) Wearing

its skin could make you attractive to potential partners. (Hmm. No, also not helpful.) Its heads could spit poison. Aha! That must be it. The monster was powering up for a dual-mouthed poison vomit hose-down of the train car!

What to do...?

Despite my occasional bursts of godly power and skill, I couldn't count on one when I needed it. Most of the time, I was still a pitiful seventeen-year-old boy.

I could retrieve my bow and quiver from the overhead luggage compartment. Being armed would be nice. Then again, that would telegraph my hostile intentions. Meg would probably scold me for overreacting. (I'm sorry, Meg, but those eyes were *glowing*, not gleaming.)

If only I'd kept a smaller weapon, perhaps a dagger, concealed in my shirt. Why wasn't I the god of daggers?

I decided to stroll down the aisle as if I were simply on my way to the restroom. If the amphisbaena attacked, I would scream. Hopefully Meg would put down her magazine long enough to come rescue me. At least I would have forced the inevitable confrontation. If the snake didn't make a move, well, perhaps he really was harmless. Then I *would* go to the restroom, because I actually needed to.

I stumbled on my tingly legs, which didn't help my "look casual" approach. I considered whistling a carefree tune, then remembered the whole quiet-car thing.

Four rows from the monster. My heart hammered. Those eyes were definitely glowing, definitely fixed on me. The monster sat unnaturally motionless, even for a reptile.

Two rows away. My trembling jaw and sweaty face made it hard to appear nonchalant. The amphisbaena's suit looked expensive and well-tailored. Probably, being a giant snake, he couldn't wear clothes right off the rack. His glistening brown-and-yellow diamond-pattern skin did not seem like the sort of thing one might wear to look more attractive on a dating app, unless one dated boa constrictors.

When the amphisbaena made his move, I thought I was prepared.

I was wrong. The creature lunged with incredible speed, lassoing my wrist with the loop of his false left arm. I was too surprised even to yelp. If he'd meant to kill me, I would have died.

Instead, he simply tightened his grip, stopping me in my tracks, clinging to me as if he were drowning.

He spoke in a low double hiss that resonated in my bone marrow:

*“The son of Hades, cavern-runners’ friend,
Must show the secret way unto the throne.
On Nero’s own your lives do now depend.”*

As abruptly as he’d grabbed me, he let me go. Muscles undulated along the length of his body as if he were coming to a slow boil. He sat up straight, elongating his necks until he was almost noses-to-nose with me. The glow faded from his eyes.

“What am I do—?” His left head looked at his right head. “How...?”

His right head seemed equally mystified. It looked at me. “Who are—? Wait, did I miss the Baltimore stop? My wife is going to kill me!”

I was too shocked to speak.

Those lines he’d spoken...I recognized the poetic meter. This amphisbaena had delivered a prophetic message. It dawned on me that this monster might in fact be a regular commuter who’d been possessed, hijacked by the whims of Fate because...Of course. He was a snake. Since ancient times, snakes have channeled the wisdom of the earth, because they live underground. A giant serpent would be especially susceptible to oracular voices.

I wasn’t sure what to do. Should I apologize to him for his inconvenience? Should I give him a tip? And if he wasn’t the threat that had set off my danger radar, what was?

I was saved from an awkward conversation, and the amphisbaena was saved from his wife killing him, when two crossbow bolts flew across the coach and killed him instead, pinning the poor snake’s necks against the back wall.

I shrieked. Several nearby passengers shushed me.

The amphisbaena disintegrated into yellow dust, leaving nothing behind but a well-tailored suit.

I raised my hands slowly and turned as if pivoting on a land mine. I half expected another crossbow bolt to pierce my chest. There was no way I

could dodge an attack from someone with such accuracy. The best I could do was appear nonthreatening. I was good at that.

At the opposite end of the coach stood two hulking figures. One was a Germanus, judging from his beard and scraggly beaded hair, his hide armor, and his Imperial gold greaves and breastplate. I did not recognize him, but I'd met too many of his kind recently. I had no doubt who he worked for. Nero's people had found us.

Meg was still seated, holding her magical twin golden *sica* blades, but the Germanus had the edge of his broadsword against her neck, encouraging her to stay put.

His companion was the crossbow-shooter. She was even taller and heavier, wearing an Amtrak conductor's uniform that fooled no one—except, apparently, all the mortals on the train, who didn't give the newcomers a second look. Under her conductor's hat, the shooter's scalp was shaved on the sides, leaving a lustrous brown mane down the middle that curled over her shoulder in a braided rope. Her short-sleeve shirt stretched so tight against her muscular shoulders I thought her epaulettes and name tag would pop off. Her arms were covered with interlocking circular tattoos, and around her neck was a thick golden ring—a torque.

I hadn't seen one of those in ages. This woman was a Gaul! The realization made my stomach frost over. In the old days of the Roman Republic, Gauls were feared even more than the Germani.

She had already reloaded her double crossbow and was pointing it at my head. Hanging from her belt was a variety of other weapons: a gladius, a club, and a dagger. Oh, sure, *she* got a dagger.

Keeping her eyes on me, she jerked her chin toward her shoulder, the universal sign for *C'mere or I'll shoot you*.

I calculated my odds of charging down the aisle and tackling our enemies before they killed Meg and me. Zero. My odds of cowering in fear behind a chair while Meg took care of both of them? Slightly better, but still not great.

I made my way down the aisle, my knees wobbling. The mortal passengers frowned as I passed. As near as I could figure, they thought my shriek had been a disturbance unworthy of the quiet car, and the conductor was now calling me out. The fact that the conductor wielded a crossbow and

had just killed a two-headed serpentine commuter did not seem to register with them.

I reached my row and glanced at Meg, partly to make sure she was all right, partly because I was curious why she hadn't attacked. Just holding a sword to Meg's throat was normally not enough to discourage her.

She was staring in shock at the Gaul. "Luguselwa?"

The woman nodded curtly, which told me two horrifying things: First, Meg knew her. Second, Luguselwa was her name. As she regarded Meg, the fierceness in the Gaul's eyes dialed back a few notches, from *I am going to kill everyone now* to *I am going to kill everyone soon*.

"Yes, Sapling," said the Gaul. "Now put away your weapons before Gunther is obliged to chop off your head."