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*To Mark and Dylan,
my very own mythic heroes xx*

Also by Marie Basting

Princess BMX

My Family and Other Romans

FRIENDS, ROMANS, COUNTRYMEN - HIYA!

Hi, I'm Silvia, an ordinary kid just like you. Or at least I was ordinary until my dad went missing and we both wound up back in an alternative version of Ancient Rome called Romana. Yeah, it took me by surprise too, but travelling back in time was nothing compared to what happened next. You see, it turns out I'm a demigod – daughter of the war goddess Bellona – and I have shedloads of godly brothers and sisters. Just name your favourite mythical creature and I'm probably related to them.

So, maybe I should have seen this coming. But Medusa – my Auntie Medusa? Like, what the gods!



CHAPTER 1

WEEKEND WORLD HOPPING

Tunic – check!

Palla – check!

Ten packets of Turkey Twizzlers – check!

I was all set to visit Romana.

‘Livi,’ called Dad from the living room, ‘what on earth are you doing in there? Come on now!’

Oops. That was the third time Dad had told me

to hurry up. Extracting the remains of yesterday's packed lunch from my satchel, I crammed in the Turkey Twizzlers and slammed the freezer door shut. I raced out of the cluttered kitchen and began the usual hunt for my coat. 'Sorry, Dad.'

'OK, love,' he replied, glancing at the pendulum clock over the stone mantel. 'It's just, I was supposed to meet Chitra and the boys ten minutes ago.'

Chitra is Dad's new girlfriend. His eyes go all glossy at the mere mention of her and I've never known him to clean his teeth so much. Which can only mean one thing. KISSING. Yuck! Don't get me wrong. I'm happy for him. He deserves someone nice after my mum turned out to be a bloodthirsty war goddess, and it means I don't have to worry about him being lonely when I'm in Romana. But, really, do him and Chitra have to be quite so lovey-dovey?

'Oops,' he continued, retrieving my coat from underneath the pile of washing he was supposed to put in the machine. 'Sorry, love. Big tidy-up when I get back from town, all ready to put up

the Christmas deccies.’

I wasn’t holding my breath. Dad’s not exactly known for his housework. Which is fine. What he lacks in furniture polish and clean socks he makes up for in being an awesome dad. Though it would be nice if he remembered to wash my underwear every now and again. I used to do more of the chores myself. But it’s hard to run a house and a realm.

Outside, Mrs Burden, our next-door neighbour, was in her garden catching snowflakes on her tongue. The bubbling spring next to her giant inflatable snowman made a gurgling noise as she turned towards us and sighed.

‘Asn’t tasted right since the eighteenth century, this stuff,’ she said, folding her arms over her flowery housecoat. ‘But what can you do? Me waterworks are all over the place.’

I smiled and leant over the drystone wall to stroke Kevin, the Burdens’ dog. He was wearing a pair of novelty reindeer antlers which flashed in sync with the hundreds of fairy lights dangling

from the trees. I've learnt the hard way that Mrs Burden doesn't actually want an answer to her questions. It's a goddess thing. They all think they know best.

Yeah, you heard right. Mrs Burden is a goddess too. The Celtic goddess of springs and wells, to be exact – **Coventina**. She's also in charge of looking after the gateway that connects our world to Romana. Just goes to show, you can't judge a person by their foam rollers.

'Livi!' Dad was getting annoyed now. It used to be me waiting for him all the time, but since I'd discovered Romana, I was finding it hard to keep on top of everything. Legging it across the gravel drive, I climbed into the truck beside him. The engine grumbling, we pulled away from our ramshackle cottage and on to the road. The snow-peaked slopes of Whin Sill loomed above us as we passed through the tiny village of Once Brewed.

'Are you sure you'll be OK?' said Dad. The snow was really coming down now. It wouldn't be long before it stuck to the roads too.

‘Of course.’ I pulled my hat over my ears and turned up the heater. I wasn’t about to let a bit of snow stop me visiting my brothers and sisters.

Dad wiped the condensation from the window with an old *Lord of the Rings* T-shirt and sighed. ‘But the weather’s really closing in up there.’

‘I’ll be fine.’ Seriously, if I could fight off griffins and fly halfway across Romana on an overly excited metal wolf, I could make it up the hill to **Hadrian’s Wall**. Turning the stereo up – Nirvana again! – I picked up the half-eaten packet of gum in the cup holder. ‘Want some?’

Dad wrinkled his nose. ‘No thanks. That stuff tastes like plumber’s putty.’

I shrugged and put the rest of the packet in my satchel to share with my brothers and sisters. I suppose it *was* a bit stale, but they’d love it! Just like they loved the Rolos and Jammie Dodgers I took them last weekend. They couldn’t get enough of the gifts I brought them from Britannia – their name for our side of the gateway.

Dad pulled up in the passing lay-by just below

Hadrian's Wall. You've heard of it, right? The super-long wall stretching across northern England that once marked the edge of the Roman Empire. The gateway was just a short walk along it, towards Housesteads Roman Fort.

'So, I'll meet you here at 3.30,' Dad said. 'Don't forget, I need you to entertain the twins for me tonight.'

As if I could forget. It was Chitra's birthday, and he'd been banging on about me looking after her sons, Ari and Avi, for weeks. 'Yes, Dad,' I said, tightening the lace on my leather **calceus**. 'You've only asked me, like, three thousand times.'

Dad laughed and leant in for a hug. 'Well, be good,' he said.

'And if you can't be good, be careful.' Squeezing each other tight, we repeated the punchline together. Proper cringey, right? But it's one of our things. Like hot chocolate in our PJs on rainy winter mornings, or crisp sandwiches for tea on long Friday-night drives to our favourite Live-Action Role-Play – *LARP* – events. It's what we do.

The carpet of snow cloaking Whin Sill was proper thick now. Almost at the wall, I picked up pace. But then I noticed Dad was still parked up in the lay-by. I waved my arms at him like I was shooing sheep. 'I'm OK.' I mouthed. 'Go!'

Dad beeped the horn and continued down the hill. I suppose you can't blame him for worrying after everything that's happened. Especially with that **Janus-faced** Athene Noctua still on the loose. She was supposed to be my mentor, but the feathery fiend betrayed me and who knows where she is now. That's why Uncle Vulcan fitted the keystone. A kind of lock that only opens for the people it recognizes. Wherever the owl lady was hiding, she wasn't getting back into Romana from Britannia.

But that didn't stop her haunting my nightmares. That's how she used to visit me, you see – in my dreams. She could read my thoughts, too, and not just when I was asleep. Yeah, I was no stranger to Athene Noctua and her big beaky gob turning

up uninvited, but these latest nightmares where she lurked silently in the shadows, watching my every move, were particularly disturbing.

Reaching the stile that marked the location of the keystone, I pushed Athene Noctua from my mind and whispered the password that would awaken the magic.

Nothing.

‘*Come on, come on,*’ I said into the icy wind that tugged at my hair. I was totally freezanche and I could do without the stone having one of its blips. I repeated the password.

Yes, finally! The keystone glowed amber. I placed my hand flat against its warm surface and it began to flash. Excitement bubbling in my stomach, I waited for the familiar thunder . . .

Right on cue! The roar was loud enough to wake up **Somnus**.

The thunder was followed by lightning – a blinding turquoise light that split the sky in two. I gripped my satchel as the world turned black.

And then there it was, shrouded in mist and

flanked by a pair of giant blazing cauldrons, the towering triumphal arch that formed the gateway between the realms.

It was time to return to Romana.