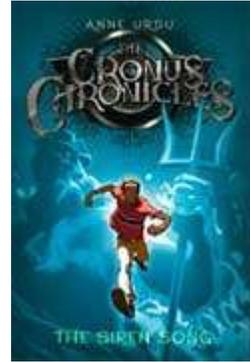


The Siren Song (Cronus Chronicles #2)

Chapter One

No Way to Treat a Hero



Once, not so long ago, inside an ordinary middle school in an ordinary city in an ordinary state in the middle of an ordinary country, a small redheaded eighth grader was doing something very ordinary, indeed. Charlotte Mielswetzski (Say it with me: *Meals-Wet-Ski*. Got it? If not, say it again. *Meals. Wet. Ski*. There.) was in the school office calling her mother. And lest you think she was calling her mother for some interesting reason, let me assure you she most certainly was not. For Charlotte could be found in that same office calling her mother every day after school. In fact, five months before, Charlotte's mother had contacted the Hartnett Middle School principal and asked him to make special arrangements to allow Charlotte to use the office phone, because Charlotte would be needing to call her mother every day and inform her when she was on her way home. You might think that after five months this would have become less embarrassing, but, as Charlotte would be happy to assure you, it had not.

You see, Charlotte Mielswetzski was grounded. *Very* grounded. Charlotte had to call her parents *right* after school every day and then walk *straight* home after she called. If her mother was at the office, Charlotte had to call when she got home too. She was required to use the school and home phones, too, so Mrs. Mielswetzski would know she was calling from the place she was supposed to be. No cell phones.

And Charlotte actually had a cell phone now. For the last two years she had been begging her parents for one, and Mrs. Mielswetzski said it was ridiculous that kids needed cell phones and Mr. Mielswetzski said something about it just getting confiscated anyway (he was a history teacher at the high school and knew whereof he spoke). Charlotte suspected she was the only person the entire world that didn't have a phone. But, as Charlotte soon learned, not having a cell phone is much better than being given a cell phone so your parents can keep track of you at all times. She needed permission to use it for any other reason, and they said they would know if she misused it because they would check the bills every month.

It was almost as if her parents didn't trust her.

The only thing Charlotte was allowed to do was school-sanctioned activities, like gymnastics. Charlotte had been quite shocked that her mother had let her try out for the team, but, frankly, her mother had seemed even more shocked that Charlotte had wanted to try out at all and perhaps was not thinking clearly. Charlotte was fairly sure that if she'd been doing gymnastics for years her mother would have grounded her

from that, too – but since Mrs. Mielswetzski had been trying to get her to do extracurricular activities for years and Charlotte had never had the slightest inclination to do so before, it suddenly must have seemed like a great idea. It’s all in the timing. “Hello, Charlotte,” said Mrs. Mielswetzski when she picked up the phone. Her mother used to call her things like “Honey,” but not anymore. “How was practice?”

“Fine,” Charlotte said. It had actually been more than fine. Charlotte had landed a cartwheel on the balance beam for the first time ever, after having tried for weeks. She was so excited she had almost fallen off, which would have made the whole thing a lot less cool-looking. But she didn’t fall, and the whole team cheered. And just then, Charlotte Mielswetzski felt like she could probably do a cartwheel anywhere – on a handrail, on a ribbon, on the whisker of her cat – and land it with grace and precision.

But she wasn’t going to tell her mother any of that. The last thing she wanted to do was give her the satisfaction of thinking that Charlotte had had even a moment of happiness.

“It’s a little late,” said Mrs. Mielswetzski.

Charlotte winced. “Practice went long. You can call Coach Seltzer!” (If Charlotte’s tone wasn’t that kind, you must forgive her; she had been a little irritable the last few months.)

With a sigh, her mother said, “Okay, Charlotte. Just come straight home. Do you want me to pick you up?” “No!” said Charlotte quickly. The Mielswetzskis lived just six blocks from the campus of Hartnett Middle School and when it was warm enough, Charlotte walked to and from school every day. But during the winter she’d had to get a ride from her mother and it was often frostier inside the car than outside. So Charlotte was always quite eager to find other options. “Maddy stayed after to study. I can get a ride with Mrs. Ruby.” Maddy, Charlotte’s best friend, had already called her mother to come get them. Maddy had fallen prey to a lengthy and mysterious illness last October, and since then her mom had been all too happy to do just about anything for her. You have to work that sort of situation to your advantage.

Her mother paused. “All right, Charlotte,” she said finally. “I’ll be sure to call Mrs. Ruby and thank her later tonight.”

Charlotte’s cheeks flushed and she hung up without saying good-bye. Before she’d called her mother, she’d still felt a small glow from her accomplishment today – just a spark, really, but after the way the last few months had gone, a spark was good enough. But now that spark was gone. All gone.

Charlotte hadn’t been lying. Mrs. Ruby was going to pick them up. Lately Maddy had been staying after school and working in the library while Charlotte was at gymnastics. Maddy was always happy to have an excuse to do homework (unlike Charlotte who preferred excuses not to do homework) but really she did it just to get some time with Charlotte, since it was the only chance they had to see each other.

Maddy watched Charlotte as she glared at the office phone. "Everything okay?" she asked.

"No," replied Charlotte irritably.

Maddy groaned sympathetically. "We should go watch for Mom."

Charlotte nodded and Maddy led her out of the office door. The school receptionist looked up and smiled at the girls. "Bye, Charlotte," she said. "See you tomorrow!"

Charlotte grunted.

"So," Maddy said when they reached the school vestibule, "your mom hasn't lightened up at all, I see."

"Nope," said Charlotte.

"It just seems kind of extreme," Maddy said for the hundredth time. "So you failed a math test. It happens." Charlotte cast a look at her friend. Maddy didn't know the truth about why her parents were so mad at her; Charlotte would have loved to have told her the whole story, but then Maddy would think Charlotte was crazy and would lock her in a nuthouse, and that would put a serious damper on their friendship.

The only person who knew the truth was Charlotte's cousin Zee, but he didn't want to be locked up any more than Charlotte did. Oh, and her old English teacher Mr. Metos knew, of course. After everything had happened, Charlotte had hoped he would help her with her parents, but talking to people wasn't really Mr. Metos's strong suit. The thing is, a few months ago in order to save all of the sick kids Charlotte and Zee had had to sneak down to the Underworld – the Underworld as in the-Greek-mythology Underworld, which is actually real. In fact, as Charlotte learned earlier in the year much to her surprise, all of Greek myths are real – Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, the whole bit. It's just that nobody knows it. Hades is the god of the Underworld and a minor god named Philonecron tried to overthrow him, and to make an army he'd stolen and enchanted kids' shadows. That's why Maddy was sick – her shadow was taken, along with the shadows of pretty much every kid in the city, not to mention London where Zee had lived. So, sometimes really bad things happen and, for reasons that are rather complicated, you're the only one who can stop it. And sometimes, in order to do so, you have to sneak out of the house late at night to get to the Underworld. And under those occasions, you, because you are a conscientious person, leave your parents a note explaining that you know what's making everyone sick and you have to go save the world. Helpfully, you also tell them you love them and not to worry.

The problem is, your parents don't really listen to this last part and when you finally get back the next morning (extremely weird because it felt like forever down there, but it turned out only to be one night in the Upperworld) – after Philonecron tried to throw you in the Styx, a few monsters tried to eat you, you met up with the Lord of the Underworld, and a whole shadow army tried to bring his palace down on your head – well, you find out that they have, in fact, worried. A lot.

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After they call the police to tell them you have returned home safely, and then they hug you a lot and cry for awhile, well – after that, they want to know where you’ve been. (And, for that matter, why you are covered in weird-looking slime, purple cobwebs, and Harpy poo, and why your cat’s leg is broken.) And when you don’t tell them, they tend to get pretty upset. And, after a few days, when you still haven’t told them, they’re going to stick you in therapy. They’re going to give you speeches about how disappointed they are in you and how family is all about trust and how you worried them to death and you don’t have the decency to explain where you were and they have to assume the worst – which is that you can’t be trusted. And then they ground you. A lot. Charlotte Mielswetzski had once thought that she could talk her way out of any situation. This was before she came back from the Underworld. She would have liked to come up with something, something to make her parents feel better and to stop her from being grounded until she was thirty-five, but for once in her life, when she opened her mouth, nothing came out.

The thing that gets Charlotte is if she’d never left a note in the first place – which she did out of concern and basic human decency, mind you – and had just snuck out of the house and come back in the morning, she could have told her parents that she’d gone to, like, a party or something (a very muddy, smelly, sooty, gross party) and then her parents would have freaked out and grounded her, but probably for only a month. Or maybe two. And she wouldn’t have had to go to therapy.

As for Maddy, Charlotte had just flat out lied. She was grounded because she failed the math midterm and was in danger of failing the class. The problem was, Maddy was Charlotte’s best friend, and Charlotte had to lie to her about the biggest thing that had ever happened to her. She had to lie to her about the whole world, basically, and what was the point of having a best friend if you couldn’t tell her everything? And as they stood in the school lobby watching for Mrs. Ruby, Charlotte thought about what it might be like to tell Maddy the truth, once and for all. She could feel the words form in her mouth – “Maddy, I have to tell you something” – but she couldn’t say them. There was no way she could say them. So Charlotte just sighed and shook her head. She’d been sighing a lot lately and was probably going to need oxygen at some point.

“How’s Zee?” Maddy asked, casually.

“Fine,” Charlotte replied, just as casually.

Maddy, like every other girl in school, had a crush on Zee. Zee had come over from England last September to live with the Mielswetzskis; his parents sent him over when all the kids in London started getting sick. But a month ago, Zee’s parents had finally moved to the US too, and Zee had gone to live with them in a house a mile away from Charlotte’s. When Zee had first come over, with his perfect British manners and instant popularity and freakish girl-magnet-ness, Charlotte had wanted him far away. But they’d gone to hell and back together, or at least to Hades, and now he was the only

one who knew the things about the world that she did, the only person who Charlotte wasn't lying to on a daily basis.

But that didn't mean she wanted Maddy to date him.

"Was practice okay?" Maddy asked, in a come-back-to-the-light-Charlotte kind of voice. "Break anything?" Charlotte thought again of her cartwheel, of the moment when she soared over the beam, when her legs began to come back to earth on a perfect line, when she knew she was finally going to land it. Then she thought of her mom's voice saying I'll be sure to call Mrs. Ruby and thank her.

"Okay," Charlotte shrugged. She felt sorry for Maddy. It must be hard to have a friend who spoke exclusively in one word sentences.

"Oh!" Maddy exclaimed. "Listen! Are you guys doing anything for spring break this year?"

Charlotte grunted. "What do you think?" Spring break was less than two weeks away, and it was going to be the same this year as it was every year. Everyone in Charlotte's school went off to some exotic locale every year and came up all happy and tan, while Charlotte stayed home and only got paler, which made her freckles even more pronounced.

Because I was thinking, maybe I could ask Mom if you could come to Florida with us this year."

"What?" Charlotte turned. "Really?"

"Sure! We've got lots of room in the house, and Brian isn't coming. We have his plane ticket, maybe we could transfer it or something." Brian was Maddy's older brother. Much older. He was at his first year of college, and apparently had better things to do than go to Fort Myers with his family. While Charlotte had nothing better at all to do. But...

"They'll never let me," Charlotte moaned. "Remember? I can't be trusted?"

Maddy rolled her eyes. "Maybe they will! I mean hasn't this gone on long enough? You've been so good too! Look, I'll have my mom call your mom. She can make it sound—I dunno, educational or something." Charlotte closed her eyes and saw sandy beaches and sunshine and palm trees and...

Can redheads tan? Charlotte wanted very much to find out.

So it happened that Charlotte arrived at her house in a good mood, the first good mood she'd been in since she had returned from the world of the Dead and gotten Super-Mega Grounded.

When she walked in the door, though, she found her parents sitting at the kitchen table waiting for her, and her good mood quickly dissipated. Charlotte had lived with her parents long enough to know that whatever this was, it could not be good.

With a loud squawk her cat Mew came tearing toward her, and Charlotte quickly bent down to scratch her between the ears. Charlotte had a sort of joint custody of Mew with Zee, because when Zee moved in with his parents Mew got upset and sulked

around the house all the time. But now they switched off weeks and Mew was much happier. Charlotte's parents had suggested the arrangement; they were chock full of good ideas about taking people's cats away from them.

"Welcome home, Charlotte," Mrs. Mielswetzski said.

"Hi, honey," Mr. Mielswetzski said. He, at least, still loved her.

Charlotte braced herself and looked up. "Hi," she said cautiously.

"How was practice?" Mr. Mielswetzski asked.

"Fine," said Charlotte, looking back and forth at their faces. They were inscrutable.

"Good, good." Her parents exchanged glances.

"Um," Charlotte said, tugging on her hair. "Well, I think I'm going to go upstairs. I've got a lot of homework." With a surreptitious bite of her lip, she moved quickly towards the door.

"Wait!" said Mr. Mielswetzski.

Not quickly enough.

Charlotte squeezed her eyes shut, then picked up Mew for defense. Mew would never let anything bad happen to her. Slowly, she turned around to eye her parents.

"Charlotte, we've got some news," said Mrs. Mielswetzski.

"Good news," said Mr. Mielswetzski.

"Really?" Charlotte couldn't help but feel a tinge of hope. Maybe she'd proven she could, in fact, be trusted. Maybe they were going to let her out of prison...

"Well, your father has won an award," said Mrs. Mielswetzski.

Oh. Honestly, if people played with Charlotte's moods anymore today, she was going to actually need her therapy.

"Well, more like a prize," said Mr. Mielswetzski.

"Oh, Mike, it's an award!" said Mrs. Mielswetzski.

"Well, that's very sweet, honey," said Mr. Mielswetzski.

"You absolutely deserve it," said Mrs. Mielswetzski.

"Guys!" said Charlotte.

"Charlotte," said Mr. Mielswetzski, turning toward his daughter, "how would you like to go on a cruise for spring break?"

Charlotte almost dropped Mew. "What?" Mew scowled at Charlotte and jumped down onto the floor.

"Well," smiled Mr. Mielswetzski, "the Clio Foundation, a foundation supporting history teachers, has given me a prize—"

"An award," corrected Mrs. Mielswetzski.

"—a cruise for the whole family during spring break!"

Charlotte's eyes bugged out. A cruise! They would go to the Caribbean! Maybe the Bahamas! Charlotte would spend the whole time reading on the deck by the pool while cute waiters brought her smoothies! Sure, she'd be stuck with her parents the whole

time, but they'd go off exploring the whole time doing lame tourist stuff, and she would just sit in the sun and –

"It's an American History cruise!" said her father. "We'll go to see Mount Vernon and go to Colonial Williamsburg and we'll look at Civil War battlefields!"

"What?" said Charlotte. Clearly, she hadn't heard right.

"An American History cruise!" said Mrs. Mielswetzski. "Up the east coast! Normally, a girl who is grounded doesn't get to go on cruises, but given the educational nature of this one, we thought we'd make an exception."

"Anyway," said Mr. Mielswetzski, "it will give us a lot of time together. As a family."

Her parents exchanged a happy look.

"Oh," Charlotte said. "Um, look, I've got to go to my room now. I'm not feeling very good."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Mielswetzski.

"Oh!" said Mr. Mielswetzski.

"You go rest!"

"By all means!"

"We can talk about the cruise later."

"Okay," said Charlotte weakly. And with that she walked slowly up to her room to call Maddy to tell her of the latest cruel twist of fate.

Now, we know Charlotte Mielswetzski was not naïve. She was by no means under the impression that she could just waltz down to the Underworld, thwart an evil demigod, chat up an Olympian, and waltz back up again without any repercussions. These things did tend to have repercussions. And since she got back from the Underworld there had been something in the back of her mind, something almost unconscious, that was waiting for something to happen. Something like Philonecron – who had been banished to the Upperworld – paying a call, or something like one of the gods – who really didn't seem that pleased with the idea of mortals traipsing through their realms – sucking her up to Mount Olympus and turning her into an aardvark. But as the months wore on and nothing happened, as she was confronted with the indignities of junior high and of having parents, Charlotte had begun to relax a little bit. Perhaps that's why she thought nothing of this strange gift falling into their laps so suddenly. Perhaps that's why the only thing that alarmed her about it was the close confinement with her parents and the forced march through Colonial Williamsburg. Perhaps she didn't even register that the organization that sent them on this trip was called the Clio Foundation, because surely if she did she would have remembered that Clio was the name of the Greek muse of history. And that should have set off alarm bells because Charlotte Mielswetzski, of all people, should beware of Greeks bearing gifts.