

THE NEW YORK TIMES #1 BEST-SELLING SERIES

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PERCY
JACKSON
AND THE OLYMPIANS



← THE CHALICE OF THE GODS →

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ONE



I GET FLUSHED

Look, I didn't want to be a high school senior.
I was hoping my dad could write me a note:

Dear Whoever,
Please excuse Percy Jackson from school forever and just
give him the diploma.
Thanks,
Poseidon

I figured I'd earned that much after battling gods and monsters since I was twelve years old. I'd saved the world . . . three times? Four? I've lost count. You don't need the details. I'm not sure I even remember them at this point.

Maybe you're thinking, But wow! You're the son of a Greek god! That must be amazing!

Honest truth? Most of the time, being a demigod blows chunks. Anybody who tells you different is trying to recruit you for a quest.

So there I was, stumbling down the hallway on my first morning of classes at a new high school—again—after losing my entire junior year because of magical amnesia (don't ask). My textbooks were spilling out of my arms, and I had no idea where to find my third-period English class. Math and biology had already melted my brain. I wasn't sure how I was going to make it to the end of the day.

Then a voice crackled over the loudspeaker: "Percy Jackson, please report to the counselor's office."

At least none of the other students knew me yet. Nobody looked at me and laughed. I just turned, all casual-like, and meandered back toward the administration wing.

Alternative High is housed in a former elementary school in Queens. That means kiddie-size desks and no lockers, so you have to carry all your stuff from class to class. Down every hall, I could find cheery reminders of the school's former childhood—smudges of finger paint on the walls, unicorn stickers peeling off the fire extinguishers, the occasional ghostly whiff of fruit juice and graham crackers.

AHS takes anybody who needs to finish their high school career. It doesn't matter if you are coming back from juvie, or have severe learning differences, or happen to be a demigod with really bad luck. It is also the only school in the New York area that would admit me for my senior year and help me make up all the course credit I'd lost as a junior.

On the bright side, it has a swim team and an Olympic-size pool (no idea why), so my stepdad, Paul Blofis, thought it might be a good fit for me. I promised him I'd try.

I'd also promised my girlfriend, Annabeth. The plan was that I'd graduate on time so we could go to college together. I didn't want to disappoint her. The idea of her going off to California without me kept me up at night. . . .

I found the counselor's office in what must've once been the school infirmary. I deduced that from a painting on the wall of a sad purple frog with a thermometer in its mouth.

"Mr. Jackson! Come in!"

The guidance counselor came around her desk, ready to shake my hand. Then she realized I had six thousand pounds of textbooks in my arms.

"Oh, just put those down anywhere," she said. "Please, have a seat!"

She gestured to a blue plastic chair about a foot too low for me. Sitting in it, I was eye level with the jar of Jolly Ranchers on her desk.

"So!" The counselor beamed at me from her comfy-looking, adult-size chair. Her bottle-thick glasses made her eyes swim. Her gray hair was curled into scalloped rows that reminded me of an oyster bed. "How are you settling in?"

"The chair's a little short."

"I mean at school."

"Well, I've only had two classes—"

“Have you started on your college applications?”

“I just got here.”

“Exactly! We’re already behind!”

I glanced at the purple frog, who looked as miserable as I felt. “Look, Ms.—”

“Call me Eudora,” she said cheerfully. “Now, let’s see what brochures we have.”

She rummaged through her desk. “Poly Tech. BU. NYU. ASU. FU. No, no, no.”

I wanted to stop her. My temples were throbbing. My ADHD was pinging around under my skin like billiard balls. I couldn’t think about college today.

“Ma’am, I appreciate your help,” I said. “But, really, I’ve kinda already got a plan. If I can just get through this year—”

“Yes, New Rome University,” she said, still digging through her desk drawer. “But the mortal counselor doesn’t seem to have a brochure.”

My ears popped. I tasted salt water in the back of my throat. “The mortal counselor?”

My hand drifted toward the pocket of my jeans, where I kept my favorite weapon: a deadly ballpoint pen. This wouldn’t have been the first time I’d had to defend myself from an attack at school. You’d be amazed how many teachers, administrators, and other school staff are monsters in disguise. Or maybe you wouldn’t be amazed.

“Who are you?” I asked.

She sat up and smiled. “I told you. I’m Eudora.”

I studied her more closely. Her curled hair **was** in fact a bed of oysters. Her dress shimmered like a jellyfish membrane.

It’s weird how the Mist works. Even for demigods, who see supernatural stuff all the time, you have to concentrate to pierce the barrier between the human world and the godly one. Otherwise, the Mist just kind of plasters over what you see, making ogres look like pedestrians or a giant drakon look like the N train. (And believe me, it’s embarrassing trying to board a drakon when one rampages into the Astoria Boulevard station.)

“What did you do with the regular counselor?” I asked.

Eudora waved her hand dismissively. “Oh, don’t worry about her. She couldn’t help you with New Rome. That’s why I’m here!”

Something about her tone made me feel . . . not reassured, exactly, but at least not personally threatened. Maybe she only ate other guidance counselors.

Her presence felt familiar, too—the salty tingle in my nostrils, the pressure in my ears as if I were a thousand feet underwater. I realized I’d encountered someone like her before, when I was twelve years old, at the bottom of the Mississippi River.

“You’re a sea spirit,” I said. “A Nereid.”

Eudora chuckled. “Yes, of course, Percy. Did you think I was a dryad?”

“So . . . my father sent you?”

She raised an eyebrow, as if she was starting to worry I might be a bit slow on the uptake. Weirdly, I get that look a lot.

“Yes, dear. Poseidon. Your father? My boss? Now, I’m sorry I can’t find a brochure, but I know you’ll need all the usual human requirements for New Rome University: test scores, official transcripts, and an up-to-date psychoeducational evaluation. Those aren’t a problem.”

“They aren’t?” After all I’d been through, it might’ve been too early to judge on that last one.

“But you’ll also need a few, ah, special entry requirements.”

The taste of salt water got sharper in my mouth. “What special requirements?”

“Has anyone talked to you about divine recommendation letters?” She looked like she really wanted the answer to be yes.

“No,” I said.

She fiddled with her jar of Jolly Ranchers. “I see. Well. You’ll need three letters. From three different gods. But I’m sure for a demigod of your talents ___”

“What?”

Eudora flinched. “Or we could look at some backup schools. Ho-Ho-Kus Community College is very nice!”

“Are you kidding me?”

The Nereid’s face started to glisten. Rivulets of salt water trickled from her oyster-bed hair.

I felt bad about getting angry. This wasn’t her fault. I knew she was only trying to help me because my dad had ordered her to. Still, it wasn’t the kind of news I wanted to deal with on a Monday morning. Or ever.

I steadied my breathing. “Sorry. It’s just . . . I need to get into New Rome. I’ve done a lot of stuff for the gods over the years. Can’t I just, like, e-mail them a recommendation form . . . ?”

Eudora’s eyebrows knotted. Her dress was now sloughing off sheets of seawater. A pool of it spread across the green-tile floor, seeping ever closer to my textbooks.

I sighed. “Ugh. I have to do new quests, don’t I?”

“Well, dear, the college admissions process is always challenging, but I’m here to help—”

“How about this?” I said. “If my father really wants to help, maybe he should explain this to me himself, rather than sending you here to break the bad news.”

“Oh. Well, that would be, um—”

“Out of character,” I agreed.

Something buzzed in Eudora’s hairdo (shell-do?), making her jump. I wondered if maybe she’d gotten an electric eel stuck in her oyster bed, but then she plucked out one of the shells. “Excuse me. I have to take this.”

She put the shell to her ear. “Hello? . . . Oh, yes, sir! I . . . Yes, I understand. Of course. Right away.”

She set the shell on the desk and stared at it, as if afraid it might ring again.

“Dad?” I guessed.

She tried for a smile. The saltwater lake was still spreading across the office floor, soaking my textbooks, seeping through my shoes.

“He thinks you might be right,” Eudora said. “He’ll explain this to you in person.”

She said in person the way most teachers say in detention.

I tried to act cool, like I had won an argument, but my dad and I hadn’t talked in . . . a while. He usually only brought me to his underwater palace when a war was about to start. I was hoping maybe he’d give me a week or so to settle in at school before he summoned me.

“Great. So . . . I can go back to class?”

“Oh, no, dear. He means NOW.”

Around my feet, the water swirled into a whirlpool. The tiles began to crack and dissolve.

“But don’t worry,” Eudora promised. “We’ll meet again!”

The floor dropped out from under my chair, and I plunged into a churning maelstrom with a thunderous **FLUSH!**

TWO



MY DAD HELPS OUT*

(*NO ACTUAL HELPING OCCURS)

You know you've been a demigod too long when you're flushed out of your school straight into the Atlantic Ocean and you're not even surprised.

I didn't try to fight the current. I could breathe underwater, so that wasn't an issue. I just sat in my blue plastic chair and rocketed through Poseidon's Private Plumbing System™, powered by a five-billion-gallon tsunami. Faster than you could say, *Well, that sucked*, I erupted from the seafloor like I'd been coughed up by a mollusk.

As the sand cloud around me settled, I tried to get my bearings. My nautical senses told me I was about forty miles southeast of the Long Island coast, two hundred feet down; no big deal for a son of Poseidon, but, kids, don't try this at home. A hundred yards in front of me, the continental shelf dropped into darkness. And right on the precipice stood a glittering palace: Poseidon's summer villa.

As usual, my dad was remodeling. I guess when you're immortal, you get tired of having the same crib for centuries. Poseidon always seemed to be gutting, renovating, or expanding. It helped that when it came to undersea building projects, he had pretty much infinite power and free labor.

A pair of blue whales was towing a marble column the size of an apartment building. Hammerhead sharks slathered grout between rows of coral brickwork with their fins and cephalofoils. Hundreds of merfolk darted here and there, all wearing bright yellow hard hats that matched their lamp-like eyes.

A couple of them waved at me as I swam through the worksite. A dolphin in a reflective safety vest gave me a high five.

I found my dad standing by a half-constructed infinity pool that looked over the abyss of the Hudson Canyon. I wasn't sure what the point of an infinity pool was when you were already underwater, but I knew better than to ask. My dad was pretty chill most of the time, but you didn't want to question his stylistic choices.

His clothes, for instance.

Some of the Greek gods I'd met liked to morph their appearance on a daily basis. They could do that, being, you know, gods. But Poseidon seemed to have settled on a look that worked for him, even if it didn't work for anyone else.

Today, he wore rumpled cargo shorts that matched his Crocs and socks. His camp shirt looked like it had been targeted in a paintball war between Team Purple and Team Hello Kitty. His fishing cap was fringed with spinnerbait lures. In his hand, a Celestial bronze trident thrummed with power, making the water boil around its wicked points.

With his athletic frame, dark trimmed beard, and curly salt-and-pepper hair, you'd think he was maybe forty-five—until he turned to smile at you. Then you noticed the weathered lines of his face, like a well-worn mountainside, and the deep melancholy green of his eyes, and you could appreciate that this guy was older than most nations—powerful, ancient, and weighed down by a lot more than water pressure.

“Percy,” he said.

“Hey.”

We have deep conversations like that.

His smile tightened. “How's the new school?”

I bit back the urge to point out that I'd only made it through two classes before getting flushed into the sea. “So far it's okay.”

I must not have sounded convincing, because my dad furrowed his bushy eyebrows. I imagined storm clouds forming along the Atlantic coast, boats rocking in angry swells. “If it's not up to snuff, I'd be happy to send a tidal wave—”

“No, it's cool,” I said hastily. “So, about these college rec letters . . .”

Poseidon sighed. “Yes. Eudora volunteered to counsel you. She's the Nereid of gifts from the sea, you understand. Loves helping people. But perhaps she should have waited a bit before breaking the news. ”

In other words: Now he had to do it, and he didn't like that.

If you've concluded that Poseidon is a "hands-off" type of parent, you win the chicken-dinner award. I didn't even meet him until I was in middle school, when (purely by coincidence) he needed something from me.

But we get along okay now. I know he loves me in his own way. It's just hard for gods to be close to their mortal offspring. We demigods don't live long compared to the gods. To them, we're sort of like gerbils. Gerbils who get killed a lot. Plus, Poseidon had a lot of other stuff going on: ruling the oceans; dealing with oil spills, hurricanes, and cranky sea monsters; remodeling his mansions.

"I just want to get into New Rome University," I said. "Isn't there any way you can . . . ?" I wriggled my fingers, trying to indicate godlike magic that could make problems disappear. Not that I'd ever seen such a thing. Gods are much better at magically creating problems than making them go away.

Poseidon combed his mustache with the tip of his trident. How he did that without cutting his face, I don't know.

"Unfortunately," he said, "those recommendation letters are the best I could do. They are the only way the Olympian Council will let you work off your debt."

Communicating underwater is complicated. I was partly translating his words from whale-song hums and clicks and partly hearing his voice telepathically in my head, so I wasn't sure I'd understood him.

"I haven't got any student debt," I said. "I haven't even been accepted yet."

"Not student debt," Poseidon said. "This is the debt you owe for . . . existing."

My heart sank. "You mean for being a child of one of the Big Three. Your kid."

Poseidon gazed into the distance, as if he'd just noticed something interesting in the abyss. I half expected him to shout, **LOOK, shiny!** and then disappear while my head was turned.

About seventy years ago, the Big Three gods—Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades—made a pact not to sire any more demigod children. We were too powerful and unpredictable. We tended to start major wars, instigate natural disasters, create bad sitcoms . . . whatever. Being gods, the Big Three still found ways to break the pact and not get in trouble. Instead, it was us demigod kids who suffered.

“I thought we’d moved past this,” I muttered. “I helped you guys fight the Titans—”

“I know,” my dad said.

“And Gaea and the giants.”

“I know.”

“And—”

“My son.” The edge to his voice told me it would be best to stop listing my greatest hits. “If it were up to me, I would waive this ridiculous requirement altogether. Alas, someone”—he glanced up, **someone** being code for my unreasonable brother Zeus—“is a stickler for rules. You were never supposed to be born, so you are technically ineligible for New Rome University.”

I couldn’t believe this.

Also, I could **totally** believe this.

Just when I thought I might catch a break, I didn’t. The Olympian gods seemed to think I was their personal kickball.

I relaxed my jaw to keep from grinding my teeth. “So, three recommendation letters.”

Poseidon brightened. “Zeus wanted it to be twenty-five. I talked him down to three.”

He looked like he was waiting for something.

“Thank you,” I grumbled. “I don’t suppose you could write one for me?”

“I’m your father. I would be biased.”

“Yeah, we wouldn’t want any bias.”

“I’m glad you understand. To earn each letter, you will have to undertake a new quest. All three will have to be completed before the application deadline of the winter solstice. Each time a god writes you a letter of recommendation, give it to Eudora, and she’ll put in your file.”

I tried to think of gods who might cut me some slack and give me simple quests. I’d helped lots of immortals over the years. The trick was coming up with some who would **remember** I had helped them—or even just remembered my name. “I guess I can ask Hermes. And Artemis . . . ?”

“Oh, you can’t go asking the gods. They’ll have to come to you. But don’t worry!” Poseidon looked really pleased with himself. “I took the liberty of putting your name on the Olympian quest board.”

“The what now?”

Poseidon snapped his fingers and a neon-yellow flyer appeared in his hands. It was an ad with my photo and this copy:

PERCY JACKSON WILL DO YOUR QUESTS
(IN EXCHANGE FOR COLLEGE RECOMMENDATION LETTERS)

The bottom of the flyer was cut into little strips with my home address on each one.

The photo looked like it had been taken from inside my bathroom mirror, which raised a whole bunch of disturbing questions. My hair was wet. My eyes were half-closed. A toothbrush was sticking out of my mouth.

“You already posted this, didn’t you,” I said.

“It wasn’t a problem,” Poseidon assured me. “I had my sea sprites put them up all over Mount Olympus, too.”

“I am so . . .”

“Grateful.” His hand settled heavily on my shoulder. “I know. I also know you weren’t expecting this extra obstacle, but just think! Once you get into college, you should have a much easier life. Monsters hardly ever attack older demigods. You and your girlfriend . . .”

“Annabeth.”

“Yes. You and Annabeth will be able to relax and enjoy yourselves.”

Poseidon straightened. “And now I think I hear my interior designer calling. We still haven’t decided whether the bathroom tile should be seafoam or aquamarine. Wonderful to see you again, Percy. Good luck with the quests!”

He thumped the base of his trident against the patio stones. The floor opened, and I was flushed right back through the ocean floor without even a plastic chair to sit in.

THREE



WE COMPLAIN ABOUT QUESTS AND DECORATIVE GOURDS

“**Y**ou have to do what?”

Annabeth and I sat on the fire escape outside my bedroom, our feet dangling over 104th Street. Over the past few weeks, as summer wound down, the fire escape had become our happy place. And despite everything that had happened today, I was happy. It’s hard to be sad when I’m with Annabeth.

I filled her in on my first day at AHS: the classes, the headaches, the unplanned field trip to the bottom of the sea. Annabeth swung her legs—a nervous habit, like she wanted to kick away mosquitoes or pesky wind spirits.

“That’s ridiculous,” she said. “Maybe I can get my mom to write you a rec.”

Annabeth’s mom was Athena, goddess of wisdom, so a college rec from her probably would have gone a long way. Unfortunately, the few times we’d met, Athena had sized me up with her piercing gray eyes like I was a deepfake.

“Your mom doesn’t like me,” I said. “Besides, Poseidon was pretty clear. I have to do **new** quests for three gods. And the requests have to come from them.”

“Ugh.”

“That’s what I said.”

Annabeth fixed her gaze on the horizon, like she was looking for a solution way out in Yonkers. Do solutions come from Yonkers?

“We’ll figure it out,” she promised. “We’ve been through worse.”

I loved her confidence. And she was right. . . . We'd been through so much together already, it was hard to imagine anything we couldn't face.

Occasionally, somebody would ask me if I'd ever dated anybody besides Annabeth, or if I'd ever thought about dating someone else. Honestly? The answer was no. When you've helped each other through Tartarus, the deepest and most horrifying place in the universe, and you've come out alive and stronger than you were to begin with . . . well, that isn't a relationship you could ever replace, or should ever want to. Yeah, okay, so I wasn't even eighteen yet. Still . . . no one knew me better, or put up with me more, or held me together as much as Annabeth, and I knew she could say the same about me—because if I were slacking as a boyfriend, she would let me know real quick.

"Maybe they'll be small quests," I said hopefully. "Like picking up garbage on the highway on Saturday or something. But this is an **I** thing and not a **we** thing. I don't want to drag you into it."

"Hey." She rested her hand on mine. "You're not dragging me into anything. I'm going to help you get through high school and into college with me, whatever it takes."

"So you'll write my essays?"

"Nice try."

We sat in silence for a minute, our shoulders touching. We were both ADHD, but I could've stayed like that for hours, perfectly content, appreciating the way the afternoon sunlight glinted in Annabeth's hair, or the way her pulse aligned with mine when we held hands.

Her blue T-shirt was emblazoned with the gold letters SODNYC. That sounded like an insult, but it was just the name of her new high school: School of Design, New York City.

I'd asked her about her first day already. After starting to tell me about her architecture teacher and first big homework assignment, she'd abruptly cut herself off with "It was fine. What about you?" I guess she knew I would have more to tell, more problems to solve.

That didn't seem fair to me—not because she was wrong, but because I didn't want to put her second. The thing about great problem-solvers is that they often don't let others help them with their own stuff.

I was getting up my nerve to ask again, to make sure no gods or monsters had visited her during her day and given her quests, when my mom called from inside. "Hey, you two. Want to help with dinner?"

“Sure, Sally!” Annabeth pulled her legs up and climbed through the window. If there was anyone Annabeth liked helping more than me, it was my mom.

When we got to the kitchen, Paul was chopping garlic for the stir-fry. He wore an apron one of his students had given him for an end-of-year present. The quote on the front read “A RECIPE IS A STORY THAT ENDS WITH A GOOD MEAL.” —PAT CONROY.

I didn’t know who that was. Probably a literary person, since Paul taught literature. I liked the quote, though, because I liked good meals.

Annabeth grabbed a knife. “Dibs on the broccoli.”

Paul grinned at her. His salt-and-pepper hair had gotten a little longer and curlier over the summer, and he’d taken to shaving only every couple of days, so he looked, as my mom put it, “pleasantly roguish.”

“I cede the chopping board to the daughter of Athena,” he said with a little bow.

“Thank you, kind sir,” Annabeth said, equally formal.

My mother laughed. “You two are adorable.”

Paul winked at Mom, then turned to heat up the wok. Ever since last spring, when Paul had tutored Annabeth in some impossible English project, the two of them had bonded over Shakespeare, of all things, so half the time when they talked to each other, they sounded like they were acting out scenes from *Macbeth*.

“Percy,” my mom said, “would you set the table?”

She didn’t really need to ask, since that was my usual job. Five mismatched pastel-colored plates. I got the blue one, always. Paper napkins. Forks. Glasses and a pitcher of tap water. Nothing fancy.

I appreciated having a simple ritual like this—something that did not involve monster-fighting, divine prophecies, or near-death experiences in the depths of the Underworld. Setting a table for dinner might sound boring to you, but when you have no downtime in your life *ever* . . . boring starts to sound pretty great.

My mom checked the rice cooker, then took a bowl of marinated tofu from the fridge. She hummed as she worked—some Nirvana song, I think. “Come as You Are”? From the glow on her face and the sparkle in her eyes, I could tell she was in a good place. She moved like she was floating, or about to burst into some dance moves. It made me smile just seeing her like that.

For too long, she'd been an overstressed, underemployed mom, heartbroken after her short affair with the god of the sea and constantly worried about me, her demigod child who'd been hounded by monsters since I was old enough to crawl.

Now she and Paul had a good life together. And if I felt a little sad about having one foot out the door just when things were getting better, hey, that wasn't my mom's or Paul's fault. They did everything they could to include me. Besides, I *wanted* to go to college. If I had to choose between being with Annabeth and . . . well, *anything*, that was no choice at all.

Paul dropped a clove of garlic into the wok, which sizzled and steamed like a sneezing dragon. (And yes, I've seen dragons sneeze.) "I think we are ready, milady."

"Incoming." Annabeth dumped the stir-fry mixture into the oil just as our doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," I said, and ran to let in our fifth for dinner.

As soon as I opened the door, Grover Underwood shoved a basket of fruit into my hands. "I brought strawberries." His nose quivered. "Is that tofu stir-fry?"

"Hello to you, too," I said.

"I love tofu stir-fry!" Grover trotted around me and made a beeline for the kitchen, because Grover knows what's good.

My best friend had allowed his appearance to go a little wild, which is saying something, since he is a satyr. His horns and his curly hair were having a race to see which could be taller. So far the horns were winning, but not by much. His goatish hindquarters had grown so shaggy he'd stopped wearing human pants to cover them, though he assured me that humans still saw them as pants through the obscuring magic of the Mist. If anyone looked at him strangely, Grover just said, "Athleisure-wear."

He wore his standard orange Camp Half-Blood shirt, and still used specially fitted tennis shoes to cover his cloven feet, because hooves are noisy and hard for the Mist to cover up. I guess the explanation "athleisure-wear plus tap-dancing shoes" didn't work so well.

My mom hugged Grover and gushed over the basket of strawberries as I put them on the kitchen counter.

"They smell wonderful!" she said. "Perfect dessert!"

"Last crop of the summer," Grover said wistfully.

He gave me a sad smile, like he was ruminating about how this had been my last summer at camp as well. Once demigods graduate high school, if we live that long, most of us transition out into the regular world. The thinking is that by then, we are strong enough to fend for ourselves, and monsters tend to leave us alone because we're no longer such easy targets. That's the theory, anyway. . . .

"Now we have to get ready for gourd season," Grover continued with a sigh. "Don't get me wrong. I love decorative gourds, but they're not as tasty."

My mom patted his shoulder. "We'll make sure these berries don't go to waste."

The rice cooker chimed just as Paul turned off the burner on the stovetop and gave the steaming wok one last stir. "Who's hungry?"

Everything tastes better when you're eating with people you love. I remember each meal my friends and I shared in the galley on board the *Argo II*—even if we were mostly just chowing down on junk food between life-and-death battles. These days, at home, I tried to savor every dinner with my mom and Paul.

I spent most of my childhood moving from boarding school to boarding school, so I never had the whole family-dinner thing growing up. The few times I was home, back when my mom was married to Smelly Gabe Ugliano, supper together had never been appealing. The only thing worse than Gabe's stink was the way he chewed with his mouth open.

My mom did her best. Everything she did was to protect me, including living with Gabe, whose stench threw monsters off my trail. Still . . . my rough past just made me appreciate these times even more.

We talked about my mom's writing. After years of dreaming and struggling, her first novel was going to be published in the spring. She hadn't made much money on the deal, but hey, a publisher had actually paid her for her writing! She was presently wavering between elation and extreme anxiety about what would happen when her book came out.

We also talked about Grover's work on the Council of Cloven Elders, sending satyrs all over the world to check out catastrophes in the wilderness. The council had no shortage of problems to deal with these days.

Finally, I filled in Grover about my first day at school, and the three recommendation letters I was supposed to get from the gods.

A look of panic flashed across his face, but he suppressed it quickly. He sat up straighter and brushed some rice out of his goatee. “Well then, we’ll do these quests together!”

I tried not to show how relieved I was deep down. “Grover, you don’t have to—”

“Are you kidding?” He grinned at Annabeth. “A chance to do quests, just the three of us? Like old times? The Three Musketeers!”

“The Powerpuff Girls,” Annabeth suggested.

“Shrek, Fiona, and Donkey,” I said.

“Wait a minute,” Grover said.

“I’m fine with this,” Annabeth said.

Paul raised his glass. “The monsters will never know what hit them. Just be careful, you three.”

“Oh, it’ll be fine,” Grover said, though his left eye twitched. “Besides, it always takes a while for word to get around among the gods. We’ve probably got weeks before the first request comes in!”

FOUR



I TAKE A HIMBO FOR SMOOTHIES

The first request arrived the next day.

At least I'd gotten through all my classes this time. I survived math, kept my eyes open through English, had a nap in study hall (favorite class ever), and got to meet the swim team in seventh period. The coach said our first swim meet would be on Thursday. No problem, as long as I remembered not to breathe underwater, swim at Mach 5, or come out of the pool totally dry. Those things tended to get me strange looks.

It wasn't until I was on my way to meet Annabeth and Grover at Himbo Juice after school that I got accosted by a god.

I was sitting on the F train when someone's shadow fell over me. "May I join you?"

I knew instantly I was in trouble. Nobody talks on the subway if they can avoid it, especially to people they don't know. No one **ever** asks if they can join you. They just wedge themselves into whatever seat is available. And besides, the car was almost empty.

The guy in front of me looked like he was about twenty. He had short-cropped black hair, large brown eyes, and coppery skin. He was dressed in ripped jeans, a skintight black tee, and various bits of gold: rings, earrings, necklace, nose ring, wrist bangles. Even the laces of his boots glittered gold. He looked like he'd just stepped out of an ad for some Madison Avenue boutique: Buy our jewelry and you will look like this dude!

I caught a whiff of cologne: something between clove and cinnamon. It made my eyes water.

He said something again.

"What?" I asked.

He gestured to the seat next to me.

“Oh. Uh—”

“Thank you.” He plopped down in a cloud of too-sweet-smelling fragrance and looked around the train at the six other riders. He snapped his fingers, like he was calling a dog, and all the people froze. Not that you could really tell any difference.

“So.” He spread his manicured fingers on his kneecaps and smiled sideways at me. “Percy Jackson. This is nice.”

“Which god are you?”

He pouted. “What makes you think I’m a god?”

“Lucky guess.”

“Hmph. And I went to all this trouble to blend in. I even put on clothes.”

“I appreciate the effort. Really.”

“Well, you’ve ruined my big reveal. I am Ganymede, beloved cupbearer to Zeus, and I need your help. What say you, Percy Jackson?”

The train came screeching into my stop. Annabeth and Grover would be waiting.

“Do you like Himbo Juice?” I asked the god.

I’d had all kinds of meetings with gods before, but this was the first time I’d ever taken one to a smoothie bar. The place was packed. Fortunately, Annabeth and Grover had scored our usual booth in the corner. Annabeth waved me over, then frowned when she saw the golden guy trailing behind me.

“We put in our order already,” she said as we slipped into the seat across from them. “I didn’t know you were bringing a friend.”

“Order for Grover!” said the server at the counter. Like most of the dudes who worked at Himbo Juice, he was huge and ripped and wearing a tank top, and his smile was blindingly white. “I’ve got a Fiji Fro-Yo, a Salty Sailor, and a Golden Eagle!”

“An eagle?! Where?” shrieked Ganymede, trying his best to hide under the table.

Annabeth and Grover exchanged a confused look.

“I’ll get the drinks,” Grover said, and he jogged over to the counter.

“The Golden Eagle is just a smoothie,” Annabeth told Ganymede, who was still hunched over and quivering.

Cautiously, the god straightened up. “I . . . I have some unresolved trauma about eagles.”

“You must be Ganymede,” Annabeth guessed.

The god frowned. He looked down at his shirt. “Am I wearing a name tag? How did you know that?”

“Well, you’re gorgeous,” Annabeth said.

That seemed to cheer up the god, though it didn’t do much for my mood.

“Thank you,” he said.

“And Ganymede was supposed to be the most beautiful of the gods,” Annabeth continued. “Along with Aphrodite, of course.”

Ganymede bobbed his head like he was weighing the comparison. “I suppose I’ll allow it.”

“You used to be mortal,” she went on. “You were so beautiful that Zeus turned into an eagle and snatched you away, brought you to Olympus.”

Ganymede flinched. “Yes. Long ago, but it still stings.”

Grover reappeared with a tray of smoothies. “I got you a Mighty Mead,” he told Ganymede. “Hope that’s okay. What did I miss?”

“He’s a god,” I said.

“I know that,” Grover said. “He’s Ganymede.”

“How did you—?” Ganymede stopped himself. “Never mind.”

“We were just about to hear why Ganymede came to find me,” I said.

Grover passed around the smoothies. Salty Sailor for me, obviously—just a hint of salted caramel with apples and bananas. The Fiji Fro-Yo was Grover’s. The Golden Eagle was Annabeth’s: turmeric, ginger, coconut milk, and a bunch of brain-food-type stuff, as if she needed any help in that department.

Ganymede thoughtfully stirred his Mighty Mead, occasionally eyeing Annabeth’s smoothie like it might grow claws and snatch him into the heavens. “I saw your ad on the bulletin board,” he began. “It . . . it also seemed too good to be true.”

“Thanks?”

“And all I have to do to reward you is write a letter of recommendation?”

I bit my tongue to keep from making several comments: Tips are appreciated. Actually, our surge pricing is in effect. “That’s the deal. And what is it I have to do?”

“We,” Annabeth and Grover corrected me in unison.

Ganymede squeaked his straw in his smoothie lid. I hated that sound. “I have to be sure this is completely discreet,” he said, dropping his voice and peering around nervously, even though none of the other patrons were paying us any attention. “You cannot tell anyone else. Is that understood?”

“Discreet is what we do,” said Grover, who had once blindly dive-bombed Medusa in a pair of flying shoes while screaming at the top of his lungs.

Ganymede sat up a little straighter. “How much do you know about my responsibilities on Mount Olympus?”

“You’re the cupbearer of the gods,” Annabeth said.

“Must be a sweet job,” Grover said dreamily. “Immortality, godly power, and you just have to serve drinks?”

Ganymede scowled. “It’s a horrible job.”

“Yeah, must be horrible.” Grover nodded. “All that . . . drink-pouring.”

“When it was just at feasts,” Ganymede said, “that was one thing. But now ninety percent of my orders are deliveries. Ares wants his nectar delivered on the battlefield. Aphrodite wants her usual with extra crushed ice and two maraschino cherries delivered to a sauna in Helsinki in fifteen minutes or less. Hephaestus . . . Don’t get me started on Hephaestus. This gig economy is killing me.”

“Okay,” I said. “How can we help?”

I was afraid he’d subcontract his delivery business to me, and I’d end up bearing cups all over the world.

“My most important symbol of office . . .” Ganymede said. “Can you guess what it is?”

I figured this must be a trick question. “Since you’re cupbearer of the gods, I’m going to guess . . . a cup?”

“Not just any cup!” Ganymede cried. “The chalice of the gods! The goblet of ultimate flavor! The only cup worthy of Zeus himself! And now . . .”

“Oh,” Annabeth said. “It’s missing, isn’t it?”

“Not missing,” said Ganymede miserably. “My cup has been stolen.”

FIVE



EVERYBODY HATES GANYMEDE BECAUSE HE'S SO PRETTY

Ganymede put his face in his hands and started to weep.

I looked at Annabeth and Grover, who both seemed as unsure as I was about how to comfort a crying god. I patted his shoulder. “There, there.”

That did not seem to help.

One of the Himbo Juice employees came over, his smile crumbling around the edges. “Is the smoothie not okay, sir? I can make you something else.”

“No.” Ganymede sniffled. “It’s just . . .” He gestured weakly at our juice drinks. “I can’t stand seeing so many cups. It’s too soon. Too soon.”

The employee flexed his pecs nervously, then made a hasty retreat.

“You know,” Grover said, “the kids at Camp Half-Blood make some great arts-and-crafts projects. They could probably fashion you a new goblet.”

The god shook his head. “It wouldn’t be the same.”

“Or you could look into single-serving cups made from recyclable material.”

“Grover,” Annabeth chided. “He wants his special cup.”

“I’m just saying, single servings might be more hygienic. All those gods sipping from the same goblet—?”

“You said it was stolen,” I interrupted. “Do you know who took it?”

Ganymede scowled. For the first time, I saw godly anger glowing in his eyes—a sign that this guy had more to him than just good looks and bling.

“I have some ideas,” he said. “But first, you have to promise that this remains confidential. The goblet makes drinks taste good to the gods. But if

a mortal got hold of it . . . one sip from it would grant them immortality.”

Suddenly my Salty Sailor didn't taste so special. My first thought was about all the random people who might find that cup, take a drink, and become immortal. The evil-eyed lady who served fish sticks at the AHS cafeteria. The dude who screamed at me to buy ice cream every time I passed his Mr. Happy Treat on First Avenue. The Wall Street broker who always cut in line at the coffee shop and assumed every order was his.

Based on my past experience, the last thing this world needed was more gods.

My second thought was: Why do the gods keep losing their magic items? It was like a job requirement for them: 1) become a god, 2) get a cool magic thing, 3) lose it, 4) ask a demigod to find it. Maybe they just enjoyed doing it, the way cats like knocking things off tables.

My next thought: “If it's so powerful, why would you trust us to get it back?”

Ganymede stared at me. “I couldn't trust anyone else! You've already turned down immortality once, Percy Jackson.”

He said this as if I had done something completely inexplicable, like ordering blueberries on a pizza. (Although come to think of it . . . that could work.)

And, I mean, yes, I did turn down immortality once. Zeus had offered me a minor godship after I saved Mount Olympus from the Titans a few years ago (certain rules and restrictions may apply). But I'd chosen systemic change instead. I'd asked the gods to stop ignoring their demigod kids.

Turns out that's another way the gods are like cats. They're not so great at learning new tricks.

“Okay,” I told Ganymede. “Totally confidential.”

“And these others?” Ganymede gestured to Grover and Annabeth.

“These others know how to keep a secret,” Annabeth said. “Loose lips are never a good strategy.”

“Totally,” Grover said.

“They're my best friends,” I said. “You can trust them as much as you can trust me.”

Which, come to think of it . . . was kind of open to interpretation, but Ganymede relaxed his shoulders. He wiped his tears away with his gold-ringed fingers.

“Fine,” he said. “I suspect someone on Olympus is trying to embarrass me, make me look bad in front of Zeus. If he finds out I lost my cup . . .” The god shuddered. “No. I have to recover it.”

“You have enemies?” I asked. It was hard for me to imagine how the drink server of the gods would make people mad.

“Oh, yes,” Ganymede said. “Hera, for one. She’s hated me since the day Zeus snatched me up to Olympus. Zeus was always complimenting me, you see—how handsome I was, how much I brightened up the palace. It’s not my fault I have nicer legs than she does.”

Annabeth grimaced. “Let’s hope it’s not Hera.”

“No . . .” Ganymede stared into his smoothie. “Probably not. She would consider it beneath her.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. If messing with my life wasn’t too petty for the queen of the gods, I wasn’t going to rule out her stealing beverage containers.

“But there are others,” Ganymede continued. “Everyone on Olympus hates me, really, because I’m a newcomer, an upstart kid made immortal. They call me a gold digger! Can you believe that?”

I tried not to stare at the twenty pounds of gold he was wearing. “You suspect anyone else in particular?”

He glanced around the shop, as if one of the himbos might have been a spy. He gestured for us to lean in.

“Before I was the cupbearer,” he said, “there were two other goddesses who had my job. First Hebe. Then Iris.”

Iris the messenger goddess, I had met. Every demigod calls on her from time to time to send rainbow messages—our version of video calls—but I also remembered visiting her organic health food store in California. The experience left a patchouli burn in my sinuses that took weeks to clear.

Grover slurped his Fiji Fro-Yo. “Iris seems kind of chill to be stealing chalices.”

“Perhaps.” Ganymede frowned. “But Hebe . . .”

Her, I didn’t know. She had a cabin at camp—one of the newer ones—but she’d never been on my quest bingo card before.

“The goddess of youth,” Annabeth said, probably noticing that I looked pretty clueless. “But, Ganymede, you’re, like, eternally young and beautiful. Why would she want to embarrass you?”

“Oh, you don’t know her,” Ganymede said. “In the early days, every time I would serve drinks at the feast table, she’d mutter **Spill it, spill it** as I walked past. She’s so immature.”

Grover shrugged. “Well, if she’s the goddess of youth . . .”

“That’s no excuse! She needs to grow up!” said the three-thousand-year-old twentysomething.

“Okay,” I said. “Do you have any proof she took it?”

“Proof?” He scoffed. “That’s what I need **you** for. Don’t you heroes dust for fingerprints, analyze DNA samples, that sort of thing?”

“You might be thinking of **CSI**. But okay, we’ll start with Hebe. Then check Iris.”

“Fine.” Ganymede sipped his smoothie. “Hmm. Not bad. Maybe when I get fired and turned back into a mortal, I could work here.”

“You’d make a great himbo,” Annabeth admitted. “So how long has your chalice been missing?”

Ganymede paused to think. “A century?”

“A century?!” I asked.

“Or a week?” Ganymede pinched his nose. “I always get those time periods confused. Not long, anyway. So far, I’ve been able to fake it with my delivery orders. The other gods kind of expect to-go cups with those. But if I don’t get my proper chalice back before the next in-person feast, everyone will notice. I’ll be humiliated!”

“When is the next feast?” Grover asked. (Grover likes feasts.)

“I don’t know!” Ganymede cried. “Zeus is unpredictable! He might schedule one in twenty years. Or it could be tomorrow. The point is, I need that goblet back before word gets out!”

He leaned forward, his expression stern. “Question those goddesses. See what they know. But **don’t** offend them. And **don’t** say I sent you. And **don’t** give away that my cup was stolen.”

“That’ll make it hard to question them,” Annabeth said. “Any idea where these goddesses hang out?”

I was bracing myself for him to say the North Pole or Outer Mongolia. If I had to take a leave of absence to go questing across the world, the college recommendation letters wouldn’t matter. I’d never graduate high school.

“They stay close to Mount Olympus,” he said to my relief. “I mean Manhattan. They should be around here somewhere.” He waved vaguely, as

if the whole of Manhattan couldn't possibly be too difficult to search. "Do this for me, Percy Jackson, and I will write you a letter!"

It didn't sound like much of a reward. Then again, usually gods just asked for things and promised nothing in return. Kind of like that bratty kid in *The Giving Tree*.

(Speaking of which, **never** give that book to a satyr for his birthday, thinking he might like it because it's about a tree. That satyr will cry, and then he will hit you. I speak from experience.)

"This recommendation letter will be **positive**?" I checked. "And you'll actually sign it?"

Ganymede frowned. "You drive a hard bargain, but very well! Now, away with you, before I am undone!"

He disappeared in a glittering cloud of dust. As usual with magical happenings, the mortals around us didn't seem to notice anything. Or maybe they just figured he had found the perfect smoothie and ascended to himbo enlightenment.

"Well." I sipped my Salty Sailor and scanned my companions' faces for any sign of regret. "This should be fun. Any ideas where to start?"

"Unfortunately, yes," said Grover. "But let me finish my drink first. We're going to need our strength."

SIX



BECAUSE LICORICE

Here's a challenge: try to do a full day of school (actually, that could be the whole challenge by itself), and then, afterward, go on a quest to find a goddess, knowing that when you get home, if you get home, you'll still have a couple of hours of math and science homework to do.

I was feeling pretty salty as we headed downtown, and it had nothing to do with my Salty Sailor.

Grover brought us straight to Times Square—the noisiest, most crowded, most tourist-infested part of Manhattan. I tried to avoid Times Square as much as possible, which naturally meant I just kept getting sucked into it, usually to battle a monster, talk to a god, or hang from a billboard in my boxer shorts. (Long story.)

Grover stopped at a storefront I would have passed right by. For half a block, all the windows were covered in foil. Usually, that means the place is either out of business or super shady. Then I looked up at the enormous electronic sign above the entrance. I might have walked by it a dozen times before, but I'd never paid it any attention. In Times Square, all the flashy jumbo screens kind of blend together.

“No way,” I said.

Annabeth shook her head. “She **really** named her place Hebe Jeebies?”

“Afraid so,” Grover sighed.

“And how did you know about this place?” I asked.

His cheeks flushed. “They have great licorice ropes. You can't pass by without smelling them!”

I couldn't see anything through the windows. I definitely didn't smell anything. Then again, I don't have a satyr's nose for licorice. It's kind of like

catnip for goat guys.

“It’s a candy store, then?” Annabeth asked.

“No, more like . . .” Grover tilted his head. “Actually, it’s easier to show you.”

I wasn’t sure traipsing into a goddess’s lair was the best idea, but Grover pushed through the doors and we followed. Because licorice, I guess.

Inside . . . well, imagine all the cheesiest entertainment centers from the 1990s got together and had a food baby. That was Hebe Jeebies.

Rows of Skee-Ball machines stood ready for action. A dozen Dance Dance Revolution platforms blinked and flashed, inviting us to boogie. Aisles with every arcade game I’d ever heard of, and dozens that I hadn’t, lined the vast, dimly lit warehouse, making the whole place a glowing labyrinth. (And labyrinth is a word I never use lightly.)

In the distance, I spotted a candy station with fill-your-own-bag dispensers and huge bins of colorful sweet stuff. On the other side of the warehouse were a cafeteria with picnic tables and a stage where robotic iguanas played musical instruments.

There was a ball pit the size of a house, a climbing structure that looked like a giant hamster habitat, a bumper-car course, and a ticket-exchange station with oversize stuffed animals for prizes.

The whole place smelled of pizza, pretzels, and industrial cleaner. And it was packed with families.

“I get it now,” said Annabeth, shivering. “This place **does** give me the heebie-jeebies.”

“I’ve been here a few times.” Grover’s expression was a combination of anxiety and hunger . . . which, come to think of it, was his usual expression. “I’ve never found the other end of the place.”

I looked at the happy kids running around obliviously and the parents who seemed just as thrilled to play games they probably remembered from their own childhoods.

“Okay,” I said, inching back toward the front door. “I’m getting strong Lotus Casino vibes in here . . . like low-rent Lotus Casino, but still . . .”

I didn’t have to explain what I meant. Years ago, we’d gotten stuck in a Vegas casino that offered a thousand reasons to never leave. We’d just barely escaped.

“It’s not a trap,” Grover said. “At least, I’ve never had any trouble leaving. These families . . . they come and go. They don’t seem to be stuck

in time.”

He had a point. I didn’t spot anybody with bell-bottoms or 1950s haircuts, which was a good sign. A family walked by, their arms full of stuffed-animal prizes, and left the building with no problem.

“Then . . . what’s the catch?” Annabeth asked. “There’s always a catch.”

I nodded in agreement. I’d never walked into any establishment run by a Greek god, monster, or other immortal being that didn’t have a nasty downside. The more interesting the place looked, the more dangerous it was.

“I don’t know,” Grover admitted. “I usually just get licorice and leave. I keep a low profile.”

He frowned at me, as if worried I might do something high-profile like burn the place down. Honestly, that hurt. Just because I’ve been known to burn places down, blow things up, and unleash apocalyptic disasters wherever I go . . . that doesn’t mean I’m **totally** irresponsible.

“And you’re sure Hebe is here?” I asked.

“No, but . . .” Grover wriggled his shoulders. “You know that feeling you get when there’s a god around and you can’t see them, but you kind of feel like there’s a swarm of dung beetles on the back of your neck?”

“Not exactly . . .” I said.

“Also,” said Annabeth, “**dung beetles** is oddly specific.”

Grover brushed the metaphorical poop bugs off his neck. “Anyway, I’ve got that feeling now. We could ask the staff if Hebe’s around. If we can find someone.”

We moved into the arcade. I kept my hand at my side, ready to draw out Riptide, my pen-sword, though there didn’t seem to be much to fight except grade-school kids and video game bosses. I half expected the robot iguana band to charge us with banjo bayonets, but they just kept playing their programmed songs.

“Oh, my gods,” Annabeth said. “Stackers. I haven’t played that since . . .”

Her thoughts seemed to drift away. She’d been at Camp Half-Blood since she was seven years old, so she must have been reliving a **really** early memory. It made sense to me that she would like a game where you had to place one block on top of another. She was all about building and architecture.

As we approached the candy station, I felt a pang in my abdomen. Not because I was hungry, but because the smell reminded me so much of my

mom's old workplace, Sweet on America. I used to love going there during the summer and watching her help people pick out candy. I guess it was a pretty hard job, and it didn't pay much, but my mom never failed to make people smile. They always left happy, with just the right mix of treats, which made my mom seem like a superhero to me.

Of course, she was still a superhero to me for a lot of reasons. But back when I was seven or eight, having a mom who was the candy lady felt like the coolest thing ever. She used to bring me free samples when she came home, and this place had all my old favorites: blueberry saltwater taffy, blue sour laces, blue . . . well, everything. It's amazing my tongue hadn't turned permanently violet.

Grover sniffed at the rows of licorice ropes, which came in so many colors they reminded me of Paul's tie rack. (Paul loves wearing funky ties to school. He says it keeps his students awake.)

A group of adults walked past, giggly and teary-eyed, reminiscing about their favorite treats and games from back in the day.

"It's a nostalgia trap," I realized. "The place is selling people their own childhoods."

Annabeth nodded. Her gaze drifted around the amusement center like she was scanning for threats. "That makes sense, but a lot of places sell nostalgia. It's not necessarily a bad thing. "

An employee walked past wearing a bright blue Hebe Jeebies polo shirt and matching shorts, fussing with a wheel of paper prize tickets.

"Excuse me, miss?" Annabeth touched her arm, and the employee jumped.

"What?" she snapped.

I realized she was just a kid. She had wiry black hair with pink barrettes, a pouty baby face, and a name tag that read SPARKY, MANAGER. She couldn't have been more than nine years old.

"Sorry." Sparky took a breath. "The token machine is broken again, and I gotta get these tickets to . . . Anyway, how can I help?"

I wondered if the gods had child-labor laws for their magical businesses. If so, the goddess of youth apparently didn't believe in them.

"We're looking for Hebe?" I asked.

"If this is about a refund for a defective game—"

"It's not," I said.

"Or the pizza being moldy—"

“It’s not. Also, yuck.”

“Depends on the mold,” Grover murmured.

“We just need to speak to the goddess in charge,” Annabeth said. “It’s kind of urgent.”

Sparky scowled, then relented. “Past the diving cliff; left at the henhouse.”

“Diving cliff?” I asked.

“Henhouse?” asked Grover.

“She’ll be in the karaoke bar.” Sparky wrinkled her nose like this was an unpleasant fact of life. “Don’t worry. You’ll hear it.”

She hurried off with her wheel o’ prize tickets.

I looked at Annabeth and Grover. “Are we really going to search out a karaoke bar . . . like, on purpose?”

“You can duet with me on ‘Shallow,’ ” Annabeth offered.

“You don’t want that,” I promised.

“Oh, I don’t know.” She pinched my arm lightly. “Might be romantic.”

“I’m just going to keep walking,” said Grover.

Which was probably the wisest choice.

We found the diving cliff: a two-story wall of fake rock where you could jump off into a suspiciously murky pool of water. A couple of kids were doing it on a loop, splashing down, clambering out, and racing back up to the top, while their parents stood nearby, engrossed in a game of **Space Invaders**.

I am a son of Poseidon, but you couldn’t have paid me enough to jump into that pool. Any enclosed body of water where little kids have been playing? No thanks. Nevertheless, I took note of where the pool was, just in case I needed some H₂O to throw around.

I am a guy of limited talents. If I can’t kill it with water, a sword, or sarcasm, I am basically defenseless. I come preloaded with sarcasm. The pen-sword is always in my pocket. Now I had access to water, so I was as prepared as I could ever be.

We passed the henhouse . . . which I’d thought might be a nickname for a private event space or something, like where you’d have hen parties. But no. It was an actual henhouse. Right in the middle of the arcade stood a red shack on stilts, surrounded by a chicken-wire fence. On the floor around it, about a dozen hens and some little yellow chicks were pecking at feed, clucking, and basically being chickens.

“Why?” I asked.

“Hebe’s sacred animal,” Annabeth said. “Maybe we should move along.”

I didn’t argue. The chickens were staring at us with their beady black eyes as if thinking, Dude, if we were still dinosaurs, we would tear you to pieces.

At last, we found the karaoke bar. It was partitioned off from the rest of the amusement center by a set of sliding mahogany doors, but that didn’t stop the music from seeping through. Inside, half a dozen tables faced a sad little stage, where a squad of old folks belted out a song that sounded vaguely Woodstock-ish. The stage lights pulsed a sickly yellow color. The sound system crackled.

That didn’t seem to bother the boomers, who threw their arms around one another and waved their canes, their bald heads gleaming as they wailed about peace and sunshine.

“Can we leave now?” Grover asked.

Annabeth pointed to a booth against the far wall. “Look over there.”

Sitting in the booth, tapping her feet to the music, was a girl about my age. At least, that’s what she appeared to be. But I could tell she was a goddess because immortals always make themselves a little too flawless when they appear in human form: perfect complexion, hair always photo-shoot ready, clothes far too crisp and colorful for mere mortals. The girl in the booth wore a pink-and-turquoise minidress with white go-go boots but somehow managed to make it look hip and not like a retro Halloween costume. Her hair was a dark beehive swirl. It occurred to me she was channeling a fashion that would remind the boomers of their own childhoods.

We approached the booth.

“Lady Hebe?” I asked.

I figured that was the safest way to address her. I was guessing her last name wasn’t Jeebies.

The goddess raised a finger to silence me, her eyes still fixed on the geriatric singers. “Don’t they seem happy? So young again!”

The boomers did seem happy. I wasn’t sure about young, but maybe young meant something different back in the day.

“Um, yeah,” I said. “We were just wondering—”

“Please, sit.” The goddess waved her hand, and three chairs appeared on the outside of the booth.

Then Hebe issued one of the most terrifying threats I had ever heard from a god: “I’ll order us some pizza, and we can talk while the old folks sing protest songs.”

SEVEN



BIG SHOCKER: I OFFEND A GODDESS

It was the pizza that got me.

I don't mean with food poisoning. I mean with nostalgia.

The cheese slice looked like a triangle of melted vinyl, garnished with three sad flecks of basil and served on a paper plate limp with grease. I had no intention of eating it—not after Sparky's mold comment—but the smell took me right back to third grade.

Wednesdays were pizza days. I remembered the burnt-cheese smell in our basement cafeteria, the cracked green plastic chairs, the feverish conversations I used to have with my friends about trading cards, the history teacher who was our lunch monitor, Mr. Christ. (No kidding, that was his actual name. We were too scared to ask what his first name was.)

Now, looking at (and smelling) Hebe Jeebies's glistening plastic pizza, I felt eight years old again.

"Wow," I said.

Hebe smiled, as if she knew exactly what I was thinking. "Wonderful, isn't it? Feeling young again?"

Okay, maybe she didn't know *exactly* what I was thinking. Being in third grade for me had not been wonderful. Neither had the pizza. But it was still a rush, being pulled back in time by nothing but a smell.

Grover dug in, devouring his pizza slice, his paper plate, and my napkin. I had learned to keep my hands away from him when he was in grazing mode or he might have started gnawing on my fingers.

Annabeth remained focused on the karaoke boomers. They were now belting out a slow, sad song about where all the flowers had gone. I wanted to shout, I don't know. Why don't you go outside and look for them?

“What a fabulous generation,” Hebe said, admiring the geriatric singers. “Even now, they refuse to accept growing old.” She turned to me. “And you, Percy Jackson, I assume you’ve come to ask a favor. Perhaps you’re starting to regret turning down immortality?”

Here we go, I thought.

Every time the gods brought up my rejection of Zeus’s offer, they treated it as a sign of stupidity—or worse, as an insult to godkind. I hadn’t figured out a great way to explain it to them. Like, maybe if you all promised to claim your demigod children sooner, so your kids weren’t living their whole lives not knowing who they were or where they came from, that would be a win for everyone?

I must have looked like I was about to bust out the sarcasm, because Annabeth intervened.

“He made the selfless choice,” she said. “Because of that, your kids got their own cabin at Camp Half-Blood. You finally got the respect you deserve.”

Hebe narrowed her eyes. “Perhaps. Still, Percy Jackson, turning down eternal youth? You can’t really want to grow old. Don’t you understand how terrible that will be?”

There didn’t seem to be a right answer to that.

Honestly, I’d spent most of my life wishing I could be older, so I could get to college, get out of the target years when monsters were trying to kill me every other day.

I didn’t want to contradict the goddess, though, so I tried a careful answer. “I mean, I guess getting older is part of life—”

“This pizza is great!” Grover interrupted, probably in an attempt to save me from god-level zappage. “And the music . . .” He frowned at the boomers. “Wait a minute. Are they actually getting younger?”

He was right. The changes were subtle, but their hair didn’t seem so gray now. Their postures were straighter. Their voices sounded more assured, though still terrible.

“They come here to remember the old days.” Hebe gestured around her. “Nostalgia is the doorway back to youth. I’m just showing them how to open it.”

A shiver ran across my shoulders. The last thing the world needed was boomers aging backward, like, We enjoyed monopolizing the planet so much the first time, we’re going to do it again!

“That’s . . . nice of you,” Grover tried. But from the slight tremor in his voice, I could tell he was not liking this place anymore, no matter how good the licorice ropes were.

Hebe crossed her go-go boots at the ankles. She placed her arms across the back of the booth. With her smug expression, she reminded me more of a Mafia boss than a 1960s teenager.

“Is that why you’re here, then?” she asked. “You want to know the secret of youth? I imagine none of you really had a childhood, did you? Always running errands for the gods, fleeing monsters, **adulthood**.”

Her expression soured, as if that word disgusted her.

“Our Skee-Ball tournament usually shaves off a year or two,” she continued. “Or you can redeem tickets for various elixirs at the rewards station. I’ll just warn you that if you’re looking for something extreme, I don’t turn anyone into babies. They do nothing but cry, poop, and throw up. The real childhood magic starts at around eight years old.”

Annabeth shifted in her seat. “There were no infants in the arcade. No one younger than, like, eight. Your manager, Sparky—”

“Stays in the main arcade,” Hebe said. “I am **always** the youngest person in any room, you see, even if it’s just by a few months. I can’t stand to be out-younged.” She brushed away the idea, banishing it from her presence. “But I do prefer the teenage years.”

“So you hang out in a karaoke bar,” I said. “Makes sense.”

She nodded. I made a mental note not to fight her with sarcasm. She was obviously immune.

“Now,” she said, “if you’ll tell me how young you want to be, I will tell you what it will cost.”

“No,” I said.

Suddenly the air around us felt colder and oilier than the pizza.

“No?” asked the goddess.

“That’s not why we’re here.”

Hebe’s expression turned from smug to “resting goddess face,” which was not a good thing.

“Then why,” she asked, “are you wasting my infinite time?”

“We’re looking for information,” Annabeth said.

“About the gods,” Grover added. “A god. Hypothetically. I don’t know . . . Ganymede, for example?”

I was tempted to shove a napkin dispenser in Grover's mouth, but it was too late.

Hebe sat forward. Her fingernails were painted Day-Glo yellow. "Now why would you ask about him?"

The boomers finished their song. After a few high fives, they replaced their mics and shuffled offstage, heading back to the arcade. Typical boomer timing: have a blast, then leave right before everything goes sideways.

Grover squirmed under the goddess's gaze. A shred of napkin clung to his goatee like a tiny ghost. "We're just conducting a brief opinion survey ___"

"He sent you here," the goddess guessed. The longer she sat with us, the younger she looked. If I'd seen her at AHS, I would've pegged her for a sophomore or even a freshman—a very colorful, vindictive-looking freshman. "Tell me, why would Ganymede do that?"

Annabeth held up her hands, trying to show our peaceful intentions. "It's not so much that he sent us—"

"He **has** been acting nervous lately," mused Hebe. "But he wouldn't send out a group of heroes unless . . ." She smiled. "Unless he's lost something. Oh, you can't be serious. He's lost the chalice of the gods?"

She laughed with such delight, I started to relax. If she found this funny, maybe that was good. I liked delighted goddesses a lot more than angry ones.

I shrugged. "Well, we can neither confirm nor deny—"

"How wonderful!" She giggled. "That upstart little witch is in **SO** much trouble! And he sent you to question me because . . . ?"

All the humor drained from her face. "Oh, I see."

"We just wanted some background information," I said hastily. "You know, like who might have a reason to, uh—"

"Steal the chalice," she finished.

Annabeth shook her head. "We're not implying—"

"You think I stole it! You came here to accuse me!"

"Not entirely!" Grover yelped. "I—I came here for the licorice!"

Hebe stood. Her dress swirled with pink-and-blue paisley light. "Heroes accusing **me** of theft! The only thing I've ever stolen is time from the Fates so mortals could enjoy longer lives! I care nothing for that . . . that **usurper's** cup! Do you think I would want my old job back, waiting tables

on Mount Olympus, when I have my own establishment right here with all the pizza, karaoke, and bumper cars I could ever desire?”

That sounded like another trick question. Stupidly, I tried to answer it.

“You’re right,” I said. “Of course that’s silly. But maybe you know someone else who could’ve stolen it? Or if you’d let us look around so we can report back that it definitely isn’t here—”

“ENOUGH!” Hebe roared. She spread her hands. “What did you say earlier, Percy Jackson? Getting older is part of life? Well, perhaps you should start that process over again. Maybe you’ll do it right this time and learn some manners!”

The goddess burst into a storm of rainbow glitter that knocked me right out of my chair.

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