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AND THE OLYMPIANS

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we couldn't imagine a crew better to
sail with into the Sea of Monsters



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ONE



I HAVE AN ACCIDENT IN THE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE

October. Best month ever.

The air was crisp. The leaves were changing colors in Central Park. And my favorite food cart on 86th Street was serving pumpkin-spice burritos.

On top of all that, I'd had ZERO recent trouble from the mythological world. No gods had knocked on my door demanding that I run their errands. No monsters had tried to kill me.

For three blissful weeks, I'd been a normal senior in high school. And when you're the demigod son of Poseidon, normalcy is a nice change of pace—even if it comes with a side of homework and weekend tutoring.

You may be wondering, *Why would a powerful demigod in his last year of high school need trivial help like weekend tutoring?*

Maybe you haven't met me. For starters, I'm dyslexic with ADHD. Little things like reading and paying attention are tougher for me than, say, leaping out of a classroom window to fight a fire-breathing boar. Weirdly, teachers don't grant extra credit for slaying monster pigs.

Also, I'd missed my entire junior year thanks to some

business we won't get into (Hera) on account of some meddling gods (Hera) for reasons of a cosmic apocalypse (Hera).

So there I was at Alternative High School, the only place that would let me complete a diploma in time to attend college with my girlfriend. In order to make up for all the credits I'd missed through no fault of my own (Hera), I had to take weekend courses.

On Saturdays, I had a dual-credit Spanish class with Dr. Hernandez at Borough of Manhattan Community College. Sundays, I took an online chemistry class. Monday mornings, when I really needed a break, I'd stumble into school with a throbbing headache and try to get through my regular classes without letting my brain leak out of my ears.

Every once in a while, my school counselor, Eudora, would step out of her office and give me a thumbs-up. "You're doing great!"

But mostly she left me alone. She was secretly a Nereid, working for my father. I think I made her nervous. Either that or she was afraid to ask how my college recommendations were coming along. I'd done a quest for Ganymede and gotten a letter from him, but I still needed endorsements from two more Greek gods if I wanted to get into New Rome University. And they weren't going to come for free, of course.

My application deadline was approaching, and things had been quiet.

Too quiet. In fact, things were so quiet I fell asleep in

English class and didn't realize it until the teacher stood right over me and said, "Percy?"

I jolted awake. Luckily, I didn't draw my sword.

"Theme!" I yelled, because that's the question I'd been preparing to answer before I nodded off. "The theme is free will versus fate."

Mrs. Foray frowned. The other students tried not to laugh.

"Your aunt is in the office." Mrs. Foray handed me a note. "She's come to pick you up."

There were several problems with this. First, it made me look like a doofus—being picked up by a family member when I was perfectly capable of taking the subway. I even had my driver's license, though driving in New York was way scarier than most quests I'd been on.

Second, if I left school early, it would mean makeup work and grumpy teachers.

Third, I didn't have an aunt. At least, not on the human side of my family . . .

I mumbled an apology to Mrs. Foray, wiped drool off my cheek, and headed for the office. Something told me I'd still be able to use that answer about free will versus fate. It seemed to be the theme of my life.

When I passed the counselor's office, Eudora stuck her head out, looking startled.

"Hi," I said. "You know anything about—?"

"SHHH! I'm not here!" She closed her door.

That was a little weird, even for her. I wondered if Nereids were like groundhogs. Maybe if they saw their

shadows when they poked their heads out of their dens, it meant six more weeks of hibernation.

When I got to the reception desk, the secretary was standing there frozen, staring at nothing. She pointed at the principal's office and murmured, "They are waiting."

Entranced secretary. Probably not a good sign.

I rapped my knuckles on the principal's door. It creaked open. Inside, Dr. Samuels sat motionless at her desk, her eyes glassy. Next to her stood a middle-aged woman in a dark sleeveless gown. A chain of diamonds glittered around her neck. Her hair was a thicket of black tufts, wreathed in a halo of green fire.

Flaming hair. Definitely not a good sign.

"Ah, good," said the woman in black. She glanced at the principal. "You may leave us now."

Dr. Samuels rose and wandered off, closing the door behind her. I imagined my school administrators were going to get pretty tired of having their jobs taken by mythological beings. First Eudora became my guidance counselor. Now this woman in black was moving into the principal's office. One of these days I was going to find that our athletic director had been replaced by a poison-breathing dragon . . . though on second thought, I'm not sure anyone would notice the difference.

The woman in black settled into the principal's chair. She smoothed her hands across the armrests as if assessing her new throne. She seemed to find it satisfactory. Before she could start laughing maniacally or

monologuing about how the school was now hers, all hers, I decided I'd better speak.

"Hi," I said. I have a way with words.

"You may continue to stand, Percy Jackson." She ran her fingers lovingly across the chipped Formica desk. "I do not anticipate this will take long."

I tried to not dwell on the many ways she could kill me instantly. "And you are—?"

I didn't mean to sound rude. Sometimes, the gods just don't think to introduce themselves, and I was beginning to suspect this lady was in the *god* category of Super-Powerful Annoying Things.

Her onyx eyes glittered. She sat forward and laced her fingers, looking more like a principal than my real principal ever did. "You may call me the Torch Bearer, the Star Walker, the Night Wanderer, the Disturber of the Dead, the daughter of Perses and Asteria, the Triple Goddess!"

"Uh-huh," I said, still clueless.

You're probably thinking, *Percy, you've been dealing with the Greek gods for years. How could you not know her?*

The thing is, immortals are always changing their appearance. And there are hundreds of Greek gods. Also, they're reluctant to give you straight answers. It's never *Hi, I'm Zeus*. It's always *I am the Thunder-Maker, the Paranoid Patriarch, Heavenly Adulterer, Lightning Britches, King of Luxurious Beard Products*.

The *triple goddess* thing did spark a memory somewhere in the back of my mind, but Greek Myth Land is full

of triple goddesses: The Fates. The Gray Sisters. The Furies. Destiny's Child. I couldn't keep track of them all.

I waited for the goddess to elaborate. That seemed like the safest thing to do.

She frowned. Maybe she was irritated that I didn't grovel or burn an offering or something.

"I am *Hecate*," she said, loud and slow. "Goddess of magic, crossroads, necromancy?"

My tongue turned to sand. I'd never formally met Hecate, but I knew her work. I remembered her from such hits as "I Joined Kronos During the Battle of Manhattan (But Then Switched Sides)" and "I Helped Your Friend Hazel Fight a Giant (But Only After I Knew the Giants Would Lose)." Hecate had always struck me as a team player—as soon as she was sure which team would win.

"Right," I said. "Lady Hecate."

My continued lack of groveling did not seem to please her. Well, she was going to have to deal with it. I wasn't much of a groveler.

"I assume you've had a restful few weeks?" she asked. "The other gods have left you alone as I requested?"

"I— Wait. *As you requested?*"

She waved her hand like she was clearing smoke. "I told them to stay away from you. I couldn't risk you getting damaged or killed before you undertook *my* quest!"

My fingernails cut grooves into my palms.

I remembered something my girlfriend, Annabeth, had once told me: *Always count to five before saying something in*

anger to a divine being. This would theoretically reduce my chances of being turned into a smoldering heap of charcoal briquettes.

I managed to count to two. "There were other gods who wanted to give me quests?"

"Oh, yes. Several."

"And you told them . . ."

"You were off-limits. I needed you fresh for this week!"

A few ancient Greek cuss words floated through my mind.

I only needed two more recommendation letters. Apparently, I could've gotten them both by now, except Hecate had snatched me from the jaws of success.

This time I counted to three before responding. I was improving. "And these other quests would have been—?"

"Unworthy of your time!" Hecate insisted. "Fetching a box of cupcakes for Aphrodite. A day of waterskiing with Hermes. All much too easy!"

Waterskiing and cupcakes. I decided not to scream, because if Hecate was scary enough to keep all the other gods away from me, she was scary with a capital SCARE.

"And *your* quest is . . . worthy of my time."

"Absolutely! Your task shall be—"

"Hold on." In the back of my mind, a red light flashed . . . a warning, a memory? Something Eudora had told me. Oh, right . . .

"My counselor told me I need to request dual credit

before I undertake a quest," I said. "So, like, if I have to do favors for any other gods along the way, they can write me recommendation letters too."

Hecate spread her arms generously. "That's no problem!"

"Great."

"Because no other gods will be involved in what I'm asking you to do, so it won't matter!"

She beamed like she was waiting for a thank-you.

"What's the quest?" I grumbled.

"Pet-sitting."

"Excuse me?"

"Pet-sitting! Starting tonight through Friday evening, you will stay at my house and watch my animals. As you know, this is an important time of year for me."

"Because . . . Oh, Friday. Halloween."

It made sense that the goddess of creepy stuff would have that date circled on her calendar. The only problem was, my friends and I already had plans for Friday.

"Alas . . ." Hecate sighed. "My sacred days used to happen at the end of *every* month. I would travel the world collecting gifts that my worshippers left for me on their doorsteps. Over the past few centuries, the offerings have been slim. But at the end of October, people still remember me! So I must travel the world and make my presence known. While I'm gone, you must watch my hellhound and polecat."

There was a lot to unpack in that statement. My big takeaway was that Hecate was going trick-or-treating. She

seemed to believe that Halloween had been created just for her.

On the one hand, that was some god-level narcissism.

On the other hand, who was I to stand between a goddess and her Tootsie Rolls?

"So, these pets . . ." I said. "I know a little about hellhounds. But polecats . . . do they eat polecat chow? Anything I should know?"

Hecate chuckled. "Many things. But we'll go over that later."

She produced a black business card, which she slid across the table. Written on the front, in glistening red like fresh blood, was an address: THE MANSE, GRAMERCY PARK WEST.

"Arrive at sunset," she said. "Then I will go over the rules for keeping my pets healthy and happy."

"Sunset . . . tonight."

She frowned. "Do you have water in your ears? Yes. Tonight. You may bring those friends of yours . . . Anna and Groverbeth."

Close enough, I thought.

"Okay, I'll do it," I said, because what choice did I have? But I must not have sounded very excited.

Hecate rose from her desk. "Percy Jackson, I am offering you the chance for a recommendation letter from *me*: a major goddess, the Torch Bearer—"

"The Star Walker, yeah, I get it. It's just that I'll have to move a few things around on my schedule. . . ."

Hecate lifted her arms. Darkness spread from the folds

of her dress, filling the room with an inky fog. "This will be an easy assignment, Percy Jackson. If you succeed, I will be grateful. If you fail me, however . . ."

Her body shimmered and stretched. Suddenly, I was looking at three distinct goddesses, all linked at the torso like gemstones on a single ring. On the left, a girl with milk-white skin and platinum-blond hair fixed me with a steely gaze that said, *Pull my pigtails. I dare you.* In the middle stood the Hecate I had been talking to—a middle-aged lady with the most disapproving mom-face I'd seen since my last brunch at Hera's. On the right, a wizened old woman with ashen hair gave me a sour scowl. Honestly, I wasn't sure which face scared me the most.

"I am the Maiden," said Hecate in a chorus of three voices. "I am the Mother. I am the Crone. I am all phases of a woman's life—all her power—and I will suffer no man to cross me."

A tremor went through my body. My legs shook.

But she wasn't done with me yet. She changed again. Her three faces became animal heads. On the left, a palomino horse whinnied angrily. In the middle, a lioness snarled and bared her fangs. On the right, a hound growled and slavered, its eyes ablaze.

"I am the horse that runs strong and fearless," she said, her voices unchanged. "I am the lion that prowls stealthy and patient. I am the hound that stands guard, loyal and fierce. I am goddess of the crossroads, where all possibilities intersect. I devour those who waver before me."

My body felt flushed—warm, damp, and unpleasant. My gut seemed to dissolve into my jeans.

Finally, the room cleared of darkness. Before me stood Hecate in a single form, the way she'd been at the beginning.

She gave me a tight smile, probably because she could see that she'd made her point.

"See you tonight, then," she said. "Ciao."

In a burst of green fire, she disappeared, leaving nothing behind but the smell of burning animal hair.

I stared at Dr. Samuels's education degrees framed on the wall.

When I felt like my legs could move again, I wobbled out of the office. I needed to finish my school day. I needed to contact Annabeth and Grover. But first I needed to go to my gym locker and change my undershorts.