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AND THE OLYMPIANS

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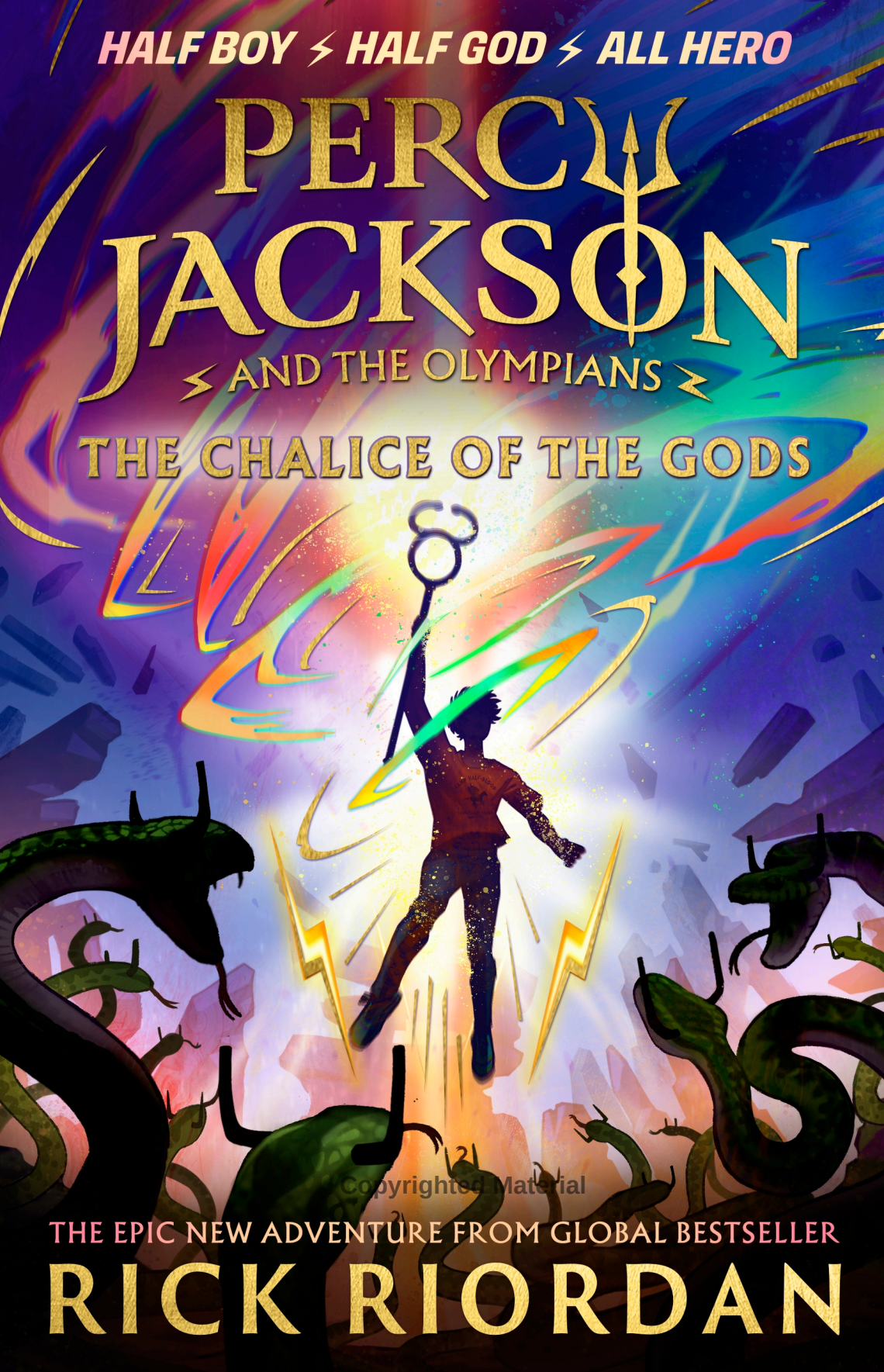

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To Walker, Aryan, and Leah

Here's to new beginnings!

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CONTENTS

1 • I Get Flushed 1

2 • My Dad Helps Out* (*No Actual Helping Occurs) 9

3 • We Complain about Quests and Decorative Gourds 17

4 • I Take a Himbo for Smoothies 26

5 • Everybody Hates Ganymede Because He's So Pretty 32

6 • Because Licorice 39

7 • Big Shocker: I Offend a Goddess 49

8 • I Want My Mommy 56

9 • The Chickens Draw First Blood 64

10 • My Singing Makes Things Worse, and Everyone Is Totally Shocked 73

11 • We Win Zero Prize Tickets 81

12 • Ganymede Gets Me a Refill 87

13 • We Look for Dead Stuff at the Farmers' Market 94

14 • Iris Gives Me a Stick 102

15 • Yonkers! 111

16 • Grover Busts Out the Snake Songs 119

17 • I Meet the Man Bun of Doom 128

18 • Annabeth Conquers All with Herbal Tea 136

19 • I Taste the Rainbow and It's Pretty Nasty 144

20 • Iris Takes Venmo 152

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21 • I Offer Relationship Advice. No, Seriously. Why Are You Laughing? 159

22 • I Get a Cupcake and a Surprise 167

23 • Ganymede Explodes All the Beverages 175

24 • I Brush My Teeth (in the Most Heroic Way Possible) 183

25 • I Meet the Goblet Ganker 189

26 • I Negotiate the Terms of My Disintegration 199

27 • My Dying Words Are Super Embarrassing 206

28 • It Starts Raining Toys 213

29 • I Teeter on the Precipice of Mount Brunch 220

30 • I Infiltrate the Lair of *Lightning God 3000* 228

31 • I Face a Dangerous Predator Who Is Possibly My Future Mother-in-Law 237

32 • Grover Eats My Leftovers 245

33 • One More Jolly Rancher for Old Times' Sake 254

34 • I Write the Worst Letter Ever, Delete, Delete 259

35 • Pretty Much the Best Good-Night Kiss Ever 265

Bonus Material 269

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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

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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

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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."

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"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.

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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

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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

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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

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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!*

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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

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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

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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. . . ."

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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.

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"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

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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

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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."

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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.

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THREE

WE COMPLAIN ABOUT QUESTS AND DECORATIVE GOURDS

"You 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."

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"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."

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"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

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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

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