The Quest for the Golden Fleas

CRISPIN BOYER
Illustrated by Andy Elkerton

UNDER THE Stars
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
For Ramah the Mighty
—C.B.
ARTEMIS AMBROSIA WAS BEING WATCHED.
She sensed it as she went about her evening routine closing up Mount Olympus Pet Center, topping off bowls of Mutt Nuggets, organizing a display of cat-scratching posts, testing the algae levels in the fish tanks to make sure the water was just right.

Artemis—or “Artie” for short—knew who was doing the watching. It wasn’t cat or dog or reptile or fish eyes she felt boring into the back of her head. “Okay, what is it, buddy?” she asked, spinning to face the golden hamster watching her from his cage high above the cash register.

“If I didn’t know any better,” Artie said, walking toward the hamster, “I’d suspect you’re waiting for me to leave so you can sneak out on another misadventure.” She reached up and stuck a finger through the bars to scratch at a patch of white fur on the hamster’s cheek. Then she tugged firmly on the cage door. “Not tonight, my little escape artist!” she said, satisfied that it was locked tight.

The hamster gave a little squeak, and Artie grinned. As much as she loved animals, she didn’t actually speak hamster. Or dog, or cat, or fish, or even insect for that matter. If she did, she would know a lot more took place in her pet center than she believed.

Artie took a final lap around the room. She checked to make sure the lid on the bug house was snug. She shook a few more flakes of fish food into the tanks. She stopped by the kennels along the big front picture window and reached down to scratch a gray and white tabby curled up in a cat bed. Finally, she zipped up her jacket and switched off the lights, plunging the room into the dim red glow of the large Mount Olympus Pet Center sign.

As she opened the front door, Artie glanced back at her favorite rescued rodent. “Nighty night, Zeus the Mighty.” She blew him a kiss. “I better not find you in a weird place in the morning.” She pulled the door shut—then immediately reopened it and pointed at her hamster. “I mean it, Zeus—stay put!”

Somewhere nearby, probably in the bug bin, a grasshopper chirped loudly. Artie closed the door and locked it.
Zeus the mighty was in a weird place. He was clinging to a long, skinny leg of his grasshopper friend Demeter, dangling from a narrow ridge above a raging whirlpool.

Zeus dipped his toe into the swirling waters. “Eeek!” he squeaked. “The water’s too wet! Lift me, Demeter! Get me out of here!”

“What’s the matter, Zeus?” Demeter hollered down. “You see the monster?”

“Just pull me up!” Zeus shouted. “Now!”

“Oh, okay, you got it!” Demeter yanked her leg upward so quickly that Zeus nearly lost his grip. But he managed to scramble up the whirlpool’s smooth white surface and onto the ridge beside Demeter. While Zeus caught his
breath, Demeter peeked at the whooshing waters below. “Sorry about that,” she said. “You know sea monsters make me jumpy ever since that whole Atlantis fiasco.”

“What do you have to be nervous about?” Zeus asked, still panting. “I’m the one doing all the heavy lifting here.”

Demeter looked confused and shook out a leg. “Mmm, I dunno. I wouldn’t exactly call you light.”

“I don’t mean, like, literally heavy lifting,” Zeus shot back. “What I’m saying is, being king of the gods isn’t easy. A lot of late nights. A lot of sleepless days.”

“Speaking of which,” Demeter looked around. “What time is it? I feel like Artie said goodnight ages ago.”

Zeus pressed on. “Planning all our adventures. Protecting the kingdom. Putting up with Poseidon’s lip. It’s exhausting!”

“Uh-huh, exhausting,” Demeter said absentmindedly. This wasn’t the first time she’d heard this speech. Or even the tenth. She nibbled from the strip of lettuce she wore across her shoulder, an ever present snack to satisfy her bottomless insect appetite.

“But, it’s a job I don’t take lightly. I mean … sometimes I think, why, why me?”

“I’m sure Poseidon would love to fill in for a bit if you wanted a vacation,” Demeter began.

“Do I look like I need a vacation?”

Zeus stood to his full six inches and puffed out his chest. The golden fur on his head stuck out in all directions above his laurel-wreath crown, and the patch of white hair on his cheek quivered. Demeter had once told him she thought the patch looked like a storm cloud when Zeus got riled up. She used it to forecast his mood, and right now his mood was not good. Demeter was eager to change the subject. “So is Charybdis really lurking down in that whirlpool?”

“Actually, Charybdis is the whirlpool.”

“Huh?” Demeter spit bits of lettuce. She stared into the watery cavern of the white porcelain basin with a small black hole at the center. She watched as water swirled around the edges. “You sure he’s down there?”

“He’s not a very sophisticated monster,” Zeus said. “He just kinda spends all day sucking in water to make whirlpools. Did I mention Charybdis is mostly mouth?”

“If you’re trying to make me less nervous, it’s not working.” Demeter swallowed loudly. “There’s no
chance it might be some other sea monster down there? Typhon maybe?"

“Typhon?” Zeus scoffed. “He’s not a sea monster. Anyway, he’s out of the picture. I sealed him away in that volcano, remember? It was kind of a big deal.”

“Now that you mention it, you may have told me that story once or twice,” Demeter said, then added quickly, “But you’re right, Zeus.”

“Of course I’m right! Whirlpools are Charybdis’s thing. All the signs are obvious. Like, literally.” Zeus jabbed his thumb over his shoulder at a white sign hanging high above them. It featured a crude image of two soapy hands clasped together under a running faucet, but to Zeus, it looked exactly like a sea monster with a wide-open mouth. Beneath it was a series of letters that might as well have been Greek.

Demeter squinted at the sign. “What’s it say?”

“Who cares? The picture’s what’s important: Giant mouth. Whirlpool. That’s Charybdis, all right. He’s down there!”

Demeter looked at the raging waters and shuddered. “That beast’s famous for more than whirlpools. I remember all the stories you told me, Zeus, about how Charybdis slurps down swimmers in one gulp.”

“That would ruin anyone’s day at the beach,” Zeus said. “Which is why we need to kick him out of Greece!”

“Shouldn’t we have maybe asked Poseidon along for this adventure?” Demeter said. “He is the lord of water.”

“I don’t need that snobby pufferfish’s permission! I rule all of Greece! That includes the sea!!”

“Right, right, of course.” Demeter held up her front legs. “I just thought if we’re really going to try to get rid of a gigantic whirlpool monster, it might be nice to have Poseidon around. You know, for backup.”

“You don’t need backup when you’re me,” Zeus said, pounding his chest. “And besides, can you imagine the look on Poseidon’s face when he hears we kicked this monster from his own backyard without his help?”
He won’t be so puffed up then!”

Demeter’s eyes narrowed. “I thought we were doing this to save Greece?”

Zeus ignored her. “The question is, how do we kick Charybdis out? I’d do it myself, but I’d get all pruny.” He held up his paws and wriggled his fingers.

“That sounds awful.”

“You don’t even know. I suppose I could whip up some lightning bolts and give Charybdis a real shock … but that seems kinda showy.”

“Showy is good.” Demeter nodded. “I like showy.”

“Nah, too cliché. Sealing up the volcano worked for Typhon,” Zeus said, reflecting on his long-ago triumph. “Maybe we can do the same trick with Charybdis here?”

Zeus rubbed his fuzzy chin and looked around the rim of the whirlpool. He spotted a shiny metal bar sticking out of the white cliff face above them. “Up there!” Zeus pointed. “Demeter, gimme a boost!”

Demeter hunched down to let Zeus use her like a step. “Oof. Ow. Pretty sure … this is heavy lifting … but whatever,” she muttered as the king of the gods clambered onto her back. His weight smooshed her flat, but she managed to give Zeus just enough of a boost to grip the metal bar. Its end dipped slightly.

“I thought so!” Zeus shouted as he pulled himself to a seated position, sitting on the bar like a bench. “This thing is stuck in the cliff here. If I yank it out, I bet I could bring the whole wall here down onto the whirlpool! That would trap Charybdis for good!”

Beneath Zeus, Demeter scrambled up and backed away. “Uh, great idea. I’ll just give you some room to do your thing.”

“I only have great ideas.” Zeus stood on the bar and jumped, making it jiggle. “See, buddy? This wall will come down in no time. Do I know how to seal away a monster or what?”

“Oh, yeah. This is becoming, like, your signature move, Zeus.”

“Well, let’s not get crazy. I have lots of other moves.” Zeus leapt again with more force. The metal bar jiggled more violently.

A sudden calm descended across the waters. Both Demeter and Zeus looked down to see that the whirlpool had stopped swirling.
“He’s still down there!”

The bar continued to dip beneath Zeus’s feet, threatening to spill him off. “Whoa!” He hugged the cool white surface of the cliff face to keep from slipping.

*Glub-glub-glub!* More bubbles broke the surface, accompanied by a rushing sound from deep below. Demeter craned her head over the edge.

“I’m … I’m slipping!” Zeus squeaked as he slid down and off the bar. He made a frantic grab for its tip and latched on with one paw, yanking the bar downward.

*FLOOSH!* The rushing grew into a roar beneath the water, which spun into a whirlpool more ferocious than before, circling toward the center of the dark pit.

“Whoa!” Demeter stared at the center of the whirlpool, unaware of Zeus hanging by one paw above her.

Zeus’s grip slipped. He tumbled, falling past Demeter. “Help!” he yelled.

Startled, Demeter reached out and grabbed Zeus as he plummeted past. “No! You’ll get all pruny!” she called. But Zeus’s momentum pulled Demeter off the slippery surface of the ridge, and together they fell into the whirlpool of the swimmer-swallowing monster.

“Oh no. Did you scare Charybdis away?” Demeter’s disappointment didn’t sound sincere.

“No, no, quite the opposite. He’s just trying to make us think that. He wants us to hop in the water so he can swallow us in one big gulp. That is *classic* Charybdis!”

“Hah! Not falling for it, monster!” Demeter taunted the whirlpool as Zeus began bouncing with gusto on the metal bar. Its tip dipped beneath his weight.

“Almost there!” Zeus said, panting. “It’s getting looser!”

*Blub-blub-blub!* Bubbles roiled the water’s surface.

“Oh, you were so right, Zeus!” Demeter shouted.