Pull the Strings

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Pull the Strings

by awayfromterra

Summary

“Where have you been?”
“I was—“
“Answer me!”
“I can’t!” I admitted. Sure, it was partially because he kept cutting me off, but equally because I didn’t know what he was talking about.
The stranger wiped his face, now holding anger along with despair.
“You’d better try! I—“ He heaved another breath before steadying his voice. “We held a goddamn memorial for you, Lester.”

Or, Apollo and Meg encounter a friend of Lester Papadopoulos. ~~Lester~~ Apollo does not handle it well.

Notes

This is set in The Dark Prophecy after they rescue the griffins and get Meg back, but before they rescue Georgina. So I guess I'm ignoring the Very Strict time limit they were on and making them try to get groceries.

Chapter 1

“Ask your arrow—”

“He *doesn’t* know, Meg, believe me.”

She responded by kicking a rock down the sidewalk. As much as I disdained her orders, I could understand her frustration. Josephine had sent us out to collect ingredients for a recipe. Why couldn’t the Waystation supply these ingredients, you may ask? My only guess is to see us suffer. It’s what Britomartus would want.

Our oh-so-helpful and wise Arrow of Dodona had specifically demanded we were to park 3 miles away from the supermarket. (That’s 4.82 kilometers, or about 3,474 ancient greek cubits, for my non-American friends.) On the one hand, we should have known better than to ask him for directions. On the other, we couldn’t use any form of GPS technology without the standard demigod consequences. Oh, to be degraded in such a way! I would have taken MapQuest over our options.

We’d parked Leo’s “acquired” (read: stolen) SUV at a near-empty strip mall and were now wading through the foot traffic of a busy Indianapolis plaza. A hum of voices and footsteps filled the air and we walked single file through the swarm.

I had begun to get used to the arms jostling into me when a hand broke through the current to grab my arm. I halted and Meg walked straight into my back before stopping, no doubt scowling at me.

“Lester?”

Cliché as it sounds, things become cliché for a reason- time really seemed to slow around me.

The accosting hand belonged to a tall boy around my age. My mortal age, that is. His head was shaven, and he wore worn looking khaki pants and a clean-pressed collared-shirt branded with the letters ‘NYMA.’

My mortal memory was far from reliable, but I was reasonably certain I had never seen this boy before. I stared dumbly at him as his fingers dug into my flesh.

“What-what the hell?” He questioned.

The boy gawked at me, then whipped his head around cartoonishly, as if looking for a hidden camera. It would have been comical if I didn’t feel such heavy dread pouring through me.

Meg took the liberty of interrupting our mutual appraisal. “Hey,” She poked me. “You know this guy?”

“Um,” I responded informatively.

“What- Is this some sort of sick joke?” The stranger asked harshly, but his face held no anger.

I glanced between him and my companion, but this matter appeared to be entirely up to me to resolve.

“Apologies,” I began. “I don’t—“

“Lester, what the fuck is going on? Am I—“ The boy paused. “Is this real? Have I lost it?”

At this, he stifled a sob, releasing his grip on me to cover his own mouth.

We were now standing in the middle of the sidewalk, being slightly shoved and scoffed at by each pedestrian.

A rare sight, Meg looked as uncomfortable as I felt.

I focused on the easier problem. “Perhaps we should sit down.”

The boy didn’t respond, but didn’t protest as I led him to the nearest bench.

I sat next to him, and Meg chose to stand to my right.

The boy ignored my young master entirely, staring at me distantly. It reminded me of the expression worn by Josephine and Hemithea when they spoke of Georgina. “I don’t understand. How are you here?”

“Well—“

“Where have you been?”

“I was—“

“Answer me!”

“I can’t!” I admitted. Sure, it was partially because he kept cutting me off, but equally because I didn’t know what he was talking about.

The stranger wiped his face, now holding anger along with despair.

“You’d better try! I—“ He heaved another breath before steadying his voice. “We held a goddamn memorial for you, Lester.”

If the world had slowed before, it broke now.

The word horrifying does not surmise in this situation. *Horrifying* was the sight of the Flavian Amphitheater, littered with corpses at Commodus’ command. Horrifying was my sister being left to hold the sky, saved not by Zeus, but by a group of mortals. *Horrifying* was apt prose to describe watching a discus veer unnaturally to fatally wound a man I loved.

Horrifying is being forced to recount these thoughts, this very moment of realization for the enjoyment of- who? The Olympian council, in partnership with Riordan himself, who would

profit only more by the increased suffering, sorry, *marketability* of his narrators?

Apologies, reader, although I know none of those particular narrations will make it past editing. Perhaps none of this entire interaction. Nevertheless, I'll continue.

"...What?" I stared at the boy. My mind was racing to decipher what he'd meant. I'd had a memorial? Er, Lester had, that is? Surely this was some misunderstanding. Perhaps he'd mistaken me for another flabby adolescent with the same name.

"*Lester."* Unlikely.

"Listen," I placated. "I don't really know how to explain this, but I'm not who you think I am."

"You'd better explain quickly."

I grimaced. It'd taken me a book and a half to explain thus far, and even now I didn't know exactly what had happened- I had my suspicions, though, and they were beyond emotion.

"I'm not… Or, I'm not exactly…" Gods above, what could I say? I *was* Lester Papadopoulos, for all intents and purposes. I couldn't exactly tell this stranger that I was an ancient deity bound to this form as punishment. Or rather, I *could* tell him that, but there was no chance he'd believe me. Luckily for me, Meg had grown tired of my stammering.

"Who are you?" She pushed her filthy glasses up on her nose.

The boy scoffed. "Ask your friend. Who-who are *you?"*

Meg turned back to me. "Who's this guy?

"I—" I sputtered, looking between them. "I don't *know*, Meg."

"You don't *know?"* The boy scowled.

"I don't. Honestly. I'm sorry, but as far as I can remember, I've never met you." I looked him in the eye and hoped my earnestness would convince him.

He seemed to look me over, then Meg, taking a shuddering breath. The silence was almost worse than the accusations; I really didn't want any time to consider the implications of the situation. "...You really don't remember anything?"

"I really, really don't."

He sighed again, running his hand over his shaven head. "Okay," He nodded. "Okay, we need to call your parents."

My now red blood ran cold. "My. Parents."

I felt Meg tense beside me as I did, pausing her usual ambient hyperactivity.

“Yeah. Obviously, Lester. They’re worried sick- they’re *mourning*, for god’s sake.” He reached into his khaki pocket and slipped out a cell phone. Meg took a step back, as if our mere proximity to the device would summon monsters to our location. In all honesty, that might be exactly how it works; I’m no Hephaestus.

“You don’t need to—” I started.

“Uh, yes, I do. What do you mean? I… Damnit, what am I doing? This is not a text. We need to let the school know, they’ll call them.”

He stood, putting the device away. I stood, backing a step away towards Meg. “Listen, uh…”

The boy’s face dropped further, if possible.. “Javon.”

I nodded. “Listen, Javon, my friend and I are a bit preoccupied at the moment.”

“We are?” Meg questioned, and I elbowed her.

“*Preoccupied?”* Javon repeated in disbelief.

“We don’t have time to go with you anywhere.”

“Lester, they need to know you’re alright.”

I breathed out a humorless laugh. “Very sorry, but again, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He frowned, stepping towards me and undoing my attempt at distance. “Then we need to get you some help. We can meet the faculty at the hospital.”

“No—” In taking another step back, I tripped on the side of the bench and stumbled ungracefully. “No, thank you. I’m fine. We’re fine.”

“You must’ve hit your head or, or *something*. You don’t just *forget*.”

I felt out of breath despite not having physically exerted myself. “Maybe you do! Or maybe you’ve simply mistaken me for someone else. I don’t know. What I do know is that we, my friend and I, need to be somewhere.”

I gestured behind us and realized my hands were shaking. I can’t describe exactly what caused the extreme aversion to going with this boy, but the more he spoke, the more my heart seemed to drum in my ears.

“Apollo?” I glanced to my right to see Meg frowning, a rare concern etched on her face.

She looked between us quickly, eyes settling back on me. It was disturbing to see her treat anything seriously. “Are you… okay?”

“He’s clearly *not* okay, he’s forgotten his entire life—” Javon reached out to grasp my arm, presumably to pull me towards the nearest hospital, or school, or whatever he’d been saying.

I wrenched my arm away. “*Don’t.*”

Javon flinched back as if burned. “Lester, *listen—*”

I couldn’t hear him over my own breathing, but every time I’d attempted to back away from him he’d closed the distance immediately. My eyes drifted to the ground in an attempt to forget he was there, or I was there, or that my father was capable of horrors worse than he’d inflicted on me—

“Hey. Shut up.” Meg snapped at the boy. She placed herself in between us, reaching out to touch my hand. I recoiled, stumbling back again. This time there was no attempt to come closer, Meg now blocking the boy. She raised her hands placatingly. “Okay. I won’t touch you.”

She hesitated, seeming unsure as to what *to* do. She looked me over like she was assessing a plant for signs of root rot. After a moment, she turned to Javon, stepping closer to him to speak too quietly for me to hear.

I took this moment to escape, turning to stumble my way into the crowd.

Chapter 2: Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> Apollo gracefully enjoys a cup of coffee and healthily processes the revelation that there may be more to his mortal form than he'd thought. Everything is fine.

I ended up sitting in a corner.

The fluorescent lights were so bright you could hear them. Indie pop blended with ice shaking blended with receipt paper printing as I bounced my leg to some fervent nonsense rhythm.

My stomach felt hollow. At some point, someone offered me a mug, shaking their head when I reached for it then setting it in front of me. My mortal mouth didn’t like coffee, but it was warm on my skin. I alternated sections of fingers to press against ceramic for as long as they could without burning.

A chunk of hair hung at just the right angle to curl into my eyeball. I shook my head once before giving up. It only poked slightly when I blinked.

What recipe had Josephine sent us out for? Given the evening sky, our friends at the Waystation had likely given up waiting and eaten another dinner entirely. The thought made me tear up slightly for some reason. It was probably from the hair.

A hand tapped a single finger on the table across from me. I looked up.

My eyes wouldn’t quite focus, but I could recognize the blurry stoplight in front of me anywhere. Meg sat first, then gracefully screeched the chair closer to the table in staccato beats. I must have made a face, because she mouthed something and stopped.

I looked back at my mug. My brain generously decided to start processing information from my eyes. My hands connected to my body in a way that didn’t quite visually compute, but the white ceramic object I was clutching shone with the reflection of the lights above. Said ceiling fixtures drew my gaze up and over to the counter, where a bespectacled teen looked away as soon as we made eye contact.

The windows from the side opposite us were now black, circling all but our table in a reflection of white and green. Finally, my eyes settled, and I realized Meg was watching me stare dumbly around the room. “You good?”

I nodded a few more times than necessary. “Mhm. Yes. Sorry.”

She stared. In few instances had I been privy to her undivided attention, and the sensation was always unnerving.

“Sorry for leaving you back there,” I continued. “That wasn’t… good.”

Meg scrunched her face. I assumed due to my less-than-poetic apology, but her eyes were on my untouched drink.

“Did you want some? I can get you one. I didn’t know you liked coffee– I haven’t drank from this one.”

She made no advance on the offer, face steeled in vague dissatisfaction. “Your hands are shaking.”

I blinked, then smiled. “Freezing in here. The coffee helps.” To demonstrate, I lifted the mug to take a drink, and immediately regretted it as hot liquid drenched my fingers.

I hissed, clumsily abandoning the mug. Meg helpfully pulled napkins one-by-one from the table’s dispenser, tossing them at me like a clown pulling out handkerchiefs. After the eighth or ninth, I waved her off with my right hand, tapping the other dry as it reddened.

We probably did look like a circus act to the other patrons, I thought. Meg paid no mind, leaning her face across the table to scrutinize my very minor burn. “Still shaking.”

“Well, *now* I am!”

She stuck her tongue out, then frowned. “You’re hurt.”

I breathed out a laugh, now gathering the excess napkins into a semblance of order. “I’m not.”

“Are too.”

“Meg, please.”

“Your hand’s burnt.”

“Well, it isn’t *my* hand, is it?”

The words came out before I could finish thinking them. Heat rushed to my face, circling my eyes in a tight strangle. Damned mortal blood! We gods never had to worry about being betrayed by our own capillaries. Aphrodite did have a brief stint with an ichor-yellow blush, but for obvious reasons it never caught on.

“Huh?” Meg squinted.

I swallowed. “I only mean…”

My brain buffered like a video with dodgy Wi-Fi as I realized I hadn’t really been *thinking* about anything for the past, well... however long it had been since I’d abandoned a child with

a stranger in Indianapolis. A stranger.

Pushing through the sudden dryness of my mouth, I vocalized my thought process. “I suppose that it’s not,” My eyes flicked up to gauge Meg’s briefly. *“My* skin.”

If her face moved somewhere behind her crooked glasses, I didn’t catch it.

“Therefore, it shouldn’t matter if I burn it. Now that I say it out loud, of course, I fear the opposite might be true. Perhaps I should be even more careful not to burn it. Or, damage it, that is. Because it isn’t mine.”

Meg wrinkled her nose. “That’s dumb.”

I laughed, loudly, the tension in my chest escaping my lungs. In my periphery, the barista’s head snapped toward the noise. I brought my unmarred hand up to wipe my eyes dry. “You have such a way with words.”

She did not thank me for the compliment. Instead, she slinked an arm over to pluck another napkin from its dispenser. “What do you want to do?”

“I doubt if Josephine or Hemithea will be too upset. Leo probably wanted dinner within five minutes of our departure. It was a losing battle.”

She shook her head. “Mm-mm, what do we do about the guy?”

I furrowed my brow. “I–I don’t know that there’s anything *to* do, at least for now. What did he say after I left?”

“You mean, on the walk here?”

“No, when—” My eyes widened. “Do you mean he’s outside?”

“Yep,” she popped the ‘p.’

“Meg!”

“What was I s’posed to do with him? He wouldn’t leave.”

I sighed, staring back into my now less-full mug. It occurred to me that from Meg, doing whatever she did to get the stranger to stay outside while she presumably figured she'd need to talk me off of a proverbial ledge was a fairly thoughtful gesture. I only hoped it hadn’t involved threats of violence or some sort of plant barricading the door.

“We can sneak out the back,” she offered.

I briefly considered the idea before deciding it would make me feel even worse. Steeling myself, I pushed the coffee away. “No, we should talk. I need to know the exact extent of my father’s derangement.”

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