

*Three young girls who thought they were—and want to be—just normal kids, find out that they are actually gods... and more powerful than even normal gods. And the guidance they get on what to do? Be patient, be careful, and then wing it.*

## **RELUCTANT GODS**

By John Cheeseman

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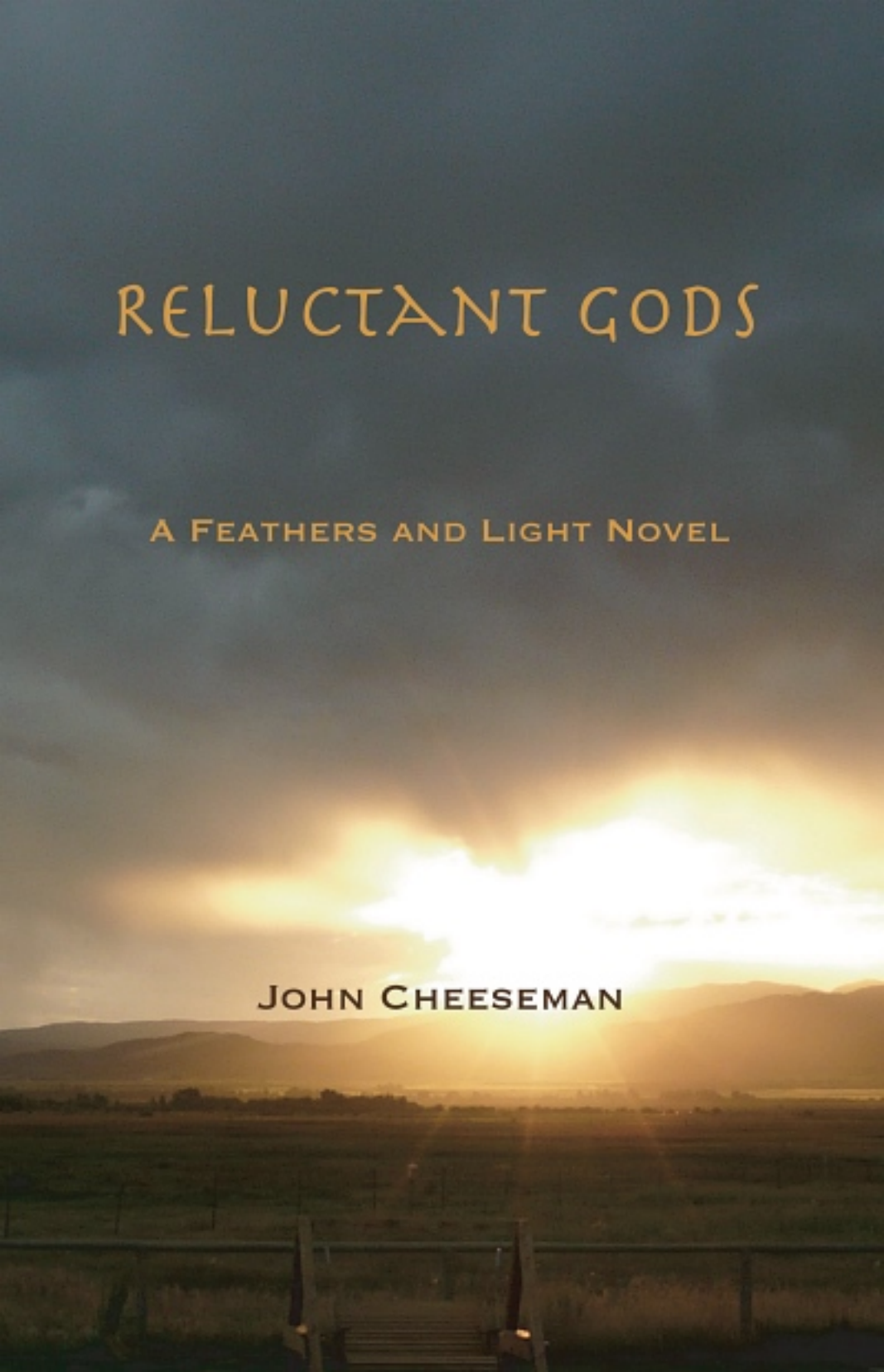
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# RELUCTANT GODS

A FEATHERS AND LIGHT NOVEL

JOHN CHEESEMAN



ALSO BY JOHN CHEESEMAN

*Feathers and Light*

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# PATIENCE & PROCESSING

## ONE

Last year, I “celebrated” turning nine—well, almost nine—by deciding to write a story about my life. I guess I thought I was different from other kids and that it might be an interesting thing to try because I’d never written a story before.

What I didn’t expect is how it would turn out. In fact, I think if any of my friends saw it, they’d think I was so weird that they wouldn’t be my friends any more. Or their parents might tell them to stop hanging out with me.

So, just to summarize the ending, I ended up on a mountain in the dark with a god who was trying to kill me. I either blew her to smithereens or blasted her off a cliff—I’m not sure which. After that I was in some kind of trance.

When I woke up, Sophia, a very wise and kind woman who was caring for me, dropped it on me that she and most everyone else in her neighborhood were gods, that my friend, Brigid, is a god, and that my mom and dad and sister are all demigods, or maybe gods. And worst of all, I’m some kind of *super*-demigod.

I know that all *sounds* exciting, but it has a lot of potential to mess up an otherwise pretty nice, normal life. I mean, what would *you* do if you found all that out? Do you know anyone who wouldn’t look at you like you were crazy? Wouldn’t you expect them to say “Yeah, right” and back away.

I guess I got out of it by telling grownups (the only ones who would ask, anyway) something weak like “I had a great summer,” or “I played a lot with my friends.” That was OK, but my sister, Harper, kept asking what happened next. How would I know? It—whatever “it” is—hasn’t happened yet.

The one thing I know *didn’t* happen was “she lived happily ever after.” But just how complicated my life would be, even at ten, wasn’t something I could foresee either.

So many things happened over the summer that now I need to write them down. My mom and dad—well, everyone I can *really* talk to, like the Narrator, and Sophia—says this will help me “process” it. Whatever that means, I’m going to do this and see where it leads.

So—yeah—the last thing I wrote about was coming home on the last day of school at the end of fourth grade. I’m sure none of the kids could look at me and think anything was different, but my teacher, Audrey, knew differently. She’d been on the mountain, had helped rescue me and had hung around for my recovery, or at least most of it. And I was still really shaken.

At home, Dad had made a light, summery lunch and chocolate malts in celebration of the beginning of summer. Mom was home, too. She said that she just couldn’t concentrate at work and had taken the rest of the day off. Harper came home to drop off her stuff but had already left to hang out with her friends.

Dad had cleaned up the picnic table so we ate outside. Malik hung close like he always does when there’s food involved. Malik’s our dog and his name means loyal follower and companion and he’s the BEST!

No one had anything else planned and the weather was just about ideal, so sitting in the sun was a perfect option. And we did.

I thought I might doze off, but couldn’t. I lay on my back looking up at the leaves. There was probably a bird singing, because it was spring, but I was too deep in my thoughts to really notice. I could sort of sense that Mom and Dad were looking at me, though.

Mom. “Anything you want to talk about?”

Me. “No, not really,” which, of course, wasn’t actually true. So after a few seconds, “Do you believe that stuff Sophia said about them being gods?”

“Well, I’d have to say I was awfully skeptical at first, but now... well, I really don’t know. What d’you think?”

I had a hard time figuring out what to say, so it took a while for me to speak again.

“I think I’d like to say no, because... well... well, I read all that mythology stuff at the library and in our classroom, and it all sounded like just fairy tales. But then there was Freya’s cape, and Morgan’s crows. And Sophia *did* give me that Light thing and I really *do* think I can see people’s souls and spirits, if that’s what they are. And I’m about as sure as I can be that the stuff with Ms. Proud really happened, especially since you and Dad seem pretty sure, too.”

OK—Ms. Proud was the other fourth grade teacher besides Audrey. Really, she was the god, Hybris, in disguise. She’s the one who tried to kill me.

“And I *know* that my feather healed the burns on Harper’s arm, and I’m pretty sure about the time with Dirk and his ankle, and Maddisen and her ski accident.”

Another pause.

“What about being demigods?” asked Dad.

“I’d never heard much about those before and Mom seemed really skeptical. And even if I feel different from other kids, that’s still seems really weird.”

“For sure,” Dad said. “Like I don’t think you’d say someone’s a demigod just because they’re ‘different’. I mean, Mom’s a biologist, and that’s different.”

“And you’re an artist,” Mom said, “and no one would ever say artists are normal.”

That’s for sure.

“But surely not all artists or biologists can be demigods,” she continued, “although, I don’t know. Maybe they are.”

“Could we all just agree that none of that happened?” I asked.

“We could,” Dad said, “but I doubt that’ll make it go away. All of us, especially you, need to bring this to some resolution, and it may take a while. And—well—I’m pretty sure it happened.”

“For now, though,” said Mom, “how about we take it easy this afternoon. Anyone up for a trail ride?”

“Yes!” I said with real enthusiasm. “I am!”

“Can I go, too?” asked Dad. Permission granted, he added, “Then let’s go.”

I left a note for Harper while Mom and Dad started getting the horses over to the fence and the tack out. I helped saddle my horse, Goldy, but I still can’t really do it solo. Even Maddisen can’t saddle her own horse, and she’s big for our age, and strong.

And I got my backpack, like always.

“Let’s hope you don’t need that today,” Mom said, “well... except for your water bottle and snacks.”

I think it’s cool that we can saddle up and take off right from our house. And for today, we chose a trail that we could get to without having to ride very far on roads.

I love early spring rides, and mid-June is pretty much early spring where we live. Mud season is pretty much over and the trails are pretty much dry. Note all the “pretty muches” because that’s pretty much all we can hope for.

As I said, it was a perfect day. Even the horses seemed to think so. The hillsides were covered with flowers, Mom pointed out some mule deer and one moose, and the pine squirrels screamed so much there was no missing them. They’re so funny. Dad talked about colors and forms and shapes. I just swayed back and forth with Goldy’s movements, and did a lot of humming.

And nothing weird or exciting happened.

Perfect.

I guess we were gone three or four hours. When we got home, we unsaddled, gave the horses some grain and cleaned up a bit in the mud-room before going into the kitchen.

There, we were greeted with a heavenly smell. Harper was home well before us and baking. Cookies. Chocolate chip. She hasn’t done that in a really long time. She cools them on wax paper so that they stay chewy. They’re great.

I reached for one and she pushed me away. What the...?

“They’re not for you,” she said. “They’re for my friends. We’re going out again tomorrow.”



I don't know what's going on, but something's different. She never bakes cookies for her girl friends, even for parties or sleepovers. But she said she was baking these because they're so easy and she wasn't sure everyone in her group would appreciate *real* baking. I guess there are more kids this year than last. So it's cookies. For now.



### THREE

Just another week and it was the beginning of July. Amazing as it seemed to me, the weather held the whole time. Where we live, people consider this to be when summer officially starts, probably because it *almost* never snows after that.

The day starts with a five or ten K fun run, and my friends and I show up for that. Harper and her friends, too. I like to take Malik, partly because there are other dogs and he likes that, and partly because I don't actually like to race. This year, to my amazement, Maddisen decided to run with us. She used to run alone and fast, but she said that she no longer cares about road racing any more than she does about ski racing. She likes having friends more.

In the afternoon, there's a parade with lots of noise, and then fireworks in the evening. That sounds like fun, but I actually hate it... Malik is petrified by the noise, so I always just stay home, wrap him up in blankets and snuggle him all evening. In case you wonder, feather powers are not much help in calming dogs.

For these couple of weeks, I mostly stayed on our side of the portals although I did go through with Harper a couple times. But when we get home, she rushes off immediately.

When we *do* go through, while Harper is baking, Brighid and I usually sit outside her hut or in the bakery garden and talk. I'd say Brighid's probably having what grownups call an identity crisis. She seems, at least, to be talking with her mom some. That has to be good. Maybe learning some about what it means to be "Brighid".

When all the beginning-of-July hoopla calmed down—and I guess it was really only a few days—Brighid and I went to see Sophia again. We met under the hazel tree and pulled weeds. And we talked. Especially Sophia and Brighid, but I really felt like a lot of it had to do with me, too.

Once, after we'd been there a while, Sophia brought us back to our first visit. "Got any more thoughts about fear and anxiety?" she asked.

This was something Brighid had clearly been thinking about and she answered quickly. "Yes, and Hope."

"Hope?"

"Hope. I realized that when I spent all that time after the battle going from place to place—mostly disaster to disaster—fear and anxiety were everywhere. And what I offered, or the cape did, was Hope.

"And, by the way, no one said anything about that as one of my powers or whatever."

"I guess you're right," said Sophia, staring at a weed she'd just pulled. "I guess I thought of it as part of healing. So sure, they're related but different."

"I bet," I said, jumping in while there was a pause, "that Hope also has something to do with those sacred springs and wells and things."

"Yeah, right. I still think those are just something someone made up," said Brighid.

"I'm sure they are," said Sophia, smiling. "But if you want to look at it that way, so are you."

Brighid turned a little red, and not from anger.

Weeding is such a good group activity. You can pull and dig when you don't want to talk, or stop and think, or stop and talk, or even talk and pull weeds at the same time. We did all of those for a while.

Finally, Brighid said, "So maybe I should give those a chance, too?"

"Could be," said Sophia. "You could give 'em a look. And you wouldn't have to stay away. You could come home whenever you wanted and go out again if you wanted. No battles. No duties but those you set for yourself."

I thought I could see what was coming, and I began to get antsy. Hopeful. Then I couldn't stand it any longer.

"I could come with you," I said trying not to sound too eager.

"No," said Brighid, "I have to do this alone."

OK, I have to interrupt the story at this point. Remember, I'm nine. Well, almost ten, but still nine. Nine year olds are good at logic and extremely persistent. When it comes down to things like going out to explore for sacred springs, "no" is not one of the acceptable answers.

"If I went with you, you wouldn't have to be lonely."

"No."

"I've read a whole lot about mythology but I also know what's really real. I could help with that."

"No." But a little less emphatic, less convincing.

"And I've got feather and Light powers, so I could help if people needed Hope."

Rather than another "no," just a very long sigh. I could tell Sophia was trying not to look or grin. I think she could see I'd already won.

"Well, OK. Maybe. But just once. And just to the first place."

Ha! I knew it.

"But Sophia has to say it's OK. And we have to talk to your parents first."

"I think it could actually work," said Sophia. "You could help each other to be patient and caring. And to not jump to conclusions. And, when you *do* talk to Coll and Danu, if you want me to be there, I can be."

At that point, Brigid just put her hands over her eyes and shook her head slowly, her lips sort of pursed to one side.

We were all pretty quiet after that, but I was really smiling. It was Brigid, this time, who went into the house to make tea. I helped by carrying the tray of goodies out to the garden table.

As we ate, I was the one humming this time. Brigid just shook her head, and Sophia just looked amused at both of us.

On our way back to the bakery path, Brigid said I should tell Mom and Dad and she would go home and let her folks know that she was going out again, and probably taking me with her. We would talk later in the week about some kind of meeting with my family.

It had been another busy day at the bakery but Harper and Gretl both looked happy. While Harper helped clean up the kitchen, and cleaned herself up, I went out front and found Hugo digging for grubs and roots. And there were some berries getting ripe so she was happily busy.

I asked how she was feeling.

“Great,” she said, but figuring out what I might *really* be asking, added, “but the cub, or cubs, aren’t actually growing yet.”

When Harper came out, I saw the same fancy woman I’d asked her about before. Harper wasn’t as irritable this time, but still didn’t know who she was.

I waved good-bye to Hugo and we hit the road. Harper wasn’t in as much of a hurry to get home this time, but said that she and her friends were getting together in the afternoon. She was taking some leftover goodies from the bakery, she said. But no cookies.

I told her about our “meeting” and that I might be able to go on a trip with Brigid. She was happy for me, but then got quiet.

“How will I get to the bakery while you’re gone?” she asked.

I hadn’t thought of that, but said, “I’m only going to be gone a couple days, and I’m sure we’ll find a way.”

“And then,” I said, perking up, “you won’t ever have to depend on me again!”

I thought she’d like that. I don’t think she likes needing her little sister’s help for anything.

In the evening, I told Mom and Dad the whole story. I’d say they were “cautiously supportive”.

The next time we went to the bakery, I left Harper to do her thing and went to find Brigid. That was easy. She was by her hut. The first place I looked.

I told her that my parents seemed OK with my going, but that they might still have some questions. Since this will be my first trip out of our town by myself—well, not counting my adventures with portals and the fact that I wouldn’t be alone—they thought that talking to Sophia and to Brigid’s parents would be a really good idea.

Then I asked Brigid how her parents had reacted.

“So,” she said, sighing, “here’s what happened. Like before, I got home and went to my hut to think. When I came out, we decided to go down to the bakery for dinner. We weren’t alone, but that was OK. I didn’t want to have to go through all this a bunch of times anyhow.

“Yeah—so we were just sitting around after dinner and I told everyone pretty much what you told your family. Dad seemed cool with it. I guess because I lived through that last thing.

“But Mom suddenly got really quiet and sort of teary.

“Finally, she said she wanted to come, too.

“Well, I just closed my eyes and shook my head in disbelief. When I could finally talk again, well, you might say I wasn’t the most ‘supportive.’

“‘What?’ I said. ‘I’m going on a quest for Hope and to learn who I’m supposed to be. I’m trying to figure out which of my supposed duties are real and which are just ridiculous add-ons. You’re the god of war and battles. How does that fit in? How could you even come up with that idea?’

“‘And,’ I added, even more, shall we say, ‘agitated’, ‘you’re my *mother!* Whoever heard of going on a trip of self-discovery and taking your mother?’

“Of course, now Mom was almost crying. Dad seemed as confused as I was.

“Then she said it was because she was scared! *The* god of war and battle? *The* Morrigan! Scared? Of what?

“Well, now Mom really *was* crying, and it took a long time for her to calm down enough to talk. Then she took a deep breath.

“She said war and battles had changed in the last—what—thousand years, and there’s no place for her. And, except for that one backpacking trip when she and Dad met your parents, she says she hasn’t been around humans for a really, really long time. Because she doesn’t understand them and she’s scared out there.

“And she said it’s worse being stuck there when I go out the gate and up that hill.

“I couldn’t believe it! Then she said maybe she could get a feather and help if there were lots of people needing Hope.”

When Brigid told me all this, she said she was even beginning to think that if she were going to offer scared people Hope, well, maybe starting with her own mom wasn’t *really* a bad idea. But then she just kept coming back to the fact that this *was* really a bad idea. Maybe even taking *me* was a bad idea.

Then she continued her story.

“For better or for worse, like I said, all this took place in the garden at the bakery with Freya and Sophia listening. Now, Freya came over to where we were sitting and said, quietly, ‘Me, too.’

“I thought I would explode. I almost screamed that I wasn’t taking either of them! Then, of course, Freya told me to calm down. Sure thing! This was ridiculous and *I* didn’t start it!

“Well, after a few deep breaths, Freya said she meant she was scared, too. Like, she wanted to see her brother again. And I guess he’s taking care some cats or something, and she’s too petrified to go. And *she’s* got a magic cape to take care of her.

“Anyhow, now I’ve got *two* war gods in tears. I looked at Dad and he looked completely baffled. Same for Hansel and Gretl.

“So why, after all these eons, were they just thinking of this? Well, now Sophia came over. I was really hoping that she wasn’t going to say that *she* was scared, too. That would have made me run off screaming. I’m *so* sure.

“But rather than shaking her head in disbelief, she was slowly nodding. Like maybe she understood.

“Finally, she said—well, first—that we live in an almost perfect place. We live in Light.

“But—of course there’s always a ‘but’—maybe it’s become a prison. Maybe it only *seems* perfect. Maybe it’s also Dark.

“She wondered if the reason they sent *me* to fight Dark was that they were all too afraid to go themselves, not because they had any particularly special faith in me.

“And then she said why she thought they were just thinking of this now, and believe it or not, she blamed it on me and you and the other kids!”

“What!?” I exclaimed, “What did I do?”

“Well, I don’t think ‘blamed’ is actually the right word. Anyhow, she said we’d all brought so much joy and excitement into their lives and they wanted more of it.

“Then she said ‘I think someone’s wondering if it’s really true that you can’t teach old gods new tricks.’

“After that, no one said anything for a while, then Freya came up with a really bizarre idea. She suggested that she and Mom go on their *own* trip. Just the two of them. Just two petrified gods.

“Freya’s brother’s in Minnesota—and she doesn’t even know what that is—but they could go see him. Poor him if they do. But it really might happen.”



The next thing, though, was to *really* convince Mom and Dad that this was an OK thing for *me* to do. Mom said she finally had a day off coming up and we could all have dinner at our house then. Including Morgan and Freya and Feron and Sophia. And what the heck, Gretl and Hansel. Harper and I issued the invitation.

I did *not* expect the reaction. Morgan immediately got so tense you could feel it half way across the Vale. It took all of our combined feather powers for Brighid and me to calm her down.

“Mom,” said Brighid exasperated, “how can you expect to go on your trip if you can’t even go to dinner with a few people that you *know*?”

It took a lot of effort, but when the time came, Brighid took one hand and I took her other one. And with her free hand, Brighid held Freya’s. We made it through a portal and into our back yard. Mom and Dad were ready with a pot of coffee and some appetizers and everyone helped the two war gods make it through the evening.

I tried to convince myself that it helped, that it gave them at least a little bit of confidence. I’m also pretty sure it did just the opposite for Mom and Dad. Maybe they were so happy that those two weren’t coming with us that they said OK to me going.

When we come back, Brighid’ll take off again, solo.



## FIVE

Just like in the summer, all through the first weeks of school, the weather continued fine. But then, I began to hear more and more grownups talking about how dry it was, and that we really needed rain.

When I thought about it, I couldn't actually remember any *real* rain since before the end of fourth grade.

Then kids started talking about the same thing, because, of course, our parents were. When we did our ecology projects outside, Audrey almost always said something about needing some rain.

Although we certainly talked about the drought at our house, it was Tomás and Rosa who were really tuned in. Their dad was already talking about *actual* fires near where they used to live. And about the smoke that was making it hard to see our mountains and was even getting to the east coast! Again. Like last year.

Rosa said that if *our* area weren't so dry, he'd probably be going back to the fire lines or to the shelters. Like last year.

So our town might have big problems, too. The sign on the way into town said the fire danger was "extreme". Brendan and Mom and others who really know about fires were worried about what they called "dry lightning". That's a kind that happens in storms when the rain doesn't actually fall all the way to the ground. That would be really bad. Lightning would start a fire and rain *wouldn't* put it out.

Then one night, I heard Mom and Dad talking about putting together an evacuation plan and "go packs" so we could get out in a hurry if we

needed to. It's hard to get *to* our town. Not being able to get *away* was a scary thought for Mom and Dad, and a whole lot scarier for Harper and me when we heard them talking about it.

We weren't the only ones. At school, other kids were talking about the same thing. We asked Audrey what she thought. After all, she *is* a teacher and knows about things. For a long time she didn't say anything, but finally, she said she wasn't sure *what* to say, so she'd talk to Tomás and Rosa's dad and see if he could help.

I guess we were lucky because despite all that was going on, Brendan came in a couple days later and did a whole school assembly. They invited parents to come, too, so they could help us kids if we got upset. Which would be for sure.

He did a whole presentation about fire and ecology. Then he talked about the danger to Brookside. But mostly, he let people ask questions about fire safety and how to know when to evacuate, like before someone came around and told you to get out NOW!

Then a few days after that, something else happened that I guess turned out OK, maybe even really good, but it's still weird.

Before school, Harper and I went through to the bakery and took a bit longer route than the ones we usually use. When we left home, the sky looked pretty bad, like maybe thunderstorms were coming. But through the portal, it looked pretty good. Some puffy clouds. The hillsides were still green, rather than brown like at home. We saw a few animals and a bunch of birds. So we were more relaxed as we walked down the trail.

Then, as we looked ahead, we saw someone coming the other way. That surprised me because I've never seen *anyone* else on *any* of the trails here. Or on the road. Well, that is, except for that one time that a portal got stuck open after the earthquake. And the time Dirk followed me. But otherwise, no one.

When we were close enough for a good look, I told Harper, "She looks a lot like Mom."

"Don't be silly," she answered, "she looks just like you."

We could see that she was also being watched by Hugo and at least one other bear, but they didn't look alarmed.

Finally, we were close enough to speak.

"Good morning," Harper and I said at the same time.

“And the same to you. I hope you are both well. And your families,” she answered with an absolutely beautiful accent. But she looked a bit confused.

Then, “Umm, please pardon me, but I seem to have gotten lost. Could you please tell me where I am?”

At that point, I realized that if this place has a name, I have no idea what it is. I’m sure the Vale is the part on the *other* side of the bakery.

“Well, the best I can say is that you’re on the road to the bakery, but if that’s where you’re going, you’re headed the wrong way.”

“The bakery? Would that be Freya’s bakery?”

“Yes,” I said, a bit puzzled that she might know that. “And we’re going there, if you’d like to walk with us.”

“Umm, actually, I’m not sure where to go, but I’m trying to find a couple of girls I’ve heard about. Their names are Sorche and Harper.”

Now because I’m still pretty cautious after the thing on the Plane of the Gods, I summoned the Light and looked at her spirit and soul. The spirit was pretty calm and interesting, but the soul was hard to see, like Sophia’s. She must be a god of some sort, I guessed. But not like Hybris. She looked OK, not like someone to worry about. And like I said, she looked so much like Mom that I decided to go with that.

“Really? That’s so strange. Cuz I’m Sorche and this is Harper.”

“Oh, perfect. How lucky for me. Well, I’ve been doing a bit of traveling, you see, and my companions basically talked about you all the time. So now then, my name’s Danu. I’m from Ireland as you can maybe tell.”

“That’s our mom’s name, too,” I said, “and you actually look a lot like her.”

“I still think she looks just like you,” Harper said.

“So—yeah—would you like to come to the bakery with us, then, and meet the others?”

“Umm. I think not right now, actually. What I really need to do is talk to you and to your parents. You see, it’s rather urgent, what with the storms and all.”

Harper and I looked at each other, trying to decide what to do.

Then Harper said, “I guess we could turn around. Is it urgent enough that we should just take the shortest way? Sorch’, could you get us right home?”

“That would be best, I think,” said this Danu, “if you don’t mind.”

“OK,” I said, and opened a portal into our back yard.

“Grand,” Danu said, smiling and looking around as we stepped through.

Mom and Dad had clearly decided it was time for us to leave. They already had Malik in the back seat of Mom’s truck. They didn’t look especially thrilled that we showed up with a stranger, but they stopped as we came through and were nice anyhow. I think they both recognized the “family resemblance”, as it were. Mom looked at me like it was a question.

“Mom, this is Danu.” Then I added in a whisper, “I think she might be the real one.”

“Pleased to meet you. And I’m also Danu,” Mom said.

“Ah Granddaughter. How I’d love to just chat with you, but I can see you are in the middle of an evacuation. But, umm, I came urgently. And if I might ask you, could you please wait for that?”

I’m sure that in any normal circumstance, Mom would have said, “sorry, we can’t.” But maybe because of all the dealings and experiences we’d had by now with gods and fairies, she didn’t. She stopped. She did look a bit anxious and, like, put out, but she stopped.

“What d’you need?”

“I would like Sorche to help me calm the weather and put an end to this fire threat.”

Mom let out a deep sigh and looked at Dad. I looked at Harper, and we both looked at Mom. “What do you need her to do?”

“Is there a high spot with a clear view anywhere near here? Somewhere easy to get to?”

“Well, there’s Gnarly Bald.”

At that, my skin crawled. I just *don’t* like to think about that place!

“And you can see all around from there?”

Mom shrugged in that way you do when you aren’t emphatically saying “yes” so much as simply saying “pretty much.”

“Good. And might you be willing to drive us there?” Danu said and headed for Mom’s truck.

“Mom,” I asked, “can we leave Malik? If it’s noisy up there, he’s going to hate it even more than staying here.”

“OK, but hurry.”

I took Malik back inside then jumped in the back seat. While I was gone, Mom got three pairs of really serious ear protectors.

Mom started the truck and we pulled out of the driveway. Rather faster than she usually drives. She picked up her radio mike, thought a second, then put it down. I thought, “who can she tell, and what would she say?”

It took about fifteen minutes to get to the mountain, and during that time, no one said a thing. Mom parked at the pull-off.

“Right, then,” said Danu after Mom turned off the engine, “here’s the plan. Danu, you should stay in the truck. Windows up, of course, and don’t touch the doors or roof. Normal lightning safety stuff.”

I hope this isn’t getting too confusing with two Danus. Sorry.

“Sorche and I are going to the top of the hill.”

I could see Mom beginning to react—*very* negatively. But Danu—the first stopped her before she got started.

“It will be fine,” she said. “Just before we get there, I’ll ask Sorche to throw her Light as high as she can. It doesn’t weigh anything, of course, so it won’t fall back. But it *will* attract all the lightning to itself. It will be very bright and very noisy, but she’ll be safe.

“Once that’s taken care of, we’ll calm the storm and get a good, gentle rain started.”

Mom said something about us getting soaked and me freezing to death. That wasn’t very reassuring, but Danu just said it wouldn’t happen.

So with just that, I guess, we got out. The wind was really howling—strong enough that I could barely stand up. Danu wasn’t doing much better even if she *is* bigger. And it was positively bucketing rain. And... we weren’t getting wet! Maybe Danu really *did* have a plan.

We started up the path, stumbling as we went. I’ll say it again... it’s a good thing I was preoccupied with the current big problem or I would have started remembering all the stuff that happened here last June.

It was pretty dark but with all the lightning, we could still see where we were going. Finally, we were at the last turn before the top, up at the very last twisted, gnarly trees. Onto the bald itself.

Danu stopped.

Despite the noise of the wind and the thunder, I could actually hear her in my mind.

“Right then,” she said. “First, if you need to talk to me, I’ll be able to hear, just as you can hear me. OK?”

“OK,” I said, and she nodded, so I knew she heard me.

“Right, then. Now, please take your Light and throw it as high as you can. It’s no worry if you can’t throw it very high. It will go higher.”

“Can you do it?” I asked, very uncertain that I could pull this off.

“No, you can. Don’t worry. Remember, it is the Light and it will take care of itself. And us.”

So I cupped my hands and opened them. I’d have to say that it seemed to be pulsing in anticipation. I guess I’d also have to say, that might just have been my wishful thinking.

Anyhow, I said “here goes,” and tossed it as high as I could. Which wasn’t very.

Then it just took off like a rocket. Really high. And lightning just started zapping it. Constantly. It absorbed every bolt, it seemed, although they came too fast to be really sure, and it kept it up for a *very* long time.

Then, “Right, then” she said. “Now for the next task. Up to the very top we go.”

Have I mentioned that it was incredibly windy? Well, it still was. And it was very slippery on the bare rocks. But finally we made it.

“Right, then,” Danu said again. “Now to squish those thunderheads and calm the wind. Pull out some more of your Light, please.”

Wait, what? I thought I’d used all my Light already. But I cupped my hands together. It *seemed* to be still there. I opened them, and sure enough, there it was.

“Right, then,” she said. “Let’s practice first. What you’ll do is spin around and let go of a little Light constantly as you spin. First let me get down so you don’t spray *me*.”

She hunkered down as far as she could, then scooched a little down hill so I wouldn’t hit her.

“Right, then. Try a practice spin.”

I did. Like just on one foot like I was some kind of dancer.

“Perfect,” she said. “Now for real. And, while you spin, tell the storm to calm and the clouds to squish down. Get rid of the cumulonimbus and make them stratonimbus. And make them go lower so the rain hits the ground.”



She looked at me as I stood there totally perplexed.

“Don’t worry. They’ll understand,” she added.

So what the heck. “Ready! Steady! SPIN!”

The Light spun out like a powder spray. Nice and evenly spread out. I was going to say it shot out like lightning, but somehow that seems like the wrong comparison right now.

Anyhow... “And again!”

Well, now I have to say this was getting to be fun.

“And again?” I asked.

“Why not? Go!”

The wind was really dropping and the rain slowed to the kind that I liked to run in when I was little. Well, and still do. Danu got up. We both smiled and looked around at a sea of beautiful grey clouds.

“Right, then,” she said, “one more thing. I’ll grab the jet stream and pull it this way to cool things off and keep the rain coming.”

Maybe I’ll learn what that means sometime. Maybe I’ll ask Audrey when we have science next time.

“And now, time to call the lightning in before we go home.”

I looked at her like she was nuts. She wanted me to hold that thing that had just taken all those lightning strikes? I guess she sensed what I was thinking. Or maybe I actually said it.

“It’s fine. Have I ever lied to you before?” she said, smiling.

I guessed she was joking because, of course, I’d only just met her. In any case, I held out my hands and what now seemed like an immense ball of Light dropped into them. I could hardly hold it, but then I folded it, like Harper does when she kneads bread, and it got smaller and smaller.

“Grand! And all of the energy is now yours. Sophia will be quite impressed, I’m sure.”

Then I heard her say, “Hey, Danu. It’s all over. Come on up and see what your daughter did.”

The truck door slammed and a minute later, Mom came around that last bend, smiling.

Then, we all just held hands and kept turning every which way and smiling. Whatever happened, I’d done it! Well, I guess I helped anyhow.

“Just before you called me,” said Mom, “Brendan was on the radio and said that something very weird had happened and it looked like evacuation plans could be put on hold for right now. But he’d be keeping a close eye on things and would warn everyone if they went downhill again.”

“Right,” said Danu-the-first, “Good plan. But it won’t be needed. Time to go home.”

When we got home, I rescued Malik from under the bed and then we all collapsed in the living room. Harper and Dad unloaded our go-packs from the truck and then joined us.

Dad finally broke the silence. “Any chance you’ll explain what just happened?”

“O aye. I’ll be doing that, but first, could I possibly have a glass of water? Unless perhaps you have some whisky?”

“Let’s all start with water, at least,” Dad answered, and Harper and I headed to the kitchen. Of course, we got the water, but then went back and started putting together some food, too. I was famished and since we had a guest, it was a good time for Harper to “show off” her skills, even if it *was* with leftovers.

Before long, what with the smells and all, everyone moved to the kitchen. We ate, quietly at first. But then, we sort of all began to talk at once.

Finally, we calmed down and looked at Danu who was just finishing her sandwich.

“Umm, that was grand. Now, the whisky, please. Then I’ll explain.”

Mom got out three glasses and a bottle labeled “Irish Whisky”, which seemed appropriate, I guess.

Danu raised her glass and said what sounded like *slawn-ja*. Somehow, Mom and Dad seemed to understand and said the same thing. So Harper and I took our water glasses and said it, too. What the heck. Why not?

“Right, then. Well, here’s the story,” Danu started. “You probably know that a month or so ago, the Ladies’ Touring Society landed on my doorstep. And then they got stuck there when the wren in Freya’s cape mated up and his lady friend laid a few eggs.

“I was pretty down at the time, but we started out around the country rather than sit at Tara and mope for a month. At first, it was pretty awful. I didn’t feel like doing much, but I listened as your friends went on and on about the Vale and about *your* family.

“And of course, they told the story of Sorche’s battle with Hybris, and the feather thing and all that. And that Sophia and Enya were trying to figure out who Sorche and Harper really are.

“Hmm. But after a while, all their blather actually started to make me feel better. Maybe it was Nanna’s doing. She is, after all, the god of joy. Who knows?

“Anyhow, we went to the most rugged area I could think of and hiked a lot. Wilderness does good things for a body, even a god. I even began to feel happy!

“And when the month was up, we went back to Tara, they collected their things and Milo, and said they were going off to look for Minnesota again. They asked if I wanted to come, but I was suddenly not feeling like going anywhere. So they took off on that road. The Merc, they called it.

“Of course, about five minutes later, I changed my mind and went after them. But I guess the way the road works, you can’t really do that. And once you’re on it, you can’t just turn around and go home.

“So I just walked on to wherever the road thought I needed to go. I saw many things I hadn’t thought on in—well—probably centuries. That included the fires to the west of you. Then, the road just ended. It dropped me in that valley where the children found me.

“By then, I knew three things. I knew that there was something very special about Harper and Sorche. Well, and about their parents as well. I knew that your village was likely in danger from wild fires. And I knew, or at least I considered, that even though I haven’t liked messing with the way the world works since I started it—well—maybe this was a special circumstance.

“Well, four things. I knew that Sorche had that Light from Sophia and that it would do the trick against the storm. I suppose I might’ve done it all by myself, but I’m tired and it seemed like a good time to start developing Sorche’s powers. So that’s what we did.”

So—yeah—Danu stayed with us for the night although she did say she never liked gods coming to Tara and expecting a free bed. But Mom and

Dad insisted. I'm glad. We just had a couch in the living room but she said that was "Grand". I offered her my room but she said she'd be just fine. Well, I tried.

I was hoping maybe she'd stay a few days, but she said she wanted to get home before too long, or wherever the Merc took her. She said she'd like to talk to Sophia and meet everyone else in the Vale, but just not this trip. She didn't feel up to it just now. But she *did* ask for our address so she could write to them. That was at least something.

In the morning, I said I'd take her through, and of course, Harper wanted to come, too. We took a scenic way so that Danu could see some of *our* wilderness and meet Hugo and so on. It was a really fun walk. When we got to the place where we'd found her, Danu took us to where the Merc dropped her.

As she was getting ready to go, Harper mumbled something like, "Why can't I just be normal?"

And Danu heard her. Oh well.

"You know, it really won't hurt you to pretend that you are. It will work at school, for sure. And you can go on that way for *quite* a while. Years.

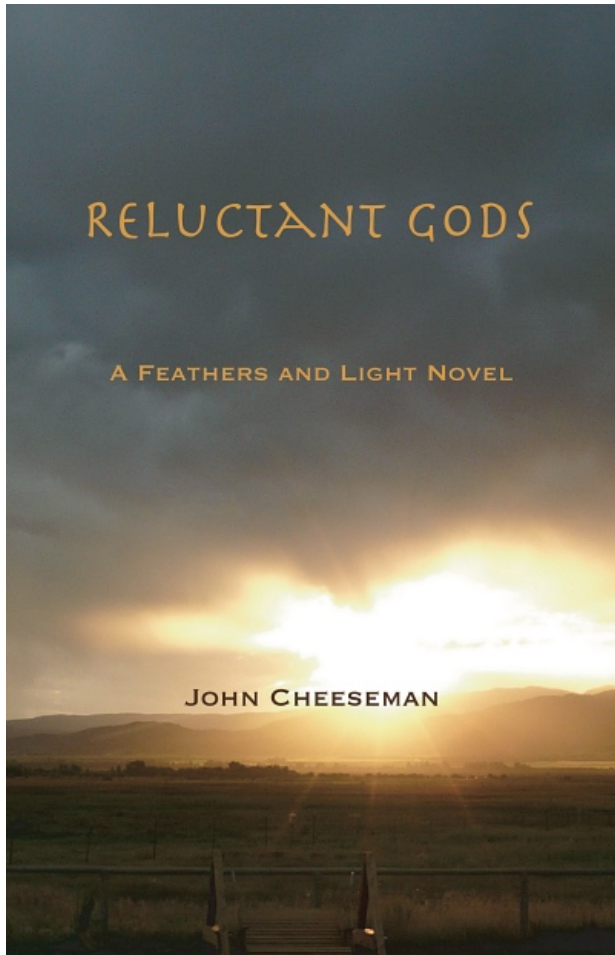
"And," she added, smiling, "for now, well, I imagine that Sorche could just leave you at home whenever she goes to the bakery."

Harper scrunched her nose up and said, "Well, not *that* normal."

"But in the end, you're not," Danu finished.

Then she just walked away. At least she turned and waved before she disappeared over the hill.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - John Cheeseman is a retired plant biologist and sometimes folk singer. He lives in the shadow of the Teton Mountains in Idaho. John has written one other children's novel, *Feathers and Light*, the first book in this series.



*Three young girls who thought they were—and want to be—just normal kids, find out that they are actually gods... and more powerful than even normal gods. And the guidance they get on what to do? Be patient, be careful, and then wing it.*

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